

Hawks cap historic comeback, defeat Pitt

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – In a four-year run full of unpredictability and unimaginable moments, the Iowa Hawkeyes added to it in the unlikeliest of manners Saturday afternoon inside Kinnick Stadium.

By afternoon's end, the story was no longer about penalties and failure to execute, but rather about the Hawkeyes pulling off the biggest comeback in school history to defeat Pittsburgh, 31-27. The victory puts Iowa at 2-1 at the quarter-mark of the 2011 season.

With 3:11 left in the third quarter, the Panthers had executed a reverse pass for a 30-yard touchdown and held a 24-3 lead on the Hawkeyes. At this juncture, Iowa had been struggling to get anything going offensively and it appeared as though the defense had finally cracked after doing everything it could to keep the Hawkeyes in this game.

A Pittsburgh kickoff that went out of bounds resulted in Iowa starting at its own 40-yard line. Junior quarterback James Vandenberg, who was 14-of-28 passing at this point in the game, threw a pass to junior wide receiver Keenan Davis initially ruled incomplete.

However, the call would be reversed to a 22-yard completion into Panther territory, and Vandenberg would punch the ball in from one yard out for Iowa's first touchdown of the day, making it 24-10 entering the fourth quarter. From that moment on, things would start clicking for the Hawkeye offense, and Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz kept his team in attack mode.

"He gave us the green light to go out and play as good as we can," Davis said. "Everybody had to make the plays."

Pittsburgh would enter the red zone, but the Hawkeyes held up near the goal-line, forcing the Panthers to settle for a 24-yard field goal that made it 27-10. Iowa would respond on its ensuing series when Vandenberg tossed the first of three fourth-quarter touchdowns to Davis to trim the deficit to 10 points.

Then came perhaps the most important play of the entire game. The Panthers faced a 4th-and-3 from Iowa's 36-yard line, and had already pooch-punted on two occasions beforehand. Pittsburgh head coach Todd Graham elected to go for it, and Sunseri threw an incomplete pass, resulting in a turnover on downs and Iowa getting the ball back with 7:56 showing on the clock.

"When the crowd's going wild, you're just thinking 'I have to make the play,'" sophomore linebacker Christian Kirksey said. "As a defense, we have to run to the ball. We can't let them have any big plays or make this first down. It was real exciting."

Once again, the Hawkeyes would respond quickly. Vandenberg completed a 25-yard touchdown pass to redshirt freshman wide receiver Kevonte Martin-Manley that made it 27-24 in Pittsburgh's favor with 6:19 left.

After a Pittsburgh three-and-out, Iowa would retain possession with 4:22 remaining. On the seventh play of the drive, the Hawkeyes would take their first lead of the game when Vandenberg hit Martin-Manley for the go-ahead 22-yard score on what was the exact same play call as the previous touchdown connection.

"It was an up route," Martin-Manley said. "James told me, he said, 'If you get a good release, I'm going to hit you.' I got a good release, caught it, and that was big play for our

team.”

Vandenberg would finish the game completing 17 of his last 20 pass attempts and finished with a career-high 399 yards passing.

“We were dialed in there in that fourth quarter,” Vandenberg said. “They didn’t blitz us for awhile there, but then they heated it back up. But we did a great job of protecting all of that second half, and that was the difference.”

The Panthers would have one last chance to retake the lead and win the game, but junior Micah Hyde, who switched back to cornerback after starting Iowa’s first two games of the season at free safety, secured his second interception of the day to seal the Hawkeye victory.

“Despite all our rough spots, despite our deficiencies right now, our inexperience, whatever it may be, whatever it is, wherever it is, to push through and still get the game, to win the game, have the guys feel good about themselves afterwards, that’s something a growing team really needs,” Ferentz said.

Iowa plays its final non-conference game of the season on Sept. 24 against UL-Monroe, a game that will kickoff at 11 a.m. Central and be televised on the Big Ten Network.