

COMMENTARY: Win maybe more convincing than perceived (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – For a Big Ten opener, the No. 17 Iowa Hawkeyes made a strong statement on Saturday.

Not only did the Hawkeyes defeat No. 22 Penn State 24-3, but Iowa crushed the Nittany Lions' will from the very start.

It doesn't have to always be the offense making the statement. In this particular game, the defense turned its played up, and did so in a big way.

Penn State is not a bad football team by any stretch of the imagination. Iowa was just that much better on this night.

Coming into the game, there was a specific emphasis on stopping the Nittany Lions' ground game, led by running back Evan Royster.

Royster, who is on the verge of becoming Penn State's all-time leading rusher, had 56 yards on 10 carries. That number is slightly skewed by a 26-yard run late in the fourth quarter when the outcome was clearly determined.

So in essence, it was more nine carries for 30 yards. Royster is the focal point of Penn State's offense.

This is why this game maybe was as the score indicated.

It didn't matter how many points Iowa was going to end up with. The way the Hawkeyes looked defensively, there was no way Penn State was coming back on this night.

Last season was all about winning close games, as the biggest margin of victory coming in Big Ten play was an 18-point win over Indiana. In just one conference game this season, Iowa wins by 21 points.

Maybe that last-minute pick-six by junior cornerback Shaun Prater inflates it and makes it seem like the 24-3 final score doesn't truly tell the story. And to some degree, that may be true.

I grant you the offense wasn't at its all-time best out there. Senior quarterback Ricky Stanzi threw one touchdown pass to one interception. Adam Robinson was held under 100 yards rushing. And there are certainly things the offense can improve upon over the course of these next two weeks.

But again, it wasn't going to matter anyway.

I would argue that the 24-3 final score is a true reflection of just how suffocating the Hawkeye defense was on this night. The fact that Prater did have a pick-six enhances the argument, in my opinion, of just how well Iowa played on the defensive side of the football.

And really, these guys deserve the accolades. The season has almost reached its halfway point, and Iowa has the No. 1 ranked defense nationally. Not just in the Big Ten, but in the country.

This unit has surrendered a grand total of 51 points in five games, and mind you, two-thirds of those points exactly came in that 34-27 loss to Arizona on Sept. 18.

There has been talk throughout the season about Iowa's identity as an offense, and I think that has been established as one that proves to be at its best when it features some semblance of balance between run and pass.

Now it's time to acknowledge this defense, a wrecking crew

that sucked the life out of Penn State early in the second half, stopping the Nittany Lions on the goal line when Iowa still only had a two-touchdown lead.

Once that happened, you just knew the Hawkeyes would be fine the rest of the evening, no matter how much the offense struggled. The defense had its back.

This is important because in two weeks (after the bye week next week), Iowa travels to The Big House to face a Michigan squad led by one of this year's top quarterbacks in college football, Denard Robinson.

That will be a game where once again, the defense will need to step up like it did Saturday night.

If what we saw against Penn State carries over, I like the Hawkeyes' chances in that game.