

Badgers feast off Hawkeye blunders

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – On the surface, the Iowa Hawkeyes and No. 22 Wisconsin Badgers would appear to be mirror images. Both teams pride themselves on playing smart, physical football. Meeting Saturday afternoon at Kinnick Stadium, these teams appear as though they match up with one another pound for pound like a prize fight.

But if Saturday's game were like a prize fight, Iowa was that fighter who had opportunity to deliver body blows and only connected on jabs. Wisconsin was that fighter that took its punches, hung around long enough and come the later rounds, delivered the knockout.

The Hawkeyes had their chances, but couldn't capitalize. When the Badgers had their chances, they did and left Kinnick Stadium maintaining possession of the Heartland Trophy after defeating Iowa 28-9. While Wisconsin looks like a team poised to make a run at a possible BCS at-large spot, the Hawkeyes find themselves all but mathematically eliminated in the Legends Division race sitting at 2-3 in Big Ten play and entering the final quarter of their 2013 season at 5-4 overall, still needing one more win to become bowl-eligible.

"They just outplayed us," junior left tackle Brandon Scherff said.

The first quarter was tailor-made for Iowa in a litany of ways – from winning the coin toss and being able to play with the wind at its back, to forcing 3-and-outs on defense and getting incredibly good field position on offense. It was ripe for the

taking, but all Iowa could get out of it was a 3-0 lead on a 28-yard field goal from senior kicker Mike Meyer, one of three he made.

Just before halftime, Iowa was up 6-0 when the first big play came from Wisconsin's offense. Given plenty of time in the pocket, quarterback Joel Stave connected downfield to a wide open Jacob Pedersen for a 44-yard strike that gave the Badgers a 7-6 lead that almost became 10-6 at halftime, but wasn't because of a missed 54-yard field goal at the end of the half.

"We were man-to-man backside with our backside corner," senior free safety Tanner Miller said. "The quarterback was looking frontside the whole time and he had some time back there. We may have gotten lackadaisical for a split second there, but give the credit to him. He found him."

It remained 7-6 midway through the third quarter when the game's turning point unfolded. Facing 1st-and-10 from its own 1-yard line, Iowa ran a play-action pass. Just as quarterback Jake Rudock was getting hit in the end zone, he tossed one of his worst throws as a starting quarterback, a ball that was intercepted by Darius Hillary and set up the Badgers at Iowa's 20-yard line.

On the very next play, Stave threw his second touchdown pass of a game to a wide open Jared Abbrederis to extend Wisconsin's lead to 14-6.

"It was a communication call right there," senior cornerback B.J. Lowery said. "We were in different coverage on both sides and the guy just got open."

Rudock's interception would be his last play of the afternoon, as he left the game with what head coach Kirk Ferentz called a knee sprain and was replaced by redshirt freshman signal-caller C.J. Beathard for the remainder of the contest. Ferentz said Rudock could have returned, but didn't think it'd be wise to put him back in.

When he departed, Rudock was 12-of-24 passing for 109 yards. Beathard didn't fare much better through the air, completing just 4-of-16 pass attempts for 70 yards.

"We're not in a desperation mode, but it's a pretty uphill climb at that point and playing against an excellent defensive football team," Ferentz said about going with Beathard the rest of the way. "It's a tough way to go."

Iowa's offense continued to struggle in the second half when an unlikely bounce turned into an unfortunate break. A Beathard pass intended for senior tight end C.J. Fiedorowicz hit junior offensive lineman Andrew Donnal – who played from the second quarter on at right guard following an injury to starter Jordan Walsh – in the back of the helmet. The ball then proceeded to go directly up in the air and land in the hands of Badger defensive end Pat Muldoon at the Hawkeyes' 25-yard line.

"I was just looking for it. I was hoping it'd be on the ground, but it wasn't," Donnal said. "It was in the air and I was just looking to bat it down."

Wisconsin would deliver the fatal blow on its ensuing possession, as running back James White scored the first of two fourth-quarter touchdowns from 11 yards out to move the Badgers ahead 21-9 with 6:29 remaining.

If there is a silver lining for Iowa now, it's that the Hawkeyes will have a very real shot at reaching bowl eligibility Nov. 9 when they meet Purdue at Ross-Ade Stadium in West Lafayette, Ind. The Boilermakers are currently 1-7 and have lost six straight games, including a 56-0 loss at home to No. 4 Ohio State on Saturday. Kickoff for next week's game is set for 11 a.m. Central and will be televised nationally on the Big Ten Network.

"We just got to go out and be prepared to play the full 60," junior strong safety John Lowdermilk said following an 11-

tackle performance.