

# COMMENTARY: Vandenberg in command (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

*HawkeyeDrive.com*

IOWA CITY, Iowa – Coming into Saturday's game between the Iowa Hawkeyes and Pittsburgh Panthers, I made the comment that Iowa would prevail in a shootout because the Hawkeyes had a decisive advantage at the quarterback position.

Junior quarterback James Vandenberg made only his fifth career start on Saturday, while Pittsburgh was counting on the play of quarterback Tino Sunseri, who came in with more game experience. Yet throughout the week, the feeling I had was that Vandenberg was due to have a big game, one where he would step out of the shadow of Ricky Stanzi and become the face of Iowa's offense.

Iowa wound up prevailing 31-27 (I had said 27-24), and Vandenberg ended up being the biggest reason why. For nearly three quarters, he played about as bad as he could have without the coaching staff contemplating taking him out for backup A.J. Derby. With the Hawkeyes trailing 24-3, Vandenberg had completed 14-of-28 passes. Those numbers were somewhat similar to what he did against Iowa State a week ago, but it was the misses that stood out.

An interception on Iowa's second series of the game where he threw the ball right at a linebacker he didn't see. Overthrowing a wide open Marvin McNutt on a third-down play near the goal that was a for-sure touchdown. He looked mediocre at best, and atrocious at worst.

Yet something changed. Following a kickoff out of bounds that gave Iowa possession on its own 40-yard line, Vandenberg threw

a pass to wide receiver Keenan Davis that was initially ruled incomplete but then called a catch after a review. He then completed two more passes before scoring on a run from one-yard out.

In the fourth quarter, Vandenberg threw the ball 17 times. Of those 17 attempts, 14 were completions, and three of those completions resulted in touchdowns.

Afterwards, the story was no longer how bad Vandenberg looked in the game's first 41:49, but how in the last 18:11, he emerged as a the leader everyone in the program knew he could become.

If this were a college exam, Vandenberg went from scoring 50 percent and failing to passing the exam with flying colors. His final numbers were 31 completions on 48 attempts for a career-high 399 yards passing.

This game might not wind up being the turning point in Iowa's season. The Hawkeyes still have one more non-conference game next week against UL-Monroe and have yet to open Big Ten play.

But I'll go out on a limb right now and say this game will prove to be that turning point in Vandenberg's career. He needed this, and needed this badly. He needed to put on a display in front of the home crowd that fans would leave Kinnick Stadium remembering, and he did just that.

Vandenberg's traits as a leader had always been talked about. On Saturday, he backed up that talk.

He still has only started five games, and not everything is going to turn out like this for him or the Hawkeyes between now and the end of his playing career. But it's clear that Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz has complete faith in the Keokuk native, and it's also clear his teammates do as well.

The most telling stat from Saturday's game that shows the

strides Vandenberg has made is ball distribution among the top three receivers. Senior Marvin McNutt still is, and has always been, the biggest threat Iowa has at the position. But junior Keenan Davis led the Hawkeyes in receiving for the second straight week with 10 catches for 129 yards and one touchdown. Redshirt freshman Kevonte Martin-Manley caught the final two touchdowns scored by Iowa, and tallied four receptions for 76 yards.

That trio of wideouts combined for 22 of Vandenberg's 31 completions and 317 of his 399 passing yards.

Iowa will go as far as Vandenberg can take it. That was finally proven on Saturday.

And while he might not be entirely out of Stanzi's shadow given how Iowa had to come from behind in win, make no mistake that Vandenberg has emerged as the leader. This is now his offense.

The good thing for the Hawkeyes is that they discovered this now and not when it would have been too late.