

COMMENTARY: Defense perseveres in biggest of moments (premium)

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – The Iowa defense is why the Hawkeyes secured their biggest victory of the season on Saturday, a 24-16 victory over No. 13 Michigan.

Yes, the same side of the football that was a heavy topic of discussion throughout the week for its struggles and was a letdown last week at Minnesota is the group of players that had the biggest impact on Iowa pulling off a rather unlikely victory. I would even go as far as saying it was the best the entire defense played all season.

Consider the opponent for a second. It's not just that Michigan came into this game ranked. It's that the Wolverines entered Kinnick Stadium with the second-best rushing attack of any Big Ten and a quarterback in Denard Robinson that was fifth in the conference in rushing averaging over 100 yards on the ground per contest.

Michigan still had some success moving the ball on this defense, but that's not the point. The bottom line is when the defense needed to make plays, it did.

One reason the Hawkeyes prevailed on Saturday is turnovers. The Wolverines had the best turnover margin of any Big Ten team, but failed to force any Iowa turnovers. Meanwhile, the Hawkeyes created two turnovers that came on Michigan's final two drives of the first half. In hindsight, those two plays made a world of difference.

The first was courtesy of senior linebacker Tyler Nielsen, who came in on a blitz and forced Robinson to lose handle of the ball while trying to get away from him. Nielsen was credited with the sack in addition to recovering Robinson's fumble, and it led to a 42-yard field goal by sophomore kicker Mike Meyer that put Iowa ahead 17-6.

Then right before halftime, sophomore linebacker Christian Kirksey intercepted a Robinson pass near the goal-line off a tipped ball, keeping Michigan off the scoreboard.

It wasn't just the turnovers, but the individual performances. I mentioned Nielsen's big play in the first half. He finished the game with 13 tackles, and that wasn't even a team-high. Senior strong safety Jordan Bernstine took those honors, recording a game-high 15 tackles, seven of which were solo.

The other performance that stood out was that of senior defensive end Broderick Binns. Having made a knack throughout his career for batting down passes, he batted down three of Robinson's throws.

Iowa also showed aggressiveness throughout the game. For a team that supposedly doesn't blitz much, the Hawkeyes had a plethora of third-down blitzes throughout the afternoon. Whether it was safety blitzes or linebackers blitzing when Iowa lined up in nickel, the Hawkeyes sent heat Robinson's direction.

Finally, let's talk about that fourth quarter. It looked as though the defense was once again going to blow a double-digit lead for the second straight week. But it didn't.

Iowa did catch two breaks courtesy of instant replay – a Michigan touchdown was taken off the board after Vincent Smith was ruled down, and Junior Hemingway was unable to maintain possession of what would've been another Wolverine score on the same drive. But then there were players like sophomore cornerback B.J. Lowery, who hasn't started once this season

and just returned from a wrist injury three weeks earlier, batting down a pass on the final play to preserve the Hawkeye victory.

Again, when Iowa needed plays defensively, it got them.

This performance doesn't excuse transgressions from the past two months, but it's worth noting the role it played keeping a solid Michigan offense in check en route to the Hawkeyes' biggest win to date in this 2011 campaign.