

COMMENTARY: Sloppy, but not too surprising (premium)

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CHICAGO, Ill. – If anyone who watched the Iowa Hawkeyes' 18-17 win over Northern Illinois on Saturday came away completely surprised by anything, you shouldn't be.

The offense had its struggles, but the struggles came in areas that are correctable. That's what happens when a new system implemented by a new offensive coordinator takes place. This was something that was going to take time, and perhaps even patience.

What I saw at Soldier Field was an offense that was exactly what I suspected it'd be before this game even took place – a group that has potential to be lethal over the course of the season, but wasn't going to get there quite yet.

It was clear the passing game wasn't going to be in sync right away, which is why sophomore running back Damon Bullock became a focal point in Iowa's attack on Saturday. In his first real action as a running back – remember, Bullock switched back and forth between running back and wide receiver his freshman season – he had 30 carries and rushed for 150 yards, 22 of which came on his game-winning touchdown run with 2:15 left.

But before Bullock's score that, on the surface, masks some of the problems Iowa had, what stood out to me was that the offense was moving the football. It sputtered once it reached the red zone and found itself settling for field goals instead of scoring touchdowns. With time, those drives are going to end in touchdowns down the road.

Coming into this game, I felt it had to be the play of Iowa's defense that had to pave the way for the Hawkeyes to emerge victorious (and guess what, this is going to be the case again next week, which I'll get to later). The defense managed to make adjustments when needed.

Yes, there was that big play where Northern Illinois quarterback Jordan Lynch took a designed quarterback draw up the middle 73 yards for a touchdown run on Iowa's dime package. But two things need to be remembered here: 1. That play was Lynch's sixth carry on a third down play and he had picked up three first downs prior – all against Iowa's dime. 2. Just before that touchdown was when junior cornerback B.J. Lowery left the game with an injury. As a result, Iowa's dime package featured Greg Castillo in Lowery's spot and true freshman cornerback Kevin Buford in Castillo's old spot.

To get back on point, the defense did its job from that point forward. It stopped using dime packages on third down and Lynch wasn't getting anything on the ground. Northern Illinois couldn't get anything going offensively. This was in large part to the play of the defensive line, which played much, much better in the second half.

A lot of the Huskies' offensive success through three quarters came in part because of atrocious tackling by the defense. But when the tackling got better, it was the rotation of seven guys up front that set the tone. One play that's going to be overlooked came early in the second half with Iowa trailing 10-6. Senior defensive end Joe Gaglione stripped the ball out of Lynch's hands and the fumble was recovered by sophomore tackle Carl Davis. Neither of those guys started. Iowa only got three points, but that was somewhat of a turning point.

There was also a sack from Dominic Alvis in the second half where he basically had a free shot at Lynch. These are the kinds of plays Iowa needed from its defensive line Saturday against an inexperienced Huskie O-line, and the Hawkeyes got

them.

Now let's fast forward to next week's game at Kinnick Stadium. The same things are going to apply next week as they did Saturday. Don't be surprised if the offense looks sloppy again next week against an Iowa State defense that features two of the best linebackers in the country. Don't be surprised if next week's game comes down to the Iowa defense needing to make plays just as it did Saturday.

The Hawkeye defense might be more aggressive next week since Iowa State's offensive line isn't going to feature five new starters like Northern Illinois' did, but outside of that, the same things are going to need to apply.

It was sloppy, but not too surprising. It took a complete team effort for Iowa to avoid leaving Soldier Field embarrassed on Saturday. There will be a few more instances in 2012 where this is all going to remain the case.

Don't be caught off guard.