

Shaky special teams cost Hawkeyes (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

TUCSON, Ariz. – The importance of special teams cannot be stressed enough.

Even after two weeks where the No. 9 Iowa Hawkeyes looked impressive, it was the ultimate concern head coach Kirk Ferentz had going into this week's match-up against No. 24 Arizona.

Football's third phase was executed poorly by the Hawkeyes, and it cost them big in a 34-27 loss to the Wildcats inside Arizona Stadium on Saturday.

"At some point, we just have to do better," Ferentz said. "I'd like to think we're capable, and we've seen times where we are capable, even this game. There were times we had excellent coverage.

"But if you don't have consistency, it's just not going to get it done."

The meltdown began right away. Iowa's offense was forced into a 3-and-out on its opening drive, something the Hawkeyes were perhaps unaccustomed to after scoring on its first two opening drives each of the past two weeks against Eastern Illinois and Iowa State.

Senior punter Ryan Donahue lined up for his first punt of the game, only to see David Roberts block it for Arizona. Just like that, the Wildcats had the ball at the Iowa 8-yard line, and would punch it in three plays later.

What made it excruciating for Ferentz was that the Hawkeyes were prepared for that very scenario. Or so he thought.

"It looked like the same punt block they ran against Southern Cal last year," Ferentz said. "We had practiced that during the week, and obviously, we didn't get that picked up during the first attempt there."

The next defining moment of the evening came in the second quarter. Iowa had just moved the ball 93 yards down the field offensively and cut Arizona's lead in half.

Michael Meyer's kickoff sailed into the end zone, where it was returned by the Wildcats' Travis Cobb. Deciding to take the ball out of the end zone, he saw open field and was off to the races with no one in his sight. In a matter of moments, Arizona was ahead by 14 points again, this time 21-7.

"We spend a lot of time on special teams," said senior wide receiver Colin Sandeman after compiling 35 yards returning on punts. "When it gets down to crunch time, we definitely have to focus a little bit better."

Special teams did begin to slowly shift in Iowa's favor. The Hawkeyes got a big play on a Donahue punt in the fourth quarter, when junior cornerback Shaun Prater recovered a muffed punt by the Wildcats at the Arizona 18-yard line. The very next play, quarterback Ricky Stanzi found Marvin McNutt in the end zone for a score that trimmed the Wildcat lead to six points.

Then, what appeared to be unthinkable earlier in the evening unfolded. Junior defensive end Broderick Binns had made an incredible play, picking off a Nick Foles pass and returning it 20 yards for a touchdown that tied the game at 27-27.

All Iowa needed to do was nail the extra point, and the Hawkeyes would be ahead 28-27. Sounds simple, right?

Arizona would block the Trent Mossbrucker PAT, keeping the score tied at 27-27. The following series, the Wildcats marched down the field and wound up scoring the game-winning touchdown.

"What do you want me to tell you? The damn ball got blocked," Ferentz said. "That's just not acceptable."

The area has become a major concern for the Hawkeyes going forward. Even the guys who have bigger roles on the team understand the importance with being consistent like Ferentz desires.

"Coach [Lester] Erb always tells us if you get a punt blocked, you're probably going to lose the game," said junior safety Tyler Sash, who was on the field when Donahue's punt was blocked. "That's what happened."