

# COMMENTARY: Some questions answered heading into Big Ten play (premium)

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*HawkeyeDrive.com*

IOWA CITY, Iowa – There were a plethora of questions regarding the NO. 18 Iowa Hawkeyes entering their game on Saturday against Ball State.

How would the running game look with Jewel Hampton out for the season? How would the defensive line shake out? Would special teams improve? Can this team still win the Big Ten?

These were just a few of those questions. But they were valid questions Hawkeye fans had before getting soaked inside Kinnick Stadium by the Iowa City rain.

After Iowa trounced Ball State 45-0, some of these can be answered.

First, regarding the offense. If you take senior quarterback Ricky Stanzi at his word, figuring out Iowa's offense after Saturday's contest would be a challenge, as Ball State brought a variety of schemes to the field.

Here's what can be concluded, though: When this team does run the football, it is Adam Robinson's job to lose at running back. In fact, it has been that way for quite some time now.

Maybe the Hawkeyes are going to be more pass-oriented the rest of the season, but my gut feeling is that Iowa would be this way even if Hampton hadn't gotten hurt against Arizona. Robinson is talented enough that opposing defenses have to respect what he can bring every week.

Yes, the second half provided plenty of both Brad Rogers and Marcus Coker. But this won't be like last season, when Robinson and Brandon Wegher shared carries. Heck, it won't even be like 2008 when Hampton would occasionally come in early and often for former Hawkeye back Shonn Greene.

Robinson is the guy. Not only should this no longer be a question (assuming No. 32 stays healthy), but Robinson has shown he deserves to be out there. He bounced back from having just five yards rushing against Arizona last week to compiling 115 yards on the ground Saturday and adding two 1-yard touchdown runs to boot.

If Iowa continues to show balance on offense like it has in its three victories, then the Hawkeyes will be fine here.

Defensively, the one question might be who plays up front. This is an issue Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz addressed earlier in the week, saying that five defensive linemen are good enough to start, but that the defense itself won't change in order to accommodate having all five out there.

Like last week, junior Broderick Binns got the start at defensive end, meaning senior Christian Ballard started at tackle. Ferentz may have said this will vary from week-to-week, but I don't see it that way.

That said, however, junior Mike Daniels made a strong case to be out there frequently. He finished with six tackles (four solo) against the Cardinals. Four of those tackles resulted in a loss of yardage.

In fact, the defense as a whole held Ball State to 112 yards of total offense, 390 yard less than what Iowa had offensively.

If the defensive line continues to wreak havoc as many expect it to, the defense will be fine.

Now, there's special teams. In the 34-27 loss on Sept. 18 at Arizona, the Wildcats were able to block a punt, return an Iowa kickoff back 100 yards for a touchdown, and block an extra point that would've gave Iowa a 28-27 lead had it been good.

Michael Meyer, a true freshman walk-on, handled all of the kicking duties against Ball State. As he had been doing all season, the Dubuque native was out there for every kickoff. On Saturday, he replaced sophomore Trent Mossbrucker on extra point attempts, connecting on all six of his PAT tries.

Meyer even kicked the Hawkeyes' first two field goals of the entire season, making one of the two kicks late in the contest.

Special teams looked improve, but again, this was one game. Whether the improvement continues to show consistently remains to be seen. But considering where this area was after last week, this time was better.

Now the final question: Can Iowa still win the Big Ten?

At this point, who knows?

There wasn't much to determine with the conference after Saturday's slate of games, but here's what could be said:

Iowa, at least to me, is still a force to be reckon with. I believe No. 2 Ohio State is still better, perhaps significantly better, than the Hawkeyes this season. But Iowa is right there.

If there's a silver lining from last week's loss in the desert for the Hawkeyes, it's that they can still win the Big Ten and represent the conference in the 2011 Rose Bowl on New Year's Day.

A third of the season is complete, and we can make a few conclusions about this Hawkeye team.

But there's still plenty to think about before Iowa returns to the gridiron on Oct. 2 for its Homecoming against No. 23 Penn State.