

# 10/11/2010: Michigan “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 Michigan Wolverines, who will entertain the 15th-ranked Hawkeyes on Oct. 16 at “The Big House” in Ann Arbor, Mich.*

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Last weekend, after covering Iowa’s 24-3 victory over Penn State and dealing with the Hawkeye bye week, I went back and watched Michigan’s 34-17 loss to Michigan State on Oct. 9 for the first time in its entirety.

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

## **Offense**

*Let’s start with the obvious here and discuss sophomore quarterback Denard Robinson. While he had his worst performance of the 2010 season against Michigan State, this one game alone shouldn’t diminish the impact he has had on the Wolverines.*

*He has over 1,000 yards rushing through six games, and he’s a quarterback. His numbers coming into this game were off the charts and many national college football pundits viewed him as the front-runner for the Heisman Trophy.*

*There are flaws in Robinson’s game that Michigan State was able to expose, but before I dig into those, let’s discuss*

what he can do well.

For someone who is only a sophomore, Robinson has great vision, especially when he runs with the football. As far as whether Michigan's offensive line – which isn't terrible by any means – should be most credited for Robinson's success goes, it's kind of a combination of both. Some of his big plays on the ground are a result of the O-Line opening up holes. But Robinson also has the ability to make plays with his feet when he doesn't have the blocking. This was evident early in this game against Michigan State. One of his first carries of the game was one where he actually lost his balance, defenders were there, and he still managed to get enough for a first down.

As far as throwing the football is concerned, Robinson's strengths are the following: When he can release the football quickly, and when he can roll out of the pocket. Michigan's best passing plays in this game against Michigan State came when Robinson could immediately get the football to one of his playmakers, or when he can find them on the outside as he rolls towards the sidelines.

There is one weakness, however, that the Spartans successfully exposed. Robinson came into this game with just one interception, and wound up throwing three of them. All three interceptions were the result of not being able to get the ball out as quick as he wanted. If he is forced to pump fake (and why he ever just does this is beyond me, to be quite honest), his throws are going to be off. The first interception on Michigan's opening drive last weekend came when he pump faked, then threw behind his receiver in the end zone. The pump fake messed up the timing.

Michigan State showed the blueprint on Robinson's third interception, which also came in the red zone. There were multiple Spartan defenders who jumped with their arms up when Robinson wanted to throw, he ended up faking, then when he

actually did release the ball, it was picked off.

This, however, is why I say Robinson's best attribute is his vision, because if Michigan executes a play as planned, he knows where everyone is supposed to be and what he needs to do. His only struggles come when timing is thrown off. A perfect example of how effective his vision is comes on his lone touchdown pass, a designed play in the red zone to tight end Martell Webb. He fakes the rollout, throws a bullet to Webb, who then goes into the end zone for the score.

As for the offense as a whole, Michigan runs shotgun, plain and simple. You will never see Robinson under center. For the most part, there will be one running back lined up next to Robinson, and then the Wolverines will typically have three wide receivers and a tight end. The tight end is important to note, because there is a bit of a tendency I noticed, especially in the first half of this particular game before it got out of hand.

Aside from one play in the second quarter after Michigan State had taken the lead for good, I noticed that whenever Michigan had a tight end lined up on the line of scrimmage in a 3-point stance next to an offensive tackle, the running back was a non-factor. It didn't matter if he lined up on the left or right side. When the tight end was lined up as a blocker on the line of scrimmage, Robinson was either running with the football himself, or throwing. Again, one play he handed off to a running back.

Michigan has three running backs it will want to use – Michael Shaw, Vincent Smith, and Stephen Hopkins. None of the three are bad by any stretch, but none of them are as significant to the Wolverines' ground game as Robinson is. I mentioned how one would line up next to Robinson in shotgun. Early in the second half of this game, one thing Michigan did was have two of these three lining up next to Robinson. It appeared it might work early on, but Robinson ended up throwing his second

*pick of the game.*

*The Wolverines will be short-handed at receiver, as Martavious Odoms has now been ruled out of this week's game with Iowa having a broken foot. But the other receivers to be cautious of include Kelvin Grady, Roy Roundtree, and Junior Hemingway. There was one sequence late in the third quarter where Michigan wideouts dropped three straight passes, all of which were on the money. Roundtree also dropped what would have been an easy touchdown reception in the second quarter, but the Wolverines did manage to score on that series. That said, if these guys have any yards in front of them to work with, look out.*

## **Defense**

*By now, it's no secret how awful Michigan's defense has been this season. The Wolverines currently have the worst ranked pass defense in the country, and in this loss to Michigan State, this got exposed pretty bad.*

*Michigan will mix things up under defensive coordinator Greg Robinson. Its base defense is a 3-3-5, which to be honest, is a bad alignment to begin with. However, expect the Wolverines to also run plenty of nickel packages in this game, where they have four down linemen as opposed to just three.*

*Regardless of how the scheme looks, two things are consistent with what this defense wants to do. Aside from obvious situations where defenses will almost always go nickel or dime, Michigan is going to have a minimum of eight guys in the box. This means that of the five defensive backs on the field, at least two of them are going to come up for run support. Secondly, if it's third down, expect blitzing from at least one of those defensive backs creeping up.*

*The Wolverines did manage to get some pressure on Michigan State's Kirk Cousins, perhaps more than anyone would normally give them credit for in a game. But one thing the Spartans*

were able to utilize to their advantage was plenty of bubble screens. Michigan really struggled getting to the outside to stop these, and what resulted were Michigan State receivers picking up yards after catch.

The big thing I would say about Michigan's defense after watching it closely in this game is how it struggles to deal with even the slimmest of adversity. This was real evident on one of Michigan State's scoring drives in the second quarter. The Wolverines thought they had a 3-and-out, only for a dead-ball penalty to be called on Michigan State. The following play, a 3rd-and-15 deep in Spartan territory, Michigan put its dime package out on the field, and Michigan State found a way to turn that into a first down. Later on that drive, and this was when Michigan was still winning, Cousins lost the snap and wound up recovering his own fumble. Very next play was a 41-yard touchdown run that gave the Spartans a 14-10 lead which they wouldn't relinquish the rest of the afternoon.

One play that disgusted me when examining Michigan's defense came in the third quarter, and again, this was a play resulting in a Michigan State touchdown. Just after the Wolverines stopped one of the Spartans' bubble screens for no gain, they gave up a 41-yard touchdown pass. Now here's the troubling part – Michigan State was in a Power-I formation. This means the Spartans had three players in the backfield behind Cousins, a tight end, and one wide receiver lined up. With all that in mind, Cousins' throw was a play-action pass to that one receiver on the field.

As for stopping the run, Michigan is very susceptible to big plays here as well. Michigan State had two touchdown runs in the first half of 61 and 41 yards, respectively. Both touchdowns came as a result of great blocking from the inside linemen (guards and centers). One of the touchdown runs specifically showed Michigan with eight guys in the box, two corners creeping up, and just one safety back deep. The Wolverines really struggled when the Spartans ran right at

*them, as opposed to around them.*

*The one player I came away impressed by was defensive tackle Mike Martin. Unfortunately for Michigan, he left the game late with what has been ruled an ankle sprain, and his status for the game against Iowa, at this time, is unknown. But prior to his injury, he seemed to be in on the majority of the plays whenever the Wolverines were able to get stops defensively.*

### **Special Teams**

*This is a mixed bag right here. The punter is solid. He's not Zoltan Mesko by any means, but Will Hagerup had some nice punts. In fact, his worst punt of the afternoon was probably his last one, which I will get to a little later. Like every single one of Iowa's opponents thus far, the Wolverines use that swinging gate formation when lining up to punt.*

*I think Michigan's return game is solid, and to be honest, it needs to be. I can only recall two series where Michigan's offense was forced to start on its 20 (one after a punt, the other after a kickoff). Otherwise, when returns were there, the Wolverines did manage to gain decent field position for Robinson to work with.*

*My concern with Michigan's special teams came on kickoffs. There wasn't a single touchback, and it seemed as though every time Michigan went to kick off, Michigan State wound up with solid field position, which would already put the Wolverines at a disadvantage defensively.*

*Also of note, Michigan did give up a blocked field goal right before halftime. It was a play where the snap was extremely low, and the holder had to make an adjustment. Whether the kick got enough is hard to tell because the snap, I feel, had a role in Michigan State being able to block the kick.*

### **Coaching**

*I will say the following about Rich Rodriguez. He may not come off as a good football coach to many around the Big Ten, as his track record thus far at Michigan would suggest. I don't think he's necessarily a bad coach either, though. Obviously, his decision to go with Robinson at quarterback has paid off to this point.*

*There were two situations against Michigan State that had me confused. The first came right before halftime, when Michigan wound up missing a field goal. On that drive, which started at the 23-second mark of the second quarter, there was a run by Robinson of six yards. Then a timeout was called. Then Robinson was able to complete a deep pass to set up the field goal attempt. Why you wouldn't just come out throwing the ball there or just run the clock out if the first play is going to be a six-yard run is beyond me.*

*The other moment came in the fourth quarter. Michigan was trailing 34-17 with about seven minutes or so left in the game, and Rodriguez elected to punt. To me, that's basically a form of surrender, and as it turned out, Michigan State managed to chew the rest of the time off on its following possession.*

### **Strengths**

- Robinson's vision/awareness*
- Special teams giving the offense solid field position*
- Multiple playmakers on offense*

### **Weaknesses**

- Defense struggles to get off the field*
- Defense susceptible to big plays via both run and pass*
- Not adjusting well when timing is thrown off*

## ***Final Thoughts***

If there was ever a good opponent for Iowa to have coming off a bye week, it's Michigan, and for many reasons. That said, however, this might not be quite the blowout some Hawkeye fans are anticipating it to be.

As far as containing Robinson goes, it should be easier for a defense like Iowa's that has such a talented defensive line. I talked about how a lot of Robinson's success as a quarterback is the result of Michigan being in a rhythm offensively and executing what normally are high-percentage plays to begin with. This is something that could play into the Hawkeyes' hands because one thing Iowa's defensive line has shown through five games is that it can disrupt timing for opposing offenses.

One reason why I felt Michigan State was able to win as convincingly as it did against Michigan last weekend is because the Spartans won the majority of the battles inside the trenches. This is why Michigan State had big plays out of its running game offensively, and why it managed to hold Robinson under 100 yards rushing defensively.

It's going to be important for Iowa's defense to do the following this weekend: Keep Robinson in the pocket when he does try to throw the football, and receivers need to be jammed at the point of attack immediately. If guys like Micah Hyde and Shaun Prater, for instance, can disrupt timing for wideouts such as Hemingway and Roundtree, Robinson's going to have a difficult time getting them the football, especially against this front four.

The play of not only Hyde and Prater, but of safeties Brett Greenwood and Tyler Sash, will be critical. If Robinson is able to find lanes to run through, and keep in mind he is still capable of finding them even if the defense starts to collapse on them, the secondary cannot let Robinson get out to



open field, otherwise no one on this Iowa defense will be able to catch him before breaking off a long play, possibly a touchdown.

Continuing with the entire defense as a whole, playing sound assignment football (which Iowa has been good at for the most part) is vital. If any one of those 11 guys on the field during a given play overpursues or makes a bad angle trying to make a tackle, Michigan is going to move the chains offensively.

I mentioned how Robinson's best passes come when he can get rid of the football quickly. The last time the Hawkeyes faced a quarterback who used that to his advantage was Arizona's Nick Foles, and the Wildcats, albeit not entirely from Foles and that offense, managed to put 34 points on the scoreboard.

As for the Hawkeye offense, I talked about how Michigan is susceptible to big plays defensively. This was also the case last season when these two teams met. If you recall, Tony Moeaki caught six passes for 105 yards and two touchdowns against the Wolverines last year. Now while Moeaki may not be there this time around, there's no reason to think someone like Allen Reisner couldn't make at least 2-3 big plays himself this weekend. It also wouldn't surprise me to see Iowa run some screens (possibly a jailbreak or two) not with the backs, but with the receivers. Guys like Marvin McNutt, Keenan Davis, Colin Sandeman (keep an eye on him especially), or Derrell Johnson-Koulianos, who only needs 67 receiving yards to become the school's career leader in that category.

One thing I feel Iowa needs to do though is pick and choose when to call play-action passes (this falls squarely on the shoulders of Ricky Stanzi). Again, Michigan State did execute a play-action pass for a touchdown on a play running a Power I formation. But there were also moments when the Spartans tried play-action and the Wolverines were able to get 1-2 defenders in Cousins' face.

As it applies to this game and with Stanzi, we all saw late in the Arizona game how the Wildcats began blitzing relentlessly and were successful at getting to Stanzi. The offensive line needs to be ready for not only this, but for Michigan to constantly load up the box with 8-9 defenders. Any blown assignments up front could cause major trouble for the Hawkeyes as an offense.

With the Wolverines loading the box like most opposing defenses have this season, it's important for Adam Robinson to get off to a strong start, especially since Iowa doesn't have quite the depth Michigan State has in the backfield. Up front, James Ferentz needs to be aware of where Mike Martin is (if he plays), and he, along with both guards Julian Vandervelde and Nolan MacMillan could potentially have huge games this weekend if Iowa shows balance offensively, and can create those big plays in the ground game for Robinson or Marcus Coker.

Special teams will also be important again, especially with this being a road game. Iowa cannot allow Michigan to make any solid returns via punt or kickoff that lead to a shorter field for Denard Robinson to work with. Likewise, I would not expect too many touchbacks when the Wolverines do kick off, so there is a chance for guys like Johnson-Koulianos or Davis to not necessarily go the distance, but create big enough returns that in turn put loads of pressure on Michigan's defense.

This is a game Iowa should win, make no mistake. But this could be a much tighter game than some anticipate because for one thing, the Hawkeyes did only win by two points last season, and that was with Tate Forcier handling the bulk of the signal-calling for Michigan. The other reason is because of the way Michigan lost last weekend. I would expect the Wolverines to come out with plenty of emotion early, wanting to show everyone that this team won't nosedive like it did a year ago. Iowa failed to withstand the emotion in Tucson, Ariz., last month early on, and I wouldn't expect to be less challenging in "The Big House" this weekend, so weathering the

storm if you will and getting off to a fast start (especially coming off a bye week) is important if the Hawkeyes are going to leave Ann Arbor with a 2-0 Big Ten mark.