

10/18/2010: Wisconsin "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. 10 Wisconsin Badgers, who will visit Kinnick Stadium on Oct. 23 to face the 13th-ranked Hawkeyes.

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Last weekend, after covering Iowa's 38-28 victory over Michigan, I went back and watched Wisconsin's 31-18 victory over Ohio State on Oct. 16 for the first time in its entirety.

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

Offense

Wisconsin's offense is very similar to Iowa's in terms of philosophy. You're not going to see the Badgers try to spread the field the way teams like Michigan, Indiana, and Northwestern do. This is a team committed to running the football, especially when there's success like there was for Wisconsin against Ohio State.

The Badgers have two running backs that are both going to get plenty of touches. Iowa fans should already be familiar with junior John Clay. Clay was the Big Ten's Offensive Player of the Year last season after he led the conference in rushing. When the Badgers and Hawkeyes faced off at Camp Randall Stadium a year ago, he looked like he would have a monster

game before getting injured.

Clay is still every bit the back he was a season ago, and in this game against Ohio State, Wisconsin had loads of success running between the tackles, especially on the left side. I'll elaborate more on the offensive line here in a second, but I'll finish mentioning these running backs.

With Clay, it's all about being physical. He is a big back looking to punish anyone who gets in his way. I don't want to compare him to Ron Dayne because Dayne was a Heisman Trophy winner and is the all-time leading rusher in FBS history. But Clay is similar in how he plays. He had two touchdowns on the ground against the Buckeyes – one right near the goal-line, the other being a run he got a nice lane to run through.

The other running back to account for is true freshman James White. There's a perception that because White is shorter and weighs less than Clay does, that he's more of a speed running back and not as powerful as Clay when he has the football. I would argue that White is just as powerful a runner and that he and Clay give the Badgers a good 1-2 punch to work with. The two combined for 184 yards on the ground and three touchdowns in this win over the Buckeyes.

Both running backs have a tremendous offensive line in front of them, and there are a few things to be aware of here regarding Wisconsin's guys up front. First of all, they are about as big a group of offensive linemen as there is in college football, averaging out to around 6-6, 320 pounds. This alone presents major challenges for defensive lines that are smaller.

I mentioned how Wisconsin does well running between the tackles. Left tackle Gabe Carimi and left guard Jonathan Moffitt are two of the best offensive linemen in the Big Ten. Carimi was actually first-team all-conference in 2009. This group absolutely manhandled the Buckeyes' defensive line last Saturday, especially in the early portions of the game when

Wisconsin was up 21-0.

Actually, the Badgers' third touchdown of the game is worth noting because the drive began at about the halfway point of the first quarter and carried over into the second quarter and lasted 19 plays.

Wisconsin has a very efficient quarterback leading the way in Scott Tolzien. From watching him play against a solid Ohio State defense, there were a few throws he made that were dangerous, but ended up on the money. He threw one interception in the second quarter where he clearly wasn't expecting the Buckeye linebacker who made the pick to be there, and it was a poor decision on Tolzien's part.

Aside from that one blunder, he was consistent. He sparked the Badgers' final scoring drive of the evening when he hit the tight end for a big completion over the middle of the field. His deepest throws come on play-action, which works when Wisconsin's ground game is there.

The Badgers will also utilize sets where there are two tight ends on the field, and will do this quite a bit. This was certainly the case early on in this game against the Buckeyes. I also picked up on one tendency from Wisconsin's offense.

Anytime the Badgers had receivers Isaac Anderson and Nick Toon lined up on the same side of the field, and Tolzien was under center, one of two plays was being run. Either Tolzien would take the snap, and immediately toss the football to Toon, who would take the screen down the sideline with Anderson as the lead blocker, or Tolzien would fake the throw to Toon and hand it off to either Clay or White, depending on who was back there.

Defense

The Badgers run a base 4-3 defense, and this will not change at any point in the game.

There were some situations where every guy up front was lined up in a 3-point stance. There were also plays where the two defensive ends would be lined up in a 2-point stance (i.e. like a linebacker but lined up right on the edge next to the defensive tackle).

Wisconsin has one defensive end, junior J.J. Watt, that needs to be accounted for at all times. I repeat, at all times. He finished the game with four tackles, all solo. Three of them were for a loss of yards, and he also had two sacks, both of which he made look effortless. Let me stress here, this came against Ohio State. This was Terrelle Pryor he was slamming to the Camp Randall Stadium turf.

Watt, like most good defensive ends, is going to use the swim-move to his advantage as much as possible when he isn't being double-teamed. He is undoubtedly the best defensive lineman on Wisconsin, and one of the best defensive ends in the entire Big Ten.

The linebacking corps featured two players who really stood out, especially on Ohio State's first scoring drive of the game, as the Buckeyes got inside the Wisconsin 5-yard line, only to settle for a field goal. Senior Blake Sorensen finished the game with 10 tackles, and the coaching staff is referring to his performance as the best he has had as a Badger. Sorensen also had an interception in the final minutes to seal the upset over an Ohio State team that came in ranked No. 1.

In addition to Sorensen was linebacker Culmer St. Jean, who had seven tackles. He seemed productive anytime he was near the football.

What really impressed me when I watched the Badgers though was the play of their secondary. I thought both Niles Brinkley and Antoni Fenelus played great games at the two corner spots. Neither gave up any extremely deep plays down the field to any

of Ohio State's wide receivers.

The one criticism I would have about Wisconsin's defense as a whole would be tendencies to maybe blitz too much. I noticed this in some situations while the Buckeyes were making their comeback, and Ohio State found holes running the football. Pryor was also able to exploit the middle of the field and was able to complete some passes for about 10-15 yards and keep the chains moving for the Buckeye offense.

Special Teams

This area was huge for Wisconsin in its win over Ohio State. David Gilreath set the tone for the entire evening on the opening kickoff, returning it 97 yards for a Badger touchdown to go up 7-0 right away. He is as explosive as they come, and on this kickoff return, he got some excellent blocking from the guys in front of him, especially from running back Bradie Ewing, who basically showed him where all the open field was on the play.

Wisconsin only punted a couple of times in this game, and like every single opponent Iowa has faced, runs the swinging gate punt formation. Aside from Gilreath's touchdown on the opening kickoff, there was nothing extremely noticeable in the return game on punts or kickoffs.

Kicker Philip Welch attempted a 41-yard field goal late in the fourth quarter that he was able to nail down the middle. He also connected on all four of his PAT attempts.

Coaching

Former Iowa defensive lineman Bret Bielema is in his fifth season as Wisconsin's head coach, and this game was his signature win. Make no mistake.

I thought he and his staff called a great game on both sides of the football. The offense had one touchdown drive that

lasted 19 plays and took over 10 minutes off the clock. You could tell the players were well-prepared because the Badgers were executing all over the field, whether it was in the trenches or on the outside.

The defense kept things simple, and even when Ohio State began to make plays as an offense, Wisconsin remained composed defensively and there were guys making plays all over the field.

Strengths

- Ground game*
- Offensive line is big, and talented*
- Pass rush is effective*

Weaknesses

- Defense leaving open field in the middle*
- Tolzien not always making the best reads down field*
- Lack of adjustments to start second half*

Final Thoughts

I know this game is at Kinnick Stadium and that Iowa has had recent success against Wisconsin. But this game against the Badgers will be very, very difficult to win.

As good as Iowa's defense is, it did just surrender 28 points to Michigan last week, with 21 of those points coming when Tate Forcier (not Denard Robinson) was in at quarterback. The challenge here is simple, and thus one key is very simple: Iowa's defensive line needs to win the battles inside the trenches. This is much easier said than done, however, given both the size and athleticism of Wisconsin's offensive line.

I think another thing the Hawkeyes need to emphasize with this

game is a fast start. Last season, Iowa managed to hang around for 60 minutes, take punches early from Wisconsin, and then fight back and seize control of the game. This year, getting behind this Wisconsin team early could be recipe for disaster. The Badgers are more talented and more experienced than they were last year when these two met in Madison, Wis. Beating Ohio State last weekend should sum up how much more improved Wisconsin is.

But the reason why I say Iowa needs to jump on Wisconsin early is this: As great as the Badgers played in beating the Buckeyes, that game was at Camp Randall Stadium. Not only that, but it just seems natural that when this team enters Kinnick Stadium, the effects of the high that comes from beating the No. 1 team in the country might still be there.

Not to say Wisconsin won't come into this contest focused, but if the Hawkeyes are able to catch the Badgers off guard and put Wisconsin behind the 8-ball early on Saturday, Iowa's odds of becoming bowl-eligible after this week go up significantly.

Obviously, shutting down the Badgers' ground game is going to be important. It doesn't matter if Clay is lined up at running back or if White is. They are going to run right at the heart of this Iowa defense like they were able to successfully do against the Buckeyes. Iowa did a decent job of containing Denard Robinson of Michigan last week, and being able to play assignment football against a team as run-oriented as Wisconsin will once again be important.

The Badgers are not going to get big plays in the passing game of 30-plus yards. Tolzien will be looking to move the chains with short and intermediate passes first. It's part of what makes him such an efficient quarterback because he isn't afraid to check down. His one tendency is throwing passes where he shouldn't, and against Ohio State, he got away with making a couple of difficult throws because he threw them on the money and not a second too early or second too late. If

Iowa can get a pass rush going and force Tolzien to either get rid of the football quicker than he wants to, or make him hold onto it longer than he wants to, he will be vulnerable to turnovers.

Offensively, the Hawkeyes need to continue utilizing Adam Robinson as they have. He has shown the last couple of games he can carry the ball 25-30 times, and it will be important for Iowa to get a ground game going to set up passing situations, especially play-action.

The left side of the offensive line – tackle Riley Reiff and guard Julian Vandervelde – will have to double-team J.J. Watt more often than not, and both linemen are going to need to play big for the Hawkeyes if they're going to be successful moving the football.

I believe plays are going to be open in the middle of the field when Iowa does decide to have quarterback Ricky Stanzi drop back and throw the football. Given the playmakers he has at receiver like Derrell Johnson-Koulianos (who had a career day last season against the Badgers last year) and Marvin McNutt (who was out of last year's game due to illness), there will be situations where those guys can get yards after the catch on this Badger secondary.

I mentioned how McNutt didn't play against the Badgers in 2009. If any of you remember the slant pass Drew Tate threw to Clinton Solomon for a touchdown in the 2005 Capital One Bowl against LSU, I could see Iowa using that very play with Stanzi and McNutt on the opening series because the Badgers could be keyed in on trying to take away Johnson-Koulianos. Given that Johnson-Koulianos scored thrice last week and had eight catches for 113 yards receiving in last year's meeting, this could be something to consider.

And as usual, special teams will be important. For one thing, the Hawkeyes don't need to give up a kickoff return for a

touchdown to Gilreath after what happened in Arizona last month. Also, field position is important in games like this where the teams are so identical, so guys like Ryan Donahue, for example, need to be on their game.

Iowa should benefit big with this game being at Kinnick Stadium, and again, a fast start here could set up a big victory for the Hawkeyes. The longer Wisconsin hangs around though, the more concerned I think Hawkeye fans should be as the game wears on. One of the reasons Michigan State was able to beat the Badgers earlier this month was because the Spartans hit them right in the mouth early on, and Wisconsin was forced to play catch-up. I think the same applies here for Iowa if the Hawkeyes are going to keep the Heartland Trophy in Iowa City for at least three more years.