

COMMENTARY: A game lost before it was actually lost (premium)

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – The Iowa Hawkeyes' 32-31 loss on Saturday to Central Michigan will be forever remembered for the Chippewas overcoming a eight-point deficit in the final 2:18 to escape Kinnick Stadium with a victory. The onside kick recovered between Central Michigan scores will be what gets the most publicity.

But if those of us who saw this game from start to finish are being honest with ourselves, Iowa lost this game in the first half. The Hawkeyes should have never allowed themselves to be in the position where an onside kick recovery would make the difference between winning and losing.

Iowa lost this game in numerous ways. It lacked discipline, especially when it really mattered. Offensively, it couldn't convert on third down. Defensively, it couldn't get off the field in the first half. Central Michigan made the most of its opportunities despite looking completely inept offensively for all but the last 2:18 of the second half.

The Hawkeyes committed seven of their nine penalties in the first half. Of those seven first-half penalties, three of them were personal fouls. To add insult to injury, the three personal fouls were one from each phase – offense, defense and special teams. If that doesn't sum up the lack of discipline, I'm not sure what does.

Offensively, Iowa did manage to show some balance once again.

It received an unbelievable performance from sophomore fullback Mark Weisman, who made the start at running back and proceeded to rush for 217 yards and three touchdowns on 27 carries.

Let me repeat that: 27 carries, 217 rushing yards, and three touchdowns. This is from a walk-on who wasn't even eligible to play last season and a guy who has pretty much become the last resort at running back right now. As disastrous as the offense has looked as a whole this season, imagine how much more atrocious it'd be without Weisman.

But even with his stellar effort, it comes back to not executing on third down. Iowa was 1-of-8 on third downs, and that one third down conversion came late in the fourth quarter while the Hawkeyes were ahead. In other words, Iowa nearly pulled off winning this game without converting a single third down. Even more significant is that every single time the Hawkeyes faced a third down, they needed at least five yards to pick up a first down. That's bad all-around.

Defensively, this team has shown it can make proper adjustments at halftime. But once again, it allowed a team to march down the field and score a touchdown on its opening drive for the third straight week. For 27:42, it pitched a shutout in the second half. But when it mattered most, it couldn't make the plays necessary to secure a win. It's also worth mentioning that Central Michigan had the ball for a little over 60 percent of the game. In the second and third quarters alone, the Chippewas had possession for over 21 minutes. Iowa's defense couldn't get off the field.

Credit goes to Central Michigan, as it should. In a game that Iowa should've been able to win handily, the Chippewas compiled 283 yards passing despite coming in with the MAC's worst passing offense and one of the worst passing offenses in the nation. They did just enough to hang around and not only make Iowa sweat, but ultimately make the Hawkeyes crack.

Did the better team win? It's still too early to tell. But did the more deserving team win? Absolutely. Iowa spent the majority of this game – and the majority of the first half – playing with fire. In the end, that's why the Hawkeyes got burned.