

COMMENTARY: Defense shines on Senior Day (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – Three weeks ago, the Iowa Hawkeyes lost a game at home to Wisconsin where the defense did everything possible to keep the Badgers from distancing themselves. On that day, it just wasn't meant to be for Iowa.

For the first 30 minutes of Saturday's game against Michigan, it was looking eerily similar. The Hawkeyes found themselves trailing 21-7 despite only surrendering 113 total yards in the first half to the Wolverine offense. Michigan was aided by a defensive touchdown on Iowa's first offensive play from scrimmage, as well as short fields for its offense to work with on a pair of second quarter touchdown drives.

But in the second half, a senior-laden defense led the charge for Iowa and the Hawkeyes scored 17 unanswered to come back and defeat Michigan, 24-21. It did so because that senior-laded defense shined on Senior Day.

At the heart of it all (literally and figuratively) was Iowa's linebacking corps of James Morris, Christian Kirksey and Anthony Hitchens. These are the three guys that fellow teammates say are "the glue" of what they're able to do and it was on full display Saturday. All three of them were all over the field against the Wolverines and made big plays when they were needed.

Morris and Hitchens both recorded eight tackles. In Hitchens' case, three of those eight tackles resulted in lost yardage and he also made the biggest play of the game when he forced Michigan's lone turnover of the game on its final possession

when he stripped the ball from Wolverine quarterback Devin Gardner.

This defense forced Michigan into 14 third downs and the Wolverines only converted on four of them for the entire game. Other than a few times using the Radar package on third down, Iowa stayed in its base 4-3 and managed to bode well. That's not to say there weren't times Gardner was able to escape the pocket because one area the Hawkeyes did struggle was getting a pass-rush on the Michigan signal-caller.

But this group only allowed the Wolverines to accumulate 158 yards of total offense for the entire game, including just 45 yards in the second half (most of which came on the final possession just before Hitchens' fumble recovery).

The similarity between this contest and that Wisconsin game three weeks ago was that the Hawkeye defense (for the most part, anyway) did what it needed to do. Both of the Wolverines' offensive touchdowns came on series where they started in Iowa territory, so it's hard to pin too much on the defense there.

Just before the offense began to click in the second half, it was looking almost exactly like that loss to the Badgers. Morris even commented afterwards how the odds usually don't favor a team that's minus-3 in turnover margin like the Hawkeyes were on Saturday.

Is this group up there with the Big Ten's top teams like Michigan State, Ohio State or Wisconsin? No. But it's not too far away from those four teams, either. Whether it's seniors like the three linebackers or cornerback B.J. Lowery or free safety Tanner Miller, or even defensive end Dominic Alvis (who returned for one play during the second half after missing the last three games with a back injury), these guys all have traits about their games that are admirable.

These are the guys most responsible for Iowa being able to

bounce back like it has from last year's 4-8 record. These are the guys that aside from the Ohio State game – when it played the best offense it'd see all season – have kept Iowa in a position to win each and every week. On Saturday, these guys all did their part and it's something that ought to be somewhat appreciated between now and the conclusion of Iowa's bowl game.

This defense is shining and showing major progress in doing so.