

COMMENTARY: Playing a complete game (premium)

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – For years, the Iowa Hawkeyes have branded themselves with the reputation under head coach Kirk Ferentz of playing their competition close and down to the wire. The games many would expect Iowa to win by 4-5 touchdowns, it would maybe win by 20 points or fewer, if that.

For one afternoon inside Kinnick Stadium, the Hawkeyes played as complete a game as their fans could've asked for. They not only beat Western Michigan 59-3. They massacred the Broncos.

Iowa had a halftime lead of 35 points, the first time since a 37-6 win over Michigan State in 2010 the Hawkeyes led a game by 30 or more at halftime. Sure, it played a Western Michigan squad that entered Saturday 0-3, but the Hawkeyes did what they had to do. The message this week around the Hayden Fry Football Complex was playing a complete game and Iowa did just that.

Setting the tone for the third straight week was Iowa's defense. Western Michigan ran the ball seven times in the first half and had just six yards total on the ground. The Broncos were also just 1-of-11 on third-down conversions during the first stanza.

Which leads to the domination done by the Hawkeyes' special teams. After weeks of hearing how they can't handle onside kicks or react properly to fake punts (and these may or may not still be issues down the road, mind you), it received a performance for the ages returning punts by junior wide receiver Kevonte Martin-Manley. He became the first Hawkeye

player ever to return two punts for touchdowns in a single game, and he did so on consecutive returns in the second quarter. He was the first Big Ten player in 30 seasons to ever do it and just the third Big Ten player ever.

Then if that wasn't enough, senior cornerback B.J. Lowery got in on the act defensively with a pair of interception returns for scores. The first one came right before halftime after junior running back Mark Weisman had just extended Iowa's lead to 31-3. The second pick-six came on Western Michigan's first play from scrimmage in the second half.

It's one thing to see a player return interceptions for touchdowns in consecutive games, but rarely does a defensive player find himself getting two pick-sixes in one contest.

Finally, let's get to the offense. Sure, the 28 points off defensive and special teams touchdowns makes things more difficult to evaluate, but there were encouraging signs here as well. After consecutive games where had 30-plus carries, Weisman only needed 10 carries Saturday. In fact, Iowa managed to get double-digit carries for four running backs in this game and one of them – sophomore Jordan Canzeri – scored the first touchdown of his career during the fourth quarter.

This game also displayed growth at other skill positions. For the second straight week, Jacob Hillyer caught a touchdown pass and did so by making his own explosive plays with yards after catch (YAC). Junior tight end Ray Hamilton has also shown strides and led the team in receptions with three of them for 39 yards. And then there's Damond Powell, a junior college transfer that's arguably the fastest player on the entire team. He had two catches – one of which was his first career TD – and led the Hawkeyes in receiving yards with 83 of them.

A lot still remains to be seen. Iowa opens Big Ten play next week with a trip to Minnesota and make no mistake, it will be

a difficult game for the Hawkeyes to win. In fact, it's fair to say next week's outcome could ultimately prove the difference in whether or not Iowa makes bowl eligibility.

But with that being said, this is about as encouraging a performance as they could have had leading up to league play. Iowa showed its full potential Saturday and while it's crazy to think it can consistently score 59 points, it shouldn't be crazy to think the Hawkeyes can't put together a complete game like this where all three phases looked strong.

That's what it'll take going forward for this team to maintain this level of success and play above the outside expectations that are there and have been there from the start.