

10/25/2010: Michigan State “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. 5 Michigan State Spartans, who will visit Kinnick Stadium on Oct. 30 to face the 18th-ranked Hawkeyes.

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Last weekend, after covering Iowa’s 31-30 loss to Wisconsin, I went back and watched Michigan State’s 35-27 victory over Northwestern on Oct. 23 for the first time in its entirety.

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

Offense

As one unit, this is, hands down, the best offense Iowa has faced and probably will face this entire season. Now that’s not to say that other teams don’t have better athletes or better football players at certain positions. All I’m saying here is when you look at the body as a whole and not specifically at certain parts, there are no glaring weaknesses with this Michigan State offense.

It starts with the Spartans’ quarterback, Kirk Cousins, who has played like he’s the best quarterback in the Big Ten this season. Last season, he had to win out a competition at quarterback with Keith Nichol. His numbers were solid, but Michigan State was a 6-7 team.

Having known now that he is the guy, Cousins has made enormous strides as a quarterback, and it's a big reason why the Spartans are coming to Iowa City this weekend with an 8-0 record and a No. 5 national ranking.

After Michigan State beat Northwestern, 35-27, Cousins was named the Big Ten's Offensive Player of the Week. It was certainly justified. He completed 29-of-43 passes against the Wildcats for 331 yards, three touchdowns, and zero interceptions. Seeing how the Spartans were down at one point 17-0, this was a golden opportunity for Cousins to showcase his arm, and he certainly didn't disappoint.

One thing I like about Cousins is his poise. The one weakness that appears in his game comes when teams are able to force pressure on him and make him get rid of the football sooner than he wants. I'll elaborate on that more later, but I bring it up now because the poor throws he did have against Northwestern didn't do enough to rattle him. The leadership he provides to that offense is critical to the Spartans' success.

He's not going to scramble out of the pocket if he doesn't have to. Cousins is just as effective when he's under center as he is when he's lined up in shotgun, which to me, is what Michigan State's offense look scary. If he has time in the pocket to look down field, he will burn whatever defense he is facing.

The weapons Cousins has to work with are all solid. Mark Dell and B.J. Cunningham both played vital roles for the Spartans against Northwestern, and made critical catches throughout the game. Dell caught two touchdown passes, while Cunningham made a great catch on a tipped ball in the end zone on the touchdown that proved to be the game-winner for Michigan State. Both guys finished the contest with over 100 yards receiving for the Spartans.

But they are far from the only contributors to this offense. I

mentioned Nichol as the guy who Cousins beat out at quarterback. Nichol switched to wide receiver last winter before Michigan State's Alamo Bowl loss to Texas Tech. On the Spartan's game-winning drive, Nichol made an incredible catch over the middle of the field on a 2nd-and-20. This came after Cousins had just been sacked. The reception was good for 18 yards, and gave Michigan State a 3rd-and-2 to work with, and the Spartans were able to move the chains.

Keshawn Martin has been a big-time player for Michigan State this season, but Northwestern did a good job of taking him away for the most part. That being said, he needs to be accounted for at all times on the field, because Martin has enough big-play potential in him.

The Spartans also have a tight end in Charlie Gantt who made a huge eight-yard reception on a 4th-and-1 during Michigan State's winning drive. He is mostly used as a blocker, but Cousins will check down to him in short-yardage situations if he's open.

As far as Michigan State's ground game is concerned, there was an end-around it scored on against Northwestern, but there are two main running backs to be focused on. The feature back, if you will, is Edwin Baker. Baker had a fumble early in this game and wasn't enormously effective until late in the game when the Spartans were already ahead. He did have a 25-yard touchdown run that ultimately put the game away, but it wasn't necessarily the best decision because had he not scored, Michigan State could have killed the rest of the clock.

That being said, on Baker's touchdown run, he got good blocking from his interior linemen, then managed to break a couple of tackles once he found the lane to run through.

Meanwhile, the other running back Michigan State will use is Le'Veon Bell. As far as Bell goes, he is a guy that is slightly bigger than Baker, but as he showed on a couple of

runs in this particular game, has enough shiftiness and explosion to his game to be an effective back. Unlike most running back combinations you see, the styles of both Baker and Bell don't have that much of a contrast to them. The Spartans are more effective in their ground game when these guys aren't forced to cut back to the outside, meaning they're going to want to run between the hashes as much as possible.

Overall, the offensive line is solid. More often than not, they gave Cousins enough time to throw down field. There were occasional struggles with picking up blitzes, especially when play-action was called, but nothing stands out negatively about this group of linemen.

Defense

When it comes to Michigan State's defense, there are things I like and things I don't like. Before I continue, I stress to take some of this with a grain of salt as Northwestern is more of a team that likes to spread the field offensively.

First off, Greg Jones is a stud. He is the Spartans' middle linebacker and the reigning Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year. Jones is as good as advertised. In this game against Northwestern, he recorded nine tackles, seven of which are solo.

But part of the reason why Michigan State is such a better team this season is because there are more contributions coming on the defensive side of the football from everyone else.

Take for instance defensive end Tyler Hoover, who was the co-Defensive Player of the Week this week in the Big Ten. Hoover also had nine tackles in this game, but of more importance, he forced a Northwestern fumble inside the 1-yard line in the first quarter that Michigan State was able to recover. At this point in the game, the Wildcats were already ahead 7-0, and had it been 14-0, the Spartans' hole would have been even more

difficult to climb out of. Hoover is the left defensive end up front.

What is really intriguing to me about Michigan State's defense is that going into the season, their plan was to switch to a 3-4 scheme. For the majority of this game, the Spartans ran a 4-3 like they had before.

One of the more impressive statistics from its win last weekend is that Michigan State had eight sacks. Now, some of those were a result of stopping Northwestern quarterback Dan Persa in the backfield on designed runs, or forcing him out of bounds behind the line of scrimmage. But nonetheless, eight sacks in one game is eye-opening.

I mentioned Jones as one of the Spartans' defensive cogs. Another player to keep an eye on is linebacker Eric Gordon. He is the guy who sealed the victory with an interception in the final minute on a play where he read Persa's eyes perfectly.

Now, as for the parts of Michigan State's defense that are unimpressive, I'm mainly looking at the secondary. One player who did well is cornerback Marcus Hyde (he is the brother of Iowa cornerback Micah Hyde), as he had six tackles in this contest. However, Northwestern did show an ability to move the football.

Most of the rushing yards the Spartans gave up were courtesy of Persa, but to be fair, Northwestern's run game hasn't been too productive this year. But the plays through the air the Wildcats got, especially in the first half, blew me away.

I saw three plays – two in the first quarter and one in the fourth quarter – where Northwestern faced 3rd-and-long, and Michigan State had zero down linemen. All three times, the Wildcats picked up first downs through the air. I didn't understand what the Spartans were doing.

Northwestern had two very impressive touchdown drives in this

game on Michigan State's defense. One came in the second quarter where on three consecutive plays – the first being an end-around and the other two being passes – the Wildcats picked up 29, 17, and 22 yards, respectively. The other was in the second half, where they moved the football methodically down the field and put together a 15-play touchdown drive of 80 yards. The longest play on this drive was 18 yards.

My point here is this – This Spartan defense can be cracked open. To Michigan State's credit, they made some good adjustments throughout this game. But it wasn't as though Michigan State's execution on the defensive end of the field was solid from start to finish.

Special Teams

As everyone knows, Michigan State did execute a fake punt to perfection during the fourth quarter that completely changed the momentum of this game. Punter Aaron Bates fielded the snap, threw a perfect spiral to Bennie Fowler, and Michigan State scored on the following play. As far as actual punting goes, he had one bad punt in the fourth quarter that had a lot to do with kicking into the wind.

Dan Conroy, who is the Spartans' placekicker, came into this game perfect on the season with both extra points and field goals. He did miss his first kick of the year though on an attempt where the snap was sort of high, but the hold was good, and Conroy just hooked it to the right. Kickoff coverage was OK, return game was OK. Nothing really stood out on either end.

Coaching

I don't care what happens the rest of the way. If Mark Dantonio isn't the Big Ten Coach of the Year, something's wrong. He was back on the sidelines for the first time since his heart attack, and both he and his coordinators Don Treadwell (offense) and Pat Narduzzi (defense) called superb

games.

What makes the fake punt even more incredible is that Michigan State had its offense on the field for fourth down, burned a timeout, then took a delay of game to move the football five yards back. Keep in mind that if Northwestern wanted to, it could have declined the delay of game penalty there. Hindsight is 20/20, but nevertheless, the job these guys did in this game and have done all season is nothing short of remarkable.

Strengths

- Cousins has strong arm, great poise*
- Offense productive in every area*
- Heads-up special teams*

Weaknesses

- Susceptible to big play defensively*
- Struggles converting third-downs*
- Cousins not as effective with pressure in his face*

Final Thoughts

Well, first of all, Iowa needs to be able to flush away the loss to Wisconsin last weekend. As heartbreaking as that might have been, the Hawkeyes can't dwell on that defeat, otherwise Michigan State is fully capable of blowing Iowa out.

The Spartans are 8-0, and while their top 5 ranking might be fair to question, keep in mind this is a team that will want payback for what Iowa was able to do up in East Lansing last season when Ricky Stanzi found Marvin McNutt on the game's final play for the winning touchdown.

If the Hawkeyes are going to win, they're going to need to do a ton on Saturday. For starters, the defensive line has to get

pressure on Cousins, and force him into ill-advised throws. As I said before, if you give him time in the pocket, he will carve this defense apart, especially considering the lack of depth right now in the Iowa linebacking corps.

Michigan State is going to want to do a lot of short-yardage stuff and take time off the clock, with the hopes that big plays will follow. Not to say stopping the run isn't going to be important this week, but I don't believe the emphasis needs to be there first.

The Spartans will throw the football as much as they need to, especially if the Hawkeyes are able to jump out to an early lead like Northwestern was able to. That's not to say they won't run the ball on this defense with Baker and Bell, but if Cousins is able to consistently connect on 10-15 yard throws to guys like Dell, Cunningham, Martin, Gantt, Nichol, I don't see Michigan State going away from that unless Iowa is able to stop it.

Iowa's back seven need to come up big. All of them. It doesn't matter who is in there. There is going to be a ton of responsibility on the linebackers and the secondary to not let any of those playmakers Michigan State has make big plays. If any of them struggle mightily, it could be a long day for the Hawkeye defense.

One of the things I listed as a weakness for the Spartans was their inability to consistently convert on third down. I stress this because if Iowa is able to get 3-and-outs against this offense, then the Hawkeyes are going to have a great chance to win this game.

Offensively, I'll tell you one thing Iowa can't be doing much of, and that's throwing a ton of screens. I felt like Northwestern got little to absolutely nothing on every screen pass it attempted. Michigan State, as it showed against the Wildcats, is not afraid to let the bulk of the defense work in

space.

The game plan could be different for the Spartans against an Iowa offense that won't rely as much on the spread attack, but nevertheless, there might still be instances where the number of down linemen is less than three when the Hawkeyes do line up in the shotgun and are facing 3rd-and-long situations.

One thing I mentioned Northwestern couldn't do whatsoever was establish a set running game with its backs. Iowa can do that with Adam Robinson. I think Robinson is going to need to have an enormous game on the ground for the Hawkeyes this Saturday. His importance cannot be stressed enough, especially when you consider that Michigan State is not going to stack the box as much as teams like Michigan or Arizona were in those games this season.

When Iowa does go to the air, the deep passes will be there, especially if the offensive line gives Stanzi good enough protection when he does drop back in play-action. I could see receivers like Derrell Johnson-Koulianos and the aforementioned McNutt both having solid games against this Spartan secondary.

The Hawkeyes did a great job offensively of not turning the football over against Wisconsin last week, even in defeat. Winning the turnover battle will be important. If the opportunity is there for Iowa like it was for Northwestern, a fumble inside the 1-yard line can't happen.

And then finally, special teams needs to be on high alert. While I don't see Michigan State running any sort of fakes this week, you never know after what happened to Iowa last week in the loss to Wisconsin. A major emphasis needs to be placed here, because right now, I would say the Spartans have an overwhelming advantage on the Hawkeyes in this area.

Since Dantonio took over in 2007, the games between Iowa and Michigan State have been classics that have gone down to the

final play, with the Hawkeyes coming up on the winning end in two of those contests. Given the atmosphere expected at Kinnick Stadium, I wouldn't expect anything less.

But while I expect Iowa to perform better than it did last week, there can't be any sort of fundamental mistakes in this upcoming game, otherwise Michigan State has enough firepower offensively to win big.