

COMMENTARY: Opportunity lost (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Saturday's game against No. 13 Michigan State provided a litany of opportunities for the Iowa Hawkeyes.

The story was set. It was Senior Day at Kinnick Stadium, and one senior in particular – wide receiver Marvin McNutt – was on pace to become perhaps the most decorated wideout in Iowa history. The Hawkeyes came off a major victory last week against Michigan and entered this contest having won three of four against the Spartans, including a 37-6 thrashing of them last season. Michigan State entered the contest not having won a game at Kinnick Stadium in 22 years.

A victory over the Spartans would have capped an undefeated season at home, which hasn't happened since 2004 when Iowa last won the Big Ten. The Hawkeyes would have been in a four-way tie for first place in the Legends Division with two weeks remaining and having the inside track towards winning it.

Saturday provided Iowa with a golden opportunity. It ended up being an opportunity that slipped away, however, as Michigan State prevailed 37-21.

Winning streak against the Spartans? Gone. Chance at its first perfect season at home in seven years? Gone. Chances of winning the Legends Division? Probably gone (Iowa isn't mathematically eliminated yet, but Michigan State's not losing to Indiana next week).

Now McNutt did become Iowa's all-time leader in receiving

yards for both a season and career, but that was about the only good that came the Hawkeyes' way Saturday. Instead of having everything fall into place, Iowa now finds itself at 6-4 overall and 3-3 in the Big Ten.

The good news for Iowa is it secured bowl eligibility last week. That's one of the few things this team can hold onto at this point.

It isn't Michigan State winning that might come by surprise, but how the Spartans won. From their opening drive to the final whistle, Michigan State played like a team that was ranked 13th in the country and in first place of the Legends Division. Iowa, on the other hand, found itself in a hole it had to continue digging out of until it was too late.

Michigan State was simply the better team on this day. This wasn't a loss that seems inexplicable like it was when Iowa lost to Minnesota two weeks ago. The Spartans won this game because it was better in all three phases of the game.

That might seem cliché to say, but that really was the case. The Spartans came in with the worst red zone offense of any team in the Big Ten and ended up scoring on all four trips it made inside the Iowa 20-yard line. Defensively, Michigan State made the Hawkeyes one-dimensional. Sophomore running back Marcus Coker only had 57 yards rushing. He was the Big Ten's leading rusher coming into Saturday's game and he had rushed for over 100 yards each of the last four weeks.

Even on special teams, Iowa fell for yet another fake field goal attempt (the second it had given up this season). There was also a fumble on a kickoff return by senior safety Jordan Bernstine.

The bottom line is this – Iowa didn't lose this game as much as Michigan State won it. What the Hawkeyes did lose, however, was a chance to really turn this into a better season than it has been for them in 2011. That's where the disappointment

ought to lie.