

Hawkeyes suffocated by Spartans

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – For a time span of 6 minutes and 18 seconds Saturday, the Iowa Hawkeyes showed signs of life. They overcame a 10-0 deficit to Michigan State and scored a pair of touchdowns to take a 14-10 lead into halftime.

That's about all the life that was shown, however. Those other 53 minutes and 42 seconds were controlled by the Spartans, who left Kinnick Stadium with a 26-14 win over Iowa that dropped the Hawkeyes to 1-1 in Big Ten play and 4-2 overall.

Michigan State came in with one of the nation's best defenses statistically and backed it up. Iowa was unable to get anything going on the ground, rushing for a meager 23 yards on 16 carries.

"We felt like we could run the ball," sophomore center Austin Blythe said. "It just didn't work out like it should have and like we wanted it to."

The game's first 15 minutes lived up to the billing it had all week. Neither team scored in the first quarter and the defenses were making plays. But Michigan State got it going in the second quarter when it was able to exploit Iowa's nickel package.

Three of the Spartans' four third-down conversions in the first half came when the Hawkeyes had the extra defensive back on the field. In fact, Michigan State's touchdown – a 46-yard pass from Connor Cook to Macgarrett Kings came on a third-down play where Iowa went nickel.

"There were some blitzes, some all-out blitzes, blitzes where we were in Cover 0," said senior free safety Tanner Miller, who was sent to blitz on the play Michigan State scored on. "Those are things where you put a lot on the line. You're either going to win or lose on them."

"There were some that we got home on and covered up nicely and then there were the ones where they got free and had the big plays."

At this point, with 6:18 left in the first half, the Hawkeye offense awoke and the Spartan defense began to unravel. After completing just one of his first four pass attempts, sophomore quarterback Jake Rudock ended the half completing 11 straight throws, including a pair of touchdown passes to junior running back Damon Bullock (47 yards) and senior tight end C.J. Fiedorowicz (10 yards).

Iowa came out for the second half and made one adjustment defensively – sticking to its base 4-3 look the rest of the game. Unfortunately for the Hawkeyes, the Spartan offense adjusted around that. Michigan State opened the half with a 7-play, 75-yard drive capped by Cook throwing a 37-yard touchdown pass to Bennie Fowler to give the Spartans a 17-14 lead. From there, the Hawkeyes tightened up and couldn't muster anything on offense.

A 35-yard field goal by Michael Geiger (the second of four he made on the day) gave Michigan State a 20-14 lead, which is what the score remained entering the fourth quarter and the Spartans facing 4th-and-7 from their own 37-yard line. Instead of going punt-safe, Iowa sent its normal punt return unit out on the field.

"When they were in the huddle, I ran over and told them, 'Watch the fake,'" senior linebacker Anthony Hitchens said.

Michigan State punter Mike Sadler took the snap, then proceeded to run up the middle and eventually down the

sideline for a 25-yard gain. As a result of Iowa opting not to line up punt-safe, Sadler had more rushing yards on one play than the Hawkeye offense did for the entire game and the Spartans were able to make it a 2-possession game with 13:28 remaining when a 49-yard field goal by Geiger made it 23-14.

"Historically, they've taken chances and special teams have taken chances, run fakes, gadgets, whatever, so that didn't surprise us at all," Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz said. "That was not a surprise, that part of it. But it's a good job on their part."

"We had a return set up and they hit us where we were weak."

Compounding matters was the number of injuries Iowa dealt with Saturday. Junior wideout Kevonte Martin-Manley was limited due to a right leg injury and actually left the game during the first half. Mark Weisman, Brandon Scherff and Carl Davis all left with injuries, but returned. Senior defensive end Dominic Alvis and senior linebacker Christian Kirksey didn't. Ferentz said afterwards all in-game injuries were "minor."

Iowa has the first of two bye weeks coming up before returning to the gridiron Oct. 19 for a contest at No. 4 Ohio State. This is the first time the Hawkeyes have had multiple bye weeks during Ferentz's 15 seasons as head coach. The second bye comes during the middle of November, which Ferentz said will be spent more on the recruiting ground than this coming week would be.

"The next series of games that we play involve new preparations for us, for the most part I think all but one," Ferentz said. "So it really gives us a chance maybe to focus on our team and then secondly focus on the teams that we have coming up."