

COMMENTARY: Confronting the crossroads (premium)

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Halfway through the 2013 football season, the Iowa Hawkeyes find themselves at a crossroads similar to last year.

Iowa now sits at 4-2 through six games once again after losing 26-14 to Michigan State on Saturday at Kinnick Stadium. This was the same point in 2012 where everything began to unravel for the Hawkeyes en route to losing six straight and ending up 4-8.

This time last year was when Iowa had its Titanic hitting the iceberg moment and the Hawkeyes saw their season sink. If they're going to prevent history from repeating itself now, they have to confront some issues that have potential to plague them further if they aren't fixed between now and Oct. 19 when they play at No. 4 Ohio State.

Let's start with the offense. Iowa did play the best defense it will face by far this entire season in the Spartans. But that doesn't mean there aren't competent defenses left on the schedule. The Hawkeyes' glimpses of success Saturday came when they pushed the tempo in the second quarter. This is something they spent the entire offseason working on and to be quite honest, this has to be their M.O. the rest of the way.

Because here's what happened when they didn't press the issue – Michigan State keyed on the run, made it completely non-existent and sophomore quarterback Jake Rudock wound up throwing 46 times out of 62 plays the Iowa offense ran, the fewest amount of plays in a game from the Hawkeyes this

season. This is an offense designed to run around 75-80 plays per game, so 62 isn't going to cut it given the competition Iowa has the rest of the way.

Defensively, Iowa needs to limit the amount of nickel and dime packages it uses, if not scrap it. It's pretty obvious right now the secondary is the weak link of the Hawkeye defense and the times Iowa went nickel in the first half against Michigan State on Saturday, the Spartans had their most success.

Even beyond the secondary issues however, this is a defense led by a trio of senior linebackers that one could argue are the three best players on the entire defense. When Iowa goes nickel, the trade-off for an extra defensive back on the field is taking out Anthony Hitchens, a guy who finished with 12 tackles Saturday and has played lights out all season.

Barring injuries, Hitchens, James Morris and Christian Kirksey all need to be on the field as much as possible. Sure, this might stunt growth in some of Iowa's younger defensive players, but they're still going to be around. These guys aren't. Get the most out of them now.

And then there's special teams. Once again, Iowa gave up a fake punt on the first play of the fourth quarter. When it happened earlier this season against Northern Illinois, the Hawkeyes were in punt-safe. That wasn't the case here against Michigan State. The one surrendered Saturday looked more like the one surrendered in 2010 when Iowa lost to Wisconsin and it came with the majority of the defensive starters on the sideline.

Right now, there's nothing encouraging about Iowa's special teams unit. One week, it's kickoff coverage that's leaky. Another week, it's an onside kick an opposing team is pulling off. Then it's like Saturday where a punter on one play could outrush the entire Iowa offense.

Yes, a shake-up was done to the coaching staff and a heavy

emphasis was placed all offseason on improving Iowa's special teams. But for all the improvements that do take place, it's clear this isn't an overnight fix. Until Iowa can prove it can be consistent in all aspects of special teams, it's going to continue to get exploited like it has the majority of this season.

All hope isn't lost for Iowa here. Unlike 2012, the Hawkeyes at least appear capable of swimming to shore right now. The waters are treacherous with opponents like Ohio State, Northwestern, Wisconsin, Michigan and Nebraska all remaining on the schedule. But one win out of that group and beating a lowly Purdue squad puts Iowa in a bowl game, which is an accomplishment after last year.

The Hawkeyes are confronted by a crossroads and the question now becomes this – Will they actually tackle their current problems head on before it's too late? Again, they're capable of doing so and if they do, then there's a positive on the horizon Iowa can build off of.

If the Hawkeyes don't though meet things head on though, well, history will wind up repeating itself.