

Ground game propels Hawkeyes to win over UNI

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – For at least one afternoon, the Iowa Hawkeyes answered questions that were out there about their character, their ability to move the ball and their toughness.

From the first offensive series to the last, Iowa made running the football its top priority on Saturday. Not only were the Hawkeyes able to do that, but an unlikely source – at least publicly – provided the bulk of those 201 yards on the ground Iowa had in its 27-16 win over Northern Iowa.

Sophomore fullback Mark Weisman was the story on this afternoon, recording all three of the Hawkeyes' touchdowns. His scoring runs from one yard, one yard again, and two yards proved beneficial for Iowa in the red zone after it had failed to score a touchdown in its previous two games once reaching the opponent's 20-yard line.

Weisman's first touchdown capped an opening drive where sophomore running back Damon Bullock was the bell cow. Eight of the 10 plays were Bullock carries, as he compiled 53 of the 60 yards Iowa accumulated on the possession.

"We were really able to establish the run early," senior quarterback James Vandenberg said. We got a lot of looks that we weren't expecting to get and they gave us some run plays. The guys did a good job of blocking it up and getting our backs 4-5 yards without being touched."

Bullock would get to 77 yards rushing before his 13th carry ended with him receiving a knee to the head, knocking him out

and sidelining him for the remainder of the game.

True freshman running back Greg Garmon entered and had three carries for 13 yards before he had to leave the game with an injury to his right arm. With Iowa down two running backs, Weisman had to switch roles and go from the fullback used out of the I-formation and in short-yardage situations to the team's feature back.

"It's a little bit of a different mindset out there, but throughout the week, we prepared for that," Weisman said. "We have depth at the running back position, so we know that you just have to be ready at all times. You have to come into the game knowing that you could be there and you have to have that mindset."

To go along with his three scores, the Air Force transfer compiled 113 yards rushing on 24 carries.

"That was not scripted, I can assure you," head coach Kirk Ferentz said. "We thought he might play a little bit, but we did not foresee the circumstances. But he runs tough."

"I can't say enough about him. It's one thing to do it in practice, but to go out and do it in a game, in a circumstance where guys are trying to nail you. He really did a great job and it's a credit to him."

Defensively, the Hawkeyes found themselves getting off to another sluggish start, allowing an opponent to march down for a touchdown on its opening possession for the second straight week. Northern Iowa's David Johnson scored from one yard out lined up in the Wildcat formation to give the Panthers an early 7-0 lead.

In fact, Northern Iowa would score points on each of its first three drives. But that first series led to its lone touchdown before having to kick three field goals to make up for the rest of its points.

"They had a few aces up their sleeves and once they kind of tipped their hand, it was really just football for us," junior linebacker James Morris said. "Keeping receivers in front of us, getting off blocks and then getting everybody to gang tackle."

Once again, Iowa was led defensively by junior linebacker Anthony Hitchens, who recorded a team-high 10 tackles. He entered Saturday's contest leading the Big Ten with 27 tackles on the season. The Hawkeyes also received strong play from senior strong safety Tom Donatell, who recorded his second interception in as many games during the third quarter.

"It was basically just a two-man look and the front four got some great pressure on [Northern Iowa quarterback Sawyer Kollmorgen]," Donatell said. "He tried to force it and it kind of came out wobbly. I just dove for it. I think I misjudged it a little bit, but I was able to get two hands under it and make the play."

Iowa continues its four-game home-stand next week with its final non-conference game of the season against Central Michigan on Sept. 22. Kickoff is scheduled for 11 a.m. Central and the game will be televised by the Big Ten Network. The Chippewas (1-1) had a bye this week after losing 41-7 at home to Michigan State on Sept. 8.