

9/13/2010: Arizona "Film Study" (premium)

Every Monday throughout the course of the 2010 Iowa football season, we will have a weekly series titled "Film Study." In this series, we go back and watch the previous game of Iowa's upcoming opponent and put together a list of observations. This week, we examine the No. 24 Arizona Wildcats, who play the Hawkeyes at Arizona Stadium in Tucson, Ariz., on Sept. 18.

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Last weekend, after covering Iowa's 35-7 win over Iowa State, I went back and watched Arizona's 52-6 victory over The Citadel for the first time and watched in its entirety.

Below is a list of observations I made of the Wildcats from examining the game real closely:

Offense

I'm going to start by saying this: Arizona's offense might wind up being the most balanced and most efficient offense Iowa sees all season. That might sound crazy, but after watching the Wildcat offense at work, this is a much-improved unit from when the Hawkeyes faced Arizona last season.

It starts with quarterback Nick Foles. Mike Stoops probably won't admit it, but the difference between Foles and the quarterback he beat out, Matt Scott, is like night and day.

In this 46-point victory over The Citadel, Foles completed 17-of-22 passes and was taken out of the game in the third quarter with Arizona ahead 38-0. He isn't a gunslinger that is always looking for the deep ball and trying to make the play downfield. Instead, he takes his time, makes his reads, and is

willing to go to his playmakers running short routes.

Foles only had one touchdown pass, which came in the second quarter. It was a play near the goalline where he got Bulldog linebackers to bite on his pump fake and found a wide open target in the back of the end zone. He threw one interception, which came on a play where he had tons of time in the pocket and ended up throwing a bad pass that was broken up by a defensive back and then intercepted off the deflection.

One thing that was made clear to me from watching the Wildcats is how much "YAC" is stressed. It doesn't matter whether we're talking "Yards After Catch" or "Yards After Contact."

Foles' biggest target is wide receiver Juron Criner. He made a huge play on the Wildcats' first scoring drive of the evening, and has proven himself to be Arizona's No. 1 wide receiver. And again, everyone else that was being distributed the football from Foles knew what to do. No one seemed content with just making the catch, they were looking to make a bigger play out of it.

Here's the part of Arizona's offense that is scary, though. The Wildcats essentially have a three-headed monster at running back. The featured back is senior Nic Grigsby.

Now before I go further, I should compliment the offensive line for giving Foles plenty of time in the pocket, and for creating solid holes for the Arizona backs to run through. Grigsby was a beneficiary of some nice holes on each of his three touchdown runs. He had two near the goal-line where he basically walked in.

But here's the difference between someone like him and someone like Iowa State running back Alexander Robinson. Grigsby has the agility and awareness to turn a negative play into a positive, and once he finds open field, he's nearly impossible to tackle.

The other two backs to take note of are Keola Antolin and Greg Nwoko. Antolin is a much shorter running back, and won't get many carries. But he proved in this game against The Citadel to be a threat in the passing game with four receptions for 53 yards. As for Nwoko, he was used a lot in the second half and finished with 72 rushing yards and two touchdowns on the ground. He is a much bigger, more physical back than both Grigsby and Antolin.

I did pick up on one tendency, however. I don't know if this is because of the opponent or what, but when Foles was in at quarterback, there was only one play where he went under center, and Arizona threw the football. It was a play-action, very similar to the type Iowa runs with the tight end in motion. Every other time he lined up under center, it was a running play, mostly with Grigsby lined up behind a fullback or H-back. All of Foles' completions came when the Wildcats were lined up in shotgun.

Arizona can be effectively on offense both on the ground and through the air. Easily posing a great challenge.

Defense

It was really difficult to assess the Wildcat defense, mainly because The Citadel ran a wishbone offense. I'm going to assume Arizona runs a basic 4-3 defense, because there were always four down linemen, and one of the safeties would constantly creep up and be that eighth man in the box. I would imagine you'll see more of that traditional 4-3 look next week.

For what it's worth, the free safety that was always coming up to help with run support was Joe Perkins, who led the Wildcats in tackles with eight against The Citadel, six of which were solo.

What grabbed my attention from start to finish was how disciplined this defense is. There was only one penalty called

on it the entire game, a personal foul face-mask penalty in the fourth quarter when the back-ups were in. The Citadel never sniffed Arizona territory until the third quarter, trailing by 38 points.

That discipline is a major reason why the Wildcats have yet to allow a touchdown, and have only surrendered eight total points in two games thus far.

There were a couple of fumble recoveries made by linebackers Paul Vassallo and Derek Earls that helped open the floodgates, as both Citadel turnovers led to Wildcat touchdowns.

Even though it was facing a team that runs a lot of triple option, I thought both cornerbacks – Robert Golden and Trevin Wade – looked solid in this game. Golden is a guy who can lay big hits to opposing playmakers. Wade, meanwhile, is someone Iowa fans ought to be familiar with, as he had a pick-six against the Hawkeyes in 2009.

One of the few times the Bulldogs did go to the air, Wade nearly came away with an interception, as he had a better read on the ball than The Citadel wideout he was covering did.

The defensive line, for the most part, did its job in this game. There was only one play The Citadel managed to run the ball up the middle successfully, and that came in the second half just before the Bulldogs finally cracked the scoreboard.

Special Teams

Not a whole lot to say here, but there was one thing that stood out.

While I would call Arizona's kickoff coverage adequate at best, the Wildcats have one heck of a kicker in Alex Zendejas. He had at least three kickoffs downed for touchbacks against The Citadel. With wind not being too big of a factor in that desert heat, that showed me Zendejas has a leg. If he can

continuously pin opponents at their own 20-yard line every time, that's huge for a defense.

There was one instance in this game late when a punt returner mishandled the ball. Fortunately for the Wildcats, he recovered his own fumble and the game was already well-decided.

Coaching

Considering the circumstances, I thought Mike Stoops and his staff called the type of game it needed to call. The playbook wasn't really opened up on either side of the ball, and there was nothing creative against The Citadel like there might be (and probably will be) against Iowa.

The only thing I wondered about was there was one point in the second quarter where he gave Scott a series at quarterback, then went back to Foles. Arizona wasn't able to move the football that certain series. Again, I'm not sure what he sees in Scott, but I just think Foles is significantly that much better.

Strengths

- Quarterback that makes good decisions*
- Strong ground game*
- Disciplined defense*

Weaknesses

- Special Teams (sans Zendejas)*
- Waiting too much maybe for plays to develop*
- Uncertainty against a better passing attack*

Final Thoughts

This game on Sept. 18 at Arizona Stadium is going to be one of the most challenging games Iowa has all season, especially mentally.

I'm going to just briefly mention intangibles here, then focus more on the actual football side of things. Yes, the game is a 7:30 p.m. kickoff in Tucson, which means it will be 9:30 p.m. back in Iowa City. This game will have similar weather conditions to Arizona's game against The Citadel, where there is heat, but very little humidity. The Hawkeyes will need to be extremely hydrated and avoid cramping as much as possible.

Now as for the football side of things, to me, this comes down to one simple component – field position.

I don't think turnovers will be nearly the concern here that they were last week when Iowa played Iowa State. This game is going to be swayed one direction or the other based on where each team starts its drives and how they are able to execute.

Both offenses are potent enough regardless of whether they run or pass. Both defenses are disciplined well enough not to make too many mental mistakes. I might have to give Arizona an edge at kicker, but special teams will be a factor as well.

With this coming down to field position, whether the Hawkeyes win or not will be determined by players like punter Ryan Donahue, Trent Mossbrucker, Michael Meyer, Colin Sandeman, Derrell Johnson-Koulianos, and Keenan Davis.

If Zendejas is routinely kicking the ball deep enough that Iowa has to settle for touchbacks, the Hawkeye offense needs to be methodical with the football, like it has been. Ricky Stanzi has done a tremendous job thus far with orchestrating scoring drives for Iowa. He'll need to continue doing that. He'll need good protection from his offensive line, which will be somewhat challenged with the entire right side starting on the road for the first time.

Offensively, Iowa needs to continue showing balance. As Arizona just proved against The Citadel, you can't be good in just one area and expect to win this game. As good as both Adam Robinson and Jewel Hampton are, the Wildcats have shown they'll move up into the box on defense and place an emphasis on stopping the run. They'll be determined after Robinson broke a 3rd-and-23 halfback draw in last year's game for a first down.

What I'll really be interested to see is how much Stanzi does try to attack the defense with some deep throws to guys like Johnson-Koulianos, Sandeman, Marvin McNutt, tight end Allen Reisner, etc. Like I said, Arizona has some decent corners, but the Wildcats also weren't really tested in pass defense seeing how The Citadel was so anemic throwing the football.

Defensively, what I think people need to realize is Arizona has the type of offense that is willing to sustain long drives and take what opposing defenses get it. Unless the Hawkeye D-Line is absolutely terrorizing the Wildcat O-Line, Arizona is going to be able to move the chains. Foles isn't going to throw many deep balls to his targets. He'll gladly take dumping it off to someone like Antolin on a screen, or hitting a receiver on a seven-yard seam route.

This is where field position matters. As I said, the Wildcats are all about getting "YAC." Iowa has to be able to tackle ball carriers as soon as they touch the ball, or they could get burned. If Arizona is consistently getting "YAC," the Hawkeyes won't be getting off the field enough, and that's where the aforementioned intangibles come into play.

Foles has a quick trigger with the football. He's not going to take any 5-step drops or 7-step drops. Awareness is going to matter. Iowa did a good job of that in last year's game, and it will need to again this year.

What makes this game exciting is that both teams are facing

their toughest challenge to date. Arizona is easily better than either Iowa State or Eastern Illinois. Iowa is easily better than either The Citadel or Toledo.

I think Iowa can win this game, but in order to do so, the Hawkeyes need to overcome the wave of emotion early from Arizona and its crowd, as well as all the mental challenges this contest presents.