

COMMENTARY: Defense steps up beyond stat sheet (premium)

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Sometimes statistics aren't the end all, be all, they get made out to be a lot of times in sports. In fact, Iowa's 41-31 victory over Northwestern on Saturday at Kinnick Stadium proved to be a strong exception.

The Hawkeyes won this game despite Northwestern racking up 495 yards of total offense, a 16-of-22 conversion rate on third downs, and having a significant margin in time of possession holding the football for 38:23. Usually numbers like these result in disaster for defense.

Now Iowa may have given up 31 points, but make no mistake. Even with the success the Wildcats had moving the football, Iowa's defense is what won this game for it.

Think back to last season, when Northwestern overcame a 10-point fourth-quarter deficit to beat Iowa 21-17. The talk after that game was how Dan Persa and the Wildcat offense moved the ball at will on a gassed Hawkeye defense. Northwestern ran 92 plays Saturday night, but this time around, the Iowa defense held its own.

What shouldn't get overlooked is the performance put together by the Hawkeyes' defensive line in particular. Iowa's front four got pressure on Persa and it showed. In fact, Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz said afterwards it was the best display put forth by the defensive line all season.

For as much concern as there has been about a group that lost three starters from last season to the NFL, this is the group

of players that set the tone for the Hawkeyes. Not only that, but the defensive line also made life easier for a linebacking corps that was thin without the services of middle linebacker James Morris and a secondary that gave up some big plays a week ago against Penn State.

Perhaps the biggest play of the game came in the first quarter. Northwestern got down to Iowa's 7-yard line and was in a position to either tie the game at 3-3 or take a 7-3 lead on the Hawkeyes. Instead, Persa was forced into an errant throw by a fast-moving Broderick Binns that sailed into the hands of sophomore free safety Tanner Miller, who proceeded to return the pick 98 yards for a touchdown that put Iowa ahead 10-0.

Miller's getting the credit for the pick-six, but it was Binns and the rest of the D-line that made it happen.

In the second quarter, senior defensive tackle Mike Daniels came up with a sack of Persa on third down that forced Northwestern out of field goal range. Sophomore defensive end Dominic Alvis also had a big game keeping contain on Persa and not allowing him to cut to the outside like he had on Iowa's defense in years past.

Then there was junior defensive tackle Steve Bigach, who got the start in place of an injured Thomas Nardo and came away with five tackles, a sack, and a fumble recovery on a play where Binns leveled Persa.

All three of Iowa's sacks came from the D-line, as did seven of the eight tackles for a loss of yards. Simply put, Rick Kaczinski's group came to play.

For all the talk there was this past week about an offensive identity and whether or not Iowa had one, it's safe to say the defense has an identity after winning this game. On one hand, opposing offenses haven't had much trouble moving the ball on this unit. However, the defense has had a knack for making key

plays when needed. Getting a pair of red zone stops, including one that resulted in points, makes the difference in games like this.

The stats might not show it, but this defense, and particularly this defensive line, made enormous strides on Saturday. Now it has a chance to build off of this against a pair of anemic offenses in Indiana and Minnesota before Michigan visits Kinnick Stadium on Nov. 5. Building off this performance could go a long way for a team that might need all the help it can in the season's final stretch.

This game was simply a start.