

COMMENTARY: The adjustment game (premium)

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Week to week and game to game, there's a common theme in the game of football – being able to make adjustments. Certain teams are better at doing this than others.

For the past week, adjustments was a heavy topic of conversation when it came to the Iowa Hawkeyes. Playing on the road against the No. 4 team in the country, Iowa looked as well-prepared schematically as it could possibly be. It just wasn't enough against Ohio State, in part because the Buckeyes were able to adjust to what the Hawkeyes were doing well and Iowa simply didn't have an answer.

It looked like deja vu was about to occur Saturday at Kinnick Stadium. Iowa jumped out to a 10-0 lead on Northwestern, a lead it took into halftime. But the Wildcats would score 10 unanswered points to ultimately force overtime before the Hawkeyes prevailed 17-10. Even then though, Northwestern was in a position late in regulation to steal the game altogether.

Quite frankly, Iowa's very fortunate it came away with this win. In fact, the Hawkeyes should feel fortunate this game went to overtime, which is already a dicey situation in and of itself because both teams start with a clean slate. The overtime masked what looked eerily similar to second halves in each of Iowa's three defeats this season.

The one positive with Kirk Ferentz and his coaching staff is with preparation, mixing in new wrinkles that force other teams to adjust. Last week, it was on offense with the "13"

personnel consisting of three tight ends on the field at once. On Saturday, it was on defense and more specifically on third down.

Instead of using a nickel package – which the Hawkeyes haven't used since losing to Michigan State earlier this month – Iowa employed what it calls the "Radar" package on third down plays where it didn't stay in its base 4-3 look. The "Radar" was essentially a 3-4 without any of the three linemen up front lining up in a 3-point or 4-point stance. Junior defensive tackle Louis Trinca-Pasat, sophomore defensive end Nate Meier and true freshman linebacker Reggie Spearman all stood up near the line of scrimmage, alongside Iowa's trio of senior linebackers and junior linebacker Quinton Alston.

The first time "Radar" was used, James Morris came away with a sack. Much like the nickel, there were mixed results. In some instances, it worked. In others, it didn't. The times it didn't, Northwestern was able to utilize its short-passing game, specifically in the middle of the field.

There is one difference here, however. The instances where "Radar" didn't work didn't result in the Hawkeyes abandoning the scheme altogether. When it comes to offensive wrinkles, that hasn't always been the case.

This team was on its way toward another week of hearing about how it can't finish off games, how it abandons what works on either side of the ball whenever opposing teams adjust. These are still valid concerns and the odds of them resurfacing in November appear good. Iowa winning this game shouldn't fool one into thinking everything's fine and dandy.

But with that said, Saturday was an instance where the Hawkeyes didn't completely shy away from what served them well early on. They didn't abandon the run game once Northwestern loaded the box with 8-9 guys. They weren't afraid to roll the dice with the "Radar" in the fourth quarter just because there

was a play in the third quarter where the Wildcats garnered a first down against it. The players made play, which is why winning this game shouldn't be fully diminished.

When Iowa plays to its strengths, it can beat almost anybody. The fact that it has led at halftime in every game this season despite being only 5-3 at this point in the season is all the evidence needed here.

But it has to continue doing so in these last four games in order to feel certain about getting a bowl game somewhere. Anywhere. That's the ultimate difference between winning and losing games like Saturday's and games like the seven ones before.