

11/8/2010: Northwestern “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 Northwestern Wildcats, who will entertain the 13th-ranked Hawkeyes on Nov. 13 at Ryan Field in Evanston, Ill.

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Last weekend, after covering Iowa’s 18-13 victory over Indiana, I went back and watched Northwestern’s 35-21 loss to Penn State on Nov. 6 for the first time in its entirety.

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

Offense

The theme of strong quarterback play in the Big Ten continues here. The best way to sum up Northwestern’s offense is this: Dan Persa is Northwestern’s offense.

Now don’t get me wrong. The Wildcats do have some playmakers at other positions, which I’ll get to a bit later. But everything Northwestern does offensively revolves around Persa. End of story.

Schematically, this is a spread attack. Kind of like when Iowa played Michigan a few weeks ago, you will never see Persa lined up under center unless it’s to either spike the ball during a two-minute drill or to line up in the victory formation and take a knee. This is a shotgun offense, which

unlike the pistol offense Iowa faced from Indiana last week, Persa is going to be five yards back behind the center.

As a quarterback, Persa's strength is his mobility. If you recall, Iowa witnessed this first-hand last year because Persa played against the Hawkeyes in place of an injured Mike Kafka, Persa's predecessor as Northwestern's signal-caller. He has a nice arm and can throw all different types of passes (it's almost night and day to what he did a year ago at Kinnick Stadium), but he is deadly running with the football. Just deadly.

His vision is extraordinary. If there's a lane for him to run through when he does drop back, he will not hesitate tucking the football in and running. His ability to juke defenders and pick up big yardage when he does scramble is just incredible.

I will say this about Persa, though: Keep an eye on what he's doing the second he takes the shotgun snap in any "passing" situation. Here's why. When it doesn't appear as if he is dropping back to pass, this is when Persa is actually most effective as a passer. At least this was the case against Penn State. When he does drop back, even in shotgun, he is more likely to start running because that's his first instinct once he sees the field and doesn't have anyone open.

I noticed this on the first two Northwestern touchdown drives, and here's another thing to consider: If Northwestern runs the football in the red zone, Persa is the threat. He had touchdown runs on both of these series – one was a designed draw, the other was just he saw open field when he went back to throw and decided to just run it in.

The Wildcats do have two running backs that will be used from time to time – Mike Trumpy and Adonis Smith. Trumpy will get more carries because he is also more effective in the short passing game for Northwestern than Smith is. When they do touch the football, it will usually be one of three ways –

either they get the hand off from Persa when they come up to him (in shotgun, Persa doesn't need to run back to hand it to them), or Persa will pitch it when Northwestern runs some option, or it will be a short dump-off, either a check-down or possibly a shovel pass (there was one of these in the first quarter).

As far as the passing game is concerned – Northwestern has three playmakers that really need to be accounted for, one of whom is just scary good. Persa's go-to guy is Jeremy Ebert, who might be the most underrated wideout in the entire Big Ten. Ebert is really effective on crossing patterns, catching passes in the middle of the field, then finding the sidelines when getting yards after catch. His speed is such that he is capable of big plays at any moment and he is a great route runner.

Demetrius Fields didn't have as much of an impact against Penn State last weekend, but he is also a guy Persa will look for. And then Drake Dunsmore is Northwestern's "super back" and he's a guy that becomes a target whenever the Wildcats get in the red zone. Perfect example of this is against Penn State. Dunsmore caught the one touchdown pass Persa threw, and it was a one-handed catch in the back of the end zone, perhaps as good a catch as you'll see in college football this year.

The offensive line does a good job of giving Persa time to make decisions in the pocket, but I wouldn't say its overall blocking is anything special, especially since Northwestern has struggled to run the football most of this season.

Defense

I'll say this about Northwestern's defense: It does possess more talent than some perhaps like to give the Wildcats credit for.

Northwestern, for the most part, lines up with a base 4-3. Actually, I would argue this defense is very similar to Iowa's

defense with one little caveat. The Wildcats tend to blitz more than the Hawkeyes do. That should be expected considering how head coach Pat Fitzgerald was an all-Big Ten linebacker at Northwestern during the program's glory days in the mid-1990s.

Here's another reason why I make the Iowa comparison, however. Over the last couple of weeks, we've seen Iowa play against teams that spread the football around offensively and line up in a 3-4 in third-down passing situations. Northwestern does this as well, and did it quite a bit against Penn State last weekend.

The Wildcats have decent playmakers up front in defensive end Vince Browne and in the linebacking corps with Quentin Davie and Nate Williams, who played like a stud against the Nittany Lions. In the secondary, the guy I really like is cornerback Jordan Mabin. Penn State eventually found success on offense going towards his side of the field, but not in the passing game.

I see three problems with Northwestern defensively – penalties, getting pushed around, and sloppy tackling. First, the penalties. The Wildcats are the most penalized team in the Big Ten this season. In the first half, Northwestern did a great job of not being called for anything until right before halftime when Penn State first scored and began to seize momentum. In the second half, Northwestern looked less disciplined on defense and really began to unravel. I will also say this is not the first time this season that this has happened, either.

Secondly, with getting pushed around. One of the adjustments Penn State made as an offense was establish its running game and attacking the left side of Northwestern's defense. To be fair, the Nittany Lions have a right guard that is as good as any offensive lineman there is in the Big Ten. But nevertheless, Penn State found a soft spot in the Wildcats' run defense, and kept exploiting it throughout the second

half.

But part of the reason why this happened is because in addition to the coaching adjustments Penn State made, Northwestern just struggled getting penetration as the game progressed. The Wildcats' defense brought a lot of pressure in the first half and played very well. But when the Nittany Lions were moving the football, they were winning all the trench battles and what you saw were a lot of guys in Northwestern's back seven having to make a lot of tackles.

Which leads to the third problem with tackling. Not only did the Wildcats struggle to get off Penn State blocks, but when they had chances to tackle whichever Nittany Lion was possessing the football, they couldn't. Tackling form was poor, and as a result, so was the tackling itself. A lot of arm tackles led to misses, and as a result, Penn State was able to continuously move the chains throughout the second half.

As far as this game goes, another thing the Nittany Lions were able to do (almost at will) was pick up first downs on screens to the halfback. That is something that as a defense, you just cannot let happen.

Special Teams

Some good, some bad, very inconsistent.

Against Penn State last weekend, there was one blunder where a return man brought the football out of the end zone and ended up getting tackled at the 12-yard line. Aside from that, kick return coverage was fine. Punt returns, didn't really see enough of these because Northwestern never really had a chance to return any Nittany Lion punts.

Kickoff coverage is fine, punt coverage is fine. However, the punter, Brandon Williams, had a couple of bad kicks against Penn State. Kicker Stefan Demos made all three extra-point

attempts (he has missed three this season), but missed a very makable field goal attempt in the first quarter. On most of his field goal and PAT tries, I noticed the snaps tended to be a little-high. Williams does a good job of fielding snaps and getting good holds down, but this might somewhat explain the inconsistencies Northwestern has had with kicking this season.

Coaching

I like Fitzgerald as a head coach, but he got outcoached by Joe Paterno in this game against Penn State. Northwestern had a 21-0 lead, then gave up a touchdown right before halftime, and then when the Nittany Lion offense took the field for the first possession of the second half, they scored another touchdown and managed to seize all the momentum.

I don't think Northwestern did a good job in this game at all of reacting to the adjustments Penn State made. It also seemed like some of the same bugaboos the Wildcats have endured all season (penalties) really came back to bite them in the second half. I don't know what he tells the team at halftime (if anything), but between the 17-0 lead Northwestern lost a few weeks back to Michigan State, and now this 21-0 lead lost to Penn State, there are some troubling concerns here.

Strengths

- Persa's mobility
- Receivers getting yards after catch
- Creating reasonable 3rd-and-short yardage situations

Weaknesses

- Getting beat handily in the trenches
- Poor tackling
- Penalties

Final Thoughts

Well, here it is. "The Game before The Game," if you will, in the minds of many Hawkeye fans.

I won't go too in-depth on Northwestern's success against Iowa over the last five years, but in summary, the Wildcats have won four of the last five meetings, including the last two, both of which came at Kinnick Stadium.

It should be stressed that when the Wildcats won last year, this was the game where Iowa quarterback Ricky Stanzi got hurt. The Hawkeyes also didn't have the luxury of Adam Robinson for last season's meeting, and by all accounts, it sounds as if he will be back in the Iowa line-up this week after missing the game at Indiana last weekend with a mild concussion.

Assuming Robinson is able to go, I really think Iowa has a chance to exploit some things because the personnel is finally in place.

I mentioned how Penn State's offense was very effective with picking up first downs, especially using screens against Northwestern's defense. I have to believe some screens are going to be involved in Iowa's game plan this week, especially if Robinson's back. For one, he can catch the ball out of the back field. Secondly, he can make guys miss (which goes back to poor tackling on Northwestern's part). Finally, the Hawkeyes have receivers and tight ends that do enough of a job blocking that he can break into the open field.

The one concern I have with the run game is the area of the Wildcats' defense that was exploited by the Nittany Lions' ground game last weekend is not where I feel the strength of Iowa's offensive line exists. I say this because if the Hawkeyes work the left side of the field (Northwestern's right side defensively) too much, they might end up letting the Wildcats off the hook at times when they shouldn't.

Penn State also did a good job (when Matt McGloin was in at quarterback) of executing play-action passes, either deep or in the middle of the field when Northwestern's defense ran zone coverage. To me, this plays right into Stanzi's strengths. If you recall, Iowa scored in the first minute of last year's meeting on a deep ball from Stanzi to wide receiver Marvin McNutt. If you also recall, the play Stanzi got hurt on near the goal-line was also play-action.

My point is this, if the play-action is there, I guarantee you Stanzi will use it, and I guarantee you it will work because he'll either hit McNutt or any of the other receivers deep, or hit them or someone like Allen Reisner in the middle of the field.

With all due respect to Northwestern cornerback Justan Vaughn, he's the one corner Iowa needs to attack when it is time to pass. Mabin is the closest thing to a shutdown corner the Wildcats have, and throwing his way is more likely to result in incomplete passes or interceptions.

As for Iowa's defense, the group needing to come up big here is the defensive line. This game (on both sides, really) is going to be decided in the trenches, and this is where I believe the Hawkeyes should be at a decisive advantage.

That being said, if the front four cannot get to Persa early and often, and force him into some poor decisions, this defense is going to be out on the field for most of this game, and that could be a major concern come the second half. If the front four manhandles Northwestern's offensive line, that is going to create some really nice opportunities for linebackers like Jeremiha Hunter, James Morris, and Shane DiBona. If Iowa has its way defensively, don't be surprised to see one of these three (at least) record a double-digit number of tackles. Seriously. Just look at last year's loss to the Wildcats. Pat Angerer had an absolutely incredible game statistically, even though Iowa lost.

If Iowa does struggle to get any pressure on Persa, what's going to happen is a lot of the guys in the secondary like Shaun Prater and Micah Hyde are going to end up recording a ton of tackles like they did last weekend against Indiana.

Northwestern's offense is most effective when the Wildcats pick up positive yardage on first down and can set up opportunities where it's 2nd-and-short or 3rd-and-short. They'll settle for five-six yards every play if they have to. That's not to say Northwestern won't look for any deep plays later in the game, but that there is more of an emphasis on picking up bits and pieces at a time.

And while Northwestern has blown double-digit leads twice in the past three weeks, that doesn't make it OK for Iowa to dig itself into a hole here before making a comeback. That's kind of what happened last week at Indiana, and it nearly cost the Hawkeyes. Iowa failed to deliver a knockout blow right away against the Hoosiers, and as a result, Indiana managed to hang around and had a lead late in the fourth quarter.

Northwestern is a slightly better team than Indiana is, meaning whatever breaks went Iowa's way a week ago might not go its way in this game. The Hawkeyes have enough firepower offensively to jump out to an early lead on this team and be in position to put the game away early, more so than I feel either Michigan State or Penn State had after seeing both of those teams up close and in person.

But getting off to a slow start in this particular game is a bad idea because of the whole psyche thing. That's when what has happened in the past can potentially start creating doubt. That's why it's important for the big-name players on this Iowa team, the captains, the guys who have shown they can step up when called upon, all need to be on their A-game.

They have a chance to set up another epic showdown next week that could very well determine Iowa's bowl fate. But another

loss to Northwestern here, and not only can the Hawkeyes kiss a shot at a Big Ten title goodbye, but the Outback Bowl probably becomes the best-case scenario as far as a 13th game is concerned.