

# COMMENTARY: Pressure on Coker greater (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

*HawkeyeDrive.com*

IOWA CITY, Iowa – I understand the biggest story from Iowa's 34-7 win over Tennessee Tech on Saturday was the 84-minute delay caused by a monsoon in Iowa City that left the 70,585 on hand at Kinnick Stadium drenched.

But there's one on-field matter that needs to be addressed, and it's something Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz said was at the top of his priority list of things he hopes his players clean up – ball security.

Throughout the preseason, I've maintained the thought that during the Hawkeyes' non-conference slate, the key figure is sophomore running back Marcus Coker. In the first quarter, he had two fumbles during his first four carries, leading to him being benched in favor of true freshman Mika'il McCall.

It's already significant enough that the guy being considered Iowa's featured back had issues holding onto the ball. Then later in the quarter, McCall's ninth carry of the game ended with him laying on the field in agony. It turned out McCall broke his right ankle when he was hit, and Ferentz said afterwards the injury would cost McCall the rest of his 2011 season.

The last thing Iowa needed was another injured running back, especially when it's a true freshman that elevated himself into being the team's No. 2 back. This now puts even more pressure on Coker than there might have already been.

Now Coker said following the game that ball security normally

hasn't been an issue with him, and in the few times he played last season, it wasn't. As a true freshman, he only had one fumble, but it came in the fourth quarter of a loss to Minnesota.

McCall being the one that went in when he did instead of junior Jason White, who was originally listed as the No. 2 back for Saturday's game, only solidifies the importance Coker has now with McCall being hurt. To Coker's credit, he wasn't blaming the weather for his issues holding onto the football. As much as it was raining on Saturday, it's not as though running backs aren't trained to secure a wet ball.

But returning to the point made by Ferentz after the game, Coker (and the rest of the team for that matter) can't afford for this to be a lingering issue during the course of the season. As much as Tennessee Tech was being praised for its experience on both sides of the football, let's be real. The Golden Eagles are nothing compared to any of the remaining opponents Iowa will be facing this fall.

Envision six weeks from now when Northwestern comes to Kinnick Stadium, and Coker fumbles on the Hawkeyes' opening series, and let's say instead of a 3-and-out, Dan Persa leads the Wildcats down the field for a score. Ferentz's point reflects the long term and why it's important for ball security to be something fixed as soon as possible.

As for Coker, his role hasn't changed. He's still the featured back. He's still has the same strengths everyone said he had entering the season. But now the pressure mounts, and if he does continue to struggle with ball security, it's going to have an effect on the rest of the team.