

COMMENTARY: O-Line “brings juice” (premium)

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – “Bring the juice.” For the Iowa offensive line, this three-word sentence has become a mantra.

As the offensive line has progressed in 2012, so has the entire offense. Over the last three weeks, the Hawkeyes have accumulated 27, 31 and 31 points after combining for only 24 points total in their first two games of the 2012 season.

Over these same past three weeks, the offense has become more balanced. On the ground, a star has surfaced in sophomore fullback Mark Weisman, who made his second start at running back Saturday against Minnesota and rushed for 177 yards and one touchdown on 21 carries. This performance comes after a 217-yard outing the week before against Central Michigan. Through the air, senior quarterback James Vandenberg tossed a touchdown pass in his second straight game after going the first quarter of the season without throwing one.

There’s one constant to this all – the offensive line. Iowa defeated Minnesota 31-13 on Saturday at Kinnick Stadium, why? Because of this group of players, one that felt it needed to “bring the juice” during a week where that juice was needed among the entire program.

For all the good the offensive line had showed up to this point, there was always something negative to counter what worked. Against Northern Illinois, the ground game clicked but pass protection was atrocious. Against Iowa State, pass protection was much better but Iowa couldn’t muster any offense running the ball. On Saturday, everything was clicking

for this group.

Consider this: Minnesota entered Saturday's game with one of the best defensive lines in the conference featuring the likes of Ra'Shede Hageman and D.L. Wilhite, who came in leading the Big Ten with 4.5 sacks this season. Hageman and Wilhite combined for three tackles. No one on Minnesota recorded a sack. A Golden Gopher defense that had the best turnover margin in the Big Ten didn't force a single turnover.

When the offense went to the run game, the offensive line opened enormous holes for Weisman to go through. Weisman had five carries of 15 yards or more. Those five carries alone made up 135 of those 177 yards rushing he had, or an average of 27 yards rushing on just those five carries.

As good a back as Weisman is and has proven to be for this team, most running backs aren't picking up 27 yards on a single carry without the necessary blocking that comes at the first level.

When the passing game came into play, Vandenberg had plenty of time to look down field, which was perhaps most evident on a flea-flicker play where he connected with a wide open Jordan Cotton down the middle for a 47-yard touchdown pass that put Iowa up 17-0 in the second quarter. That play broke Minnesota's back. Vandenberg, Weisman and Cotton all made that play what it was, but again, the offensive line did its job there like it did throughout the afternoon.

Earlier in the week, center James Ferentz made the comment how one of the reasons Iowa had lost to Minnesota each of the last two years was because the Hawkeyes didn't match the level of excitement the Golden Gophers played with. That wasn't the case Saturday. Iowa looked more like the team that was 4-0 coming in than the team that actually was 4-0. Iowa played with more enthusiasm, with more of a mean streak. Why? Because of the offensive line.

So it was only fitting that when the team rushed towards Minnesota's sideline to repossess Floyd of Rosedale, it was the offensive line leading the charge towards the trophy. James Ferentz, Brandon Scherff and Matt Tobin, the three linemen that probably played the biggest roles of all on Saturday, hoisted the bronze pig just before the rest of the team was able to follow suit.

Weisman said how he owed the entire offensive line dinner after the performance he had Saturday. Chances are whenever that dinner takes place, the O-line will "bring the juice" then as well.