

COMMENTARY: Offense picks bad time to sputter (premium)

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LINCOLN, Neb. – When the 2011 season first began, many believed the success of the Iowa Hawkeyes would hinge on the play of their offense as opposed to the stout defenses fans became accustomed to seeing the past few years.

But in the regular season finale against No. 22 Nebraska on Friday, it was the play of the offense that had to be most disappointing in Iowa's 20-7 loss at Memorial Stadium in what was dubbed the inaugural "Heroes Game."

Now part of it was the play of Nebraska's defense, which finally looked the part of what many saw it being back in the summer. But this was about as putrid a performance put together by the Iowa offense as there has been in quite some time.

From a statistical standpoint, Iowa featured one of the Big Ten's most efficient quarterbacks, one of the most reliable running backs, and probably the league's best wide receiver. Yet it could only muster 270 yards of total offense on Friday, and had it not been for a late 2-yard touchdown run by sophomore running back Marcus Coker, Iowa would've been shut out for the first time since 2000.

For most of the game, senior wide receiver Marvin McNutt, who ended up with four catches for 29 yards receiving, was stuck on two catches for one yard receiving.

Let me repeat that for emphasis – two catches for one yard receiving. We're talking about probably the best wideout in

the Big Ten and the best wideout Iowa has ever had. I don't mention this to dog McNutt after a rough performance, but because that's not what anyone (including him) would ever anticipate being his final numbers in a game of this magnitude.

From a yardage standpoint, this wasn't the worst showing by junior quarterback James Vandenberg this season. In fact, he had three performances prior to Friday's game where he was held under 200 yards passing. But Vandenberg started this game 1-of-6 on Iowa's first two drives, and never seem to be rebound from the sluggish start.

Now the defense doesn't get a free pass for what transpired. Two of Nebraska's scoring drives were aided by atrocious penalties coming from the Hawkeye secondary. But for most of this game, it played well enough to put Iowa in position to capitalize, and the offense never did.

I wouldn't attribute this to the short week of preparation, however. The one other time Iowa's offense was as bad as it was Friday came at Penn State last month after the Hawkeyes came off a bye week.

Nebraska came to play, make no mistake. But when Iowa comes into this game having only been held to single digits once all season, only coming away with seven points and getting humbled like this in front of a national TV audience doesn't do the Hawkeyes any favors going forward.

Iowa now has one game remaining, most likely against Texas A&M in the Meineke Car Care Bowl of Texas (this is pure speculation on my part at this moment), to regain stride offensively before it loses McNutt and at least two (perhaps three) starting offensive linemen. How the next five weeks or so are spent fixing the offense will be the most intriguing thing to watch during Iowa's bowl preparation.

Because if things don't get fixed, it won't matter if it's

Texas A&M or anyone else that lies ahead. Iowa will continue to struggle offensively, and that's not how the Hawkeyes want to end 2011.