

COMMENTARY: Unlikely win a season-changer (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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EAST LANSING, Mich. – For three-and-a-half quarters, the script to Iowa's game against Michigan State was a familiar one. Much like losses the Hawkeyes had last season to teams such as Penn State, Nebraska and Oklahoma, Iowa looked well on its way to losing a game Saturday where the defense held its own, only for the offense to look completely out of sync and not come through.

It wouldn't have been a major surprise, either. The Spartans came in with the Big Ten's stingiest defense and the Hawkeyes were coming off a bye week. Add in some bad weather, and the recipe was there.

Except this time around, there was an unlikely ending, one that just might have changed the entire outlook of Iowa's 2012 season. Instead of falling back to .500 and instead of losing a game there was little expectation for the Hawkeyes to win, Iowa finally began clicking in all three phases during the fourth quarter and pulled off a stunning 19-16 victory in double overtime over Michigan State.

Now, the Hawkeyes are 4-2 overall. Now, they're 2-0 in the Big Ten's Legends Division and control their own destiny towards playing in Indianapolis on Dec. 1. Yes, what looked nearly unfathomable at one point Saturday afternoon suddenly looks realistic in a wide-open Big Ten.

The odds were stacked in Michigan State's favor, but Iowa kept hanging around. The Spartans had their fair share of blunders, most notably failing to get a play off at the end of the first

half as they were driving and looking to go up by double figures. But that shouldn't overshadow the play of the Hawkeyes' defense.

After giving up a touchdown run to Michigan State running back Le'Veon Bell (which came following an interception deep in Iowa territory), this defense not only kept him and the rest of the Spartan offense out of the end zone, but it got better as the game progressed. By the time Iowa's offense finally began showing signs of life, the defense began having its way with Michigan State. Whether it was Louis Trinca-Pasat mauling offensive linemen or the secondary not being gashed by big plays, Iowa's defense proved worthy of the challenge and played well enough for the Hawkeyes to win.

As far as the offense goes, I can go on and on about how stagnant it looked. Iowa at one point in the fourth quarter was 3-of-14 converting third downs. Let me repeat: 3-of-14.

But everything changed when the Hawkeyes faced 2nd-and-26. Senior quarterback James Vandenberg, who prior to that play had looked awful the entire afternoon, connected with senior wide receiver Keenan Davis on a 35-yard completion. Suddenly, Iowa's offense had life. The Hawkeyes faced two more third downs and managed to convert both with its ground game. The second third-down conversion was a 5-yard touchdown run up the middle that tied the game with 55 seconds remaining.

Even special teams proved huge. Junior kicker Mike Meyer might very well be the Big Ten's best kicker now after making four field goals in wet conditions, including one in the first overtime to tie the game at 16-16 and a 42-yard attempt in the second overtime that wound up winning the game. This team doesn't have a winning record without Meyer, plain and simple.

So here's the new twist. Kirk Ferentz gets his 100th win as Iowa's head coach. Vandenberg finally wins a start in a state not beginning with the letter "I." The Hawkeyes (for now) are

in the driver's seat towards playing in Indianapolis on Dec. 1.

If this team does wind up pulling off what once looked unimaginable, remember this game at Spartan Stadium. Because of this win, the complexion of this season has changed. There's hope now with this team and with the Big Ten as mediocre as it has been, that could prove to be enough in the end.