

COMMENTARY: Defense provides inspiring performance (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – I'll be completely honest. As this past week went by, I wasn't really sure what to make of Saturday's contest between No. 18 Iowa and No. 5 Michigan State.

Normally, I feel I have a pretty good read on things, but it wasn't until Friday morning that I began thinking the Hawkeyes had a terrific chance of bouncing back.

As soon as I heard Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz utter at the Johnson County I-Club Breakfast that defensive coordinator Norm Parker would be in the Kinnick Stadium press box, that's when I finally got that read, that thought that the Hawkeyes might be in better shape than I anticipated.

Iowa winning wasn't what surprised me on Saturday. It was how the Hawkeyes absolutely manhandled an undefeated Michigan State team to the tune of 37-6. This was honestly the last thing I anticipated.

When Parker is around this team, there's just a different vibe, period. Parker didn't completely resume to normal coaching duties, and Ferentz made clear after the game this wasn't a timetable for when that would happen. But his presence, him physically appearing around the team, makes all the difference in the world.

It wasn't going to matter if Parker called every play, or just simply gave two pieces of input the entire afternoon. There's no way Michigan State, a top 5 team, a squad as balanced as it

was coming into this contest offensively, only scores six measly points if Parker wasn't inside Kinnick Stadium. This is something you couldn't convince me on if you tried.

The first time I truly thought about this was last season. If you recall, Parker missed Iowa's 42-24 win over Indiana at this time a year ago. Take away a fluky pick-six from Tyler Sash and a ridiculous offensive display in the fourth quarter by the Hawkeyes, the Hoosier offense had Iowa on the ropes.

Then fast forward to the Orange Bowl, with Parker firmly in place. Iowa shut down what was a vaunted Georgia Tech offense and only gave up one touchdown that entire night (the Yellow Jacket defense scored once).

That's when it truly hit me how much Parker means to this team. That's when it truly hit how much these Hawkeye players were going to fight tooth and nail for this guy.

If there was ever a time for that emotion, that determination to be on display, it was in this game.

Perhaps nothing exemplified the dominance by the Iowa defense more than the play of the secondary. Corners Shaun Prater and Micah Hyde and safeties Brett Greenwood and Tyler Sash all had outstanding performances.

Prater led the Hawkeyes with 10 tackles, seven of which were unassisted, and stalled a potential Michigan State scoring drive. Greenwood had an interception in the second half. And of course, there was the big play in this game when Sash recorded the first pick and proceeded to lateral the ball to Hyde, who then went 66 yards for a touchdown.

In essence, all four defensive backs got their hands on the ball in this game.

Then there was the linebacking corps, which was just depleted coming in. Jeff Tarpinian didn't start, but he returned to the

gridiron, giving this defense a needed boost. James Morris and Shane DiBona (both of whom are freshmen) found themselves starting in place of Tarpinian and an injured Jeremiha Hunter. Throw in that Tyler Nielsen left the game with an injury, and yet the Hawkeyes were throwing 3-4 packages at the Spartans in third-down situations. That takes guts.

It also shows the adaptability the coaches have.

Finally, there was the front four. These guys weren't going to allow Michigan State to push them around like Wisconsin did the week prior.

For those who didn't understand Parker's impact, now you do. The difference is a near-180.

And if the Hawkeyes find a way to have Parker with them, regardless of how much work he's actually doing, then Iowa becomes a dangerous out in November.

I got to be honest. I wasn't thinking this would be the case. It's amazing how things change. It's also amazing how things can stay the same.

With Parker there physically with the team, I would expect performances like what the defense showed on Saturday to keep continuing.