

11/22/2010: Minnesota “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 Minnesota Golden Gophers, who will entertain the 24th-ranked Hawkeyes at TCF Bank Stadium in Minneapolis, Minn., on Nov. 27.

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Last weekend, after covering Iowa’s 20-17 loss to Ohio State, I went back and watched Minnesota’s 38-34 victory over Illinois back on Nov. 13 for the first time in its entirety. Although it was more than a week ago, this was the most recent game because of a bye last week.

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

Offense

Maybe this statement’s a bit of a stretch since I’m only basing this off one game, but from what I saw out of Minnesota’s offense against Illinois, it isn’t that bad. Not great by any means, but it isn’t completely atrocious.

I’ll start with the quarterback position, because technically, there are two guys Iowa will need to keep its eyes on this weekend – Adam Weber and MarQueis Gray.

Weber will take the majority of the snaps at quarterback, and he can both line up under center and in shotgun. His strength is his arm, no question. He can make any kind of throw, which

is something you want to have from a fifth-year senior quarterback and one who has started since he was a redshirt freshman.

The thing Weber won't get nearly enough credit for is his feet. Very rarely will there be situations where Weber is looking to run, but when he does, he can be effective. Against Illinois, he had a huge 29-yard run on a 3rd-and-10 designed quarterback draw from the Golden Gophers' own 20-yard line. The run went right up the middle, and this came on Minnesota's final drive of the game, the one it would score and win on.

One area of Weber's game I would be critical of, however, is his decision-making with the football when he throws. I like the intangibles he brings and he knows the playbook and how to play the position. But there are definitely instances where he doesn't make the smartest decision as to where to put the football.

Just watching this game against the Fighting Illini closely, his first completion (the first play of the game for Minnesota's offense) was a pass that should have been picked off. On the Golden Gophers' game-winning drive, he had at least one, maybe even two throws that could've been intercepted and killed any hopes of a Minnesota comeback. Fortunately for him, they weren't, and the lone turnover against Illinois didn't come from the offense.

Now the other weapon, and I say weapon because he does a variety of things for the Golden Gophers offensively, this team has at quarterback is MarQueis Gray. When I watch him, I see someone that has a ton of potential still to be a solid quarterback. He doesn't have the leadership traits down like Weber does, but Gray is one heck of an athlete.

Minnesota has used him at both quarterback and receiver this season, and plenty of this was on display against Illinois. Unlike Weber, when Gray is lined up at quarterback (mainly in

shotgun), he is looking to run first. That's not to say he can't throw the football. Just that when he's back there, it's because the Golden Gophers are looking for him to provide the offense a spark.

Gray can also catch the ball and has done a decent job of being able to make tough catches. But with that said, Minnesota's receiving corps is undoubtedly led by Da'Jon McKnight. He and Weber seem to have a real good connection, and McKnight showed against the Fighting Illini how dangerous he is. He made a nice catch in the end zone for a Golden Gopher touchdown when he did have man-to-man coverage and wasn't facing a zone. This is the one wideout that needs to be accounted for.

Minnesota has two running backs it will use – Duane Bennett and DeLeon Eskridge. Bennett is more of a threat in both the running and passing game as he can catch the football out of the backfield and make plays. On the game-winning drive here, he had a 25-yard reception on a screen play and was taken down at the Illinois 6-yard line.

Eskridge went off on the Fighting Illini defense for three touchdowns on the ground. The one thing I like about Eskridge is his vision. He appeared to be at his best when the holes were there for him inside the hashes, but from there, he knew how to make guys miss and get bigger runs.

Offensive line play is sort of mediocre. There were times I thought they gave Eskridge good holes and gave Weber enough time, especially when Minnesota ran play-action. There were also situations where I feel Illinois was able to just shut down whatever the Golden Gophers wanted to do, and as a result, teams with better or more talented defenses are more capable of making Minnesota more pass-oriented and very one-dimensional.

Defense

Now here's why the Golden Gophers are a 2-9 team right here. I liked what I saw from a few individuals, but for the most part, calling this a suspect defense would be kind.

My biggest criticism of Minnesota's defense is this – the middle of the field is going to be open. Quite a bit.

When Illinois was moving the ball on this Golden Gopher defense, most of the success came in the middle of the field. The best runs the Fighting Illini had (and this is a team that runs a zone-read scheme) were inside the tackles. The long touchdown run Minnesota gave up in the fourth quarter was a play designed to go between the tackles, and a cutback inside led to nothing between the running back and the end zone.

What this tells me is that against this defense, it's going to be all about reaching the second level. The Golden Gophers primarily run a 4-3 scheme. Some nickel on occasion, but for the most part, Minnesota will stick with the 4-3 defense, even when the going appears to be rough.

I noticed the defensive line likes to run a lot of stunts to try and confuse the offensive linemen they face in the trenches. This is something to keep an eye on, especially when it comes to establishing a zone-blocking scheme for running the football.

Brandon Kirksey is a defensive lineman that brings the most to the table for the Golden Gophers' defensive line. He opens up possibilities for the other guys on the line, and they benefited when they did get pressure on Illinois' Nathan Scheelhaase.

The linebacking corps, to me, left a little to be desired, mainly because as I said before, a lot of the yards this team is going to give up come in the middle of the field. The guys in the secondary do a decent job with run support, but again, this is a defense that is going to relinquish yards and big plays through the air. One guy I really like is safety Troy

Stoudemire.

Stoudemire made a play on special teams I'll get to here in a bit, but at the end of the game, he made an interception that sealed the win for Minnesota. On the play, he made a good read on the football and knew when to go for it.

Special Teams

Punt and kickoff coverage are fine. I won't get into this too much here. I will say that Minnesota drops the three guys back on punts, meaning every team Iowa has faced this season will do this instead of the normal punt formation you see the Hawkeyes line up in.

Minnesota's punt return game is intriguing because unlike most teams, the Golden Gophers are going to drop two guys back to return punts instead of just one. This is something to consider when Iowa does go back to punt.

Kickoff return coverage had one great moment and one bad moment. First, the bad came in the third quarter. Illinois was kicking into the wind, so it attempted a high, short kickoff that was fumbled by one of the up-backs, and the Fighting Illini were able to recover the football. But later in the fourth quarter after Illinois went up by 10 points, the aforementioned Stoudemire made a huge play to give the Golden Gophers life, returning a kickoff all the way to the Illinois 4-yard line.

Coaching

Now this is significant to consider because Tim Brewster was the head coach until a month ago. Since that time, offensive coordinator Jeff Horton took over as the team's interim head coach.

There wasn't anything I really took away from Minnesota's game against Illinois that has me thinking about Horton one way or

another, mainly because he's in a position where even he knows that he won't be back. With that in mind, he obviously has the support of the players because they fought hard and won for him two weeks ago, and he even got a Gatorade bath after winning the game.

Strengths

- Variety on offense*
- Stoudemire a threat on kickoff returns*
- Weber's arm strength*

Weaknesses

- Middle of the field left open by defense*
- Inconsistent play from offense*
- Tendency to give up lots of points*

Final Thoughts

Well, it's the final regular season game. Unfortunately for the Hawkeyes, they have fallen out of contention for a Big Ten championship and are really playing for better bowl positioning in this game, while the Golden Gophers are simply playing for pride.

If I'm Minnesota, I'm treating this week like a bowl game, especially since the Golden Gophers are coming off their bye week after winning at Illinois. The season ends for Minnesota after this game, it's a rivalry game, and there's a trophy called Floyd of Rosedale at stake. It's a trophy the Golden Gophers have only had possession of twice over the past decade.

Normally, I would say Iowa should have absolutely no trouble scoring on this defense. But the problem is that the Hawkeyes, as a unit, have struggled offensively for the past 14 quarters

(I'm including the second half of Iowa's win over Michigan State).

Even more troubling for the Hawkeyes is that with Adam Robinson suffering what appeared to be a second concussion in the fourth quarter of last weekend's game against Ohio State, Iowa is going to be relying heavily on Marcus Coker to carry the workload.

Looking at this from the Hawkeyes' perspective, this is a game I feel needs to be won in convincing fashion. Any momentum you can carry going into your bowl game is going to be of benefit to a team like Iowa whose confidence looks deflated after the past two weeks.

Coker will need to have a solid game. By solid, I mean he is going to need to go over 100 yards on the ground for the Hawkeyes like he did when he got the start against Indiana earlier in the month.

For a quarterback like Ricky Stanzi, this is a game that is going to provide him plenty of opportunities down field. Simply put, he needs to make the most of these chances he is going to get. If Iowa calls plays where guys like Marvin McNutt, Derrell Johnson-Koulianos and Allen Reisner can all get open in the middle of the field, there is potential for the Hawkeyes to make some huge plays on this Minnesota defense.

The Golden Gophers are not a team that's going to change up their schemes defensively, so it's simply a matter of the Iowa offense knowing where to attack and when.

Now from a defensive standpoint for the Hawkeyes, this game again is going to come down to the front four. If guys like Adrian Clayborn, Christian Ballard, Karl Klug (a Minnesota native) and Mike Daniels dominate their battles in the trenches, it's going to be a long afternoon for Weber.

That said, if Minnesota's O-Line holds its own and gives Weber enough time to throw, especially when the Golden Gophers go to play-action, there will be opportunities for Weber to pick Iowa's defense apart. This is why covering McKnight and forcing other Minnesota wideouts and tight ends to beat you is essential.

On special teams, Michael Meyer better be careful on kickoffs. He had one kickoff last weekend against the Buckeyes that went out of bounds and gave Ohio State tremendous field position. For one, he needs to avoid that because kicking the football out of bounds on kickoffs is inexcusable. And secondly, you don't want a guy like Stoudemire breaking a big return on your kickoff coverage, which as he showed against Illinois, he is capable of.

Finally, let's address the weather. It's going to be cold. Very cold. The Hawkeyes are not going to have the luxury of playing this game indoors inside the Metrodome, or as Iowa fans call it, "Kinnick North." The weather could be a factor here, and the cold temperatures are something that need to be taken seriously because it will have an impact on this game.

This is a game Iowa should win with ease, but Illinois should have beat Minnesota with ease as well. The Golden Gophers are playing with house money. Pressure's on the Hawkeyes, especially the offense to produce. Anything less than 24 points against this Minnesota team would be sad and would suggest that little progress is being made offensively. It will be interesting to see how Iowa responds to this challenge.