

Hawkeye spirits dampened in Tampa

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

TAMPA, Fla. – Before facing Iowa in the 2014 Outback Bowl on Wednesday, LSU head coach Les Miles said the most emphasis would be placed in two areas – running the ball and stopping the run.

The Hawkeyes had a hard time matching that physicality displayed by LSU and it proved to be the difference, as the 14th-ranked Tigers defeated Iowa 21-14. This defeat gave the Hawkeyes a final record of 8-5 for the 2013 season.

LSU's emphasis on the ground game was evident from the opening possession. After Iowa won the coin toss and elected to defer to the second half, the Tigers – led Wednesday by true freshman quarterback Anthony Jennings in what was his first career start – relied on the run. Their first 12 plays from scrimmage all came on the ground and they were able to wear out the Hawkeye defense by rushing for 220 yards on 51 carries.

At the center of LSU's offensive success was running back Jeremy Hill, who rushed for 216 of those yards on 28 carries and had two touchdowns en route to being named the game's Most Valuable Player.

"He's a very good back, obviously," Iowa head coach Kirk Ferentz said. "The first guy that comes to mind for me is [Ohio State's Carlos Hyde]. He's pretty good, too.

"I don't want to pick one over the other, but if you were picking one, you'd be happy to have either one. I could tell

you that.”

LSU’s opening drive consisted of the first eight of those 12 running plays. The first play from scrimmage was a 42-yard scamper by Hill and the Tigers went ahead 7-0 when Jennings scored from three yards out.

From there, the first half turned into a defensive battle as Iowa’s defense was able to adjust and get crucial stops. But the offense couldn’t muster anything during the first 30 minutes. The Hawkeyes had only 73 yards of total offense in the first half, including just 15 yards rushing on 16 carries.

“We pride ourselves in being physical,” junior running back Mark Weisman said. “Today, we didn’t get it done.”

The backbreaking play in the first half for Iowa came after one of those defensive stops in the second quarter that forced LSU to punt. Junior wide receiver Kevonte Martin-Manley attempted to call fair catch, only to muff the punt and see it recovered by the Tigers at Iowa’s 39-yard line. LSU took advantage of the turnover as Hill scored from 14 yards out to extend the Tiger lead to 14-0 at halftime.

“It was poor technique by me,” Martin-Manley said. “It was a good punt and I didn’t flip my hips well enough and get set. My feet were crossed. That’s just something that I have to keep working on and it came at an inopportune time.”

The third quarter began with Iowa finally being able to establish a rhythm on offense. After only picking up one third down conversion in the first half, the Hawkeyes’ first third-down situations of the second stanza were all converted, with the first two coming on completions from Rudock to sophomore wideout Jacob Hillyer.

However, the Hawkeyes were unable to come away with any points as senior kicker Mike Meyer missed a field goal try from 35 yards out.

The defense would respond off that missed kick as junior strong safety John Lowdermilk intercepted a Jennings pass floated over the middle and proceeded to return it down the sideline for what looked to be a pick-six.

But instant replay showed the ball never cross the goal line when he dropped it thinking he had scored. Because it didn't go out of the end zone and no one jumped on it, Iowa was given 1st-and-Goal at the 1-yard line and Weisman scored from two yards out two plays later to make it 14-7.

Lowdermilk was relieved to see Weisman score, but afterwards expressed disgust for what occurred.

"I don't know what I was doing," Lowdermilk said. "It was real embarrassing and that's not the type of person or player I am. I apologize."

The score remained 14-7 in LSU's favor when Rudock re-injured his sprained knee on his final pass attempt of the third quarter. When the fourth quarter began, redshirt freshman C.J. Beathard had entered and played the rest of the way, much like he did in contests against Wisconsin and Nebraska back in November.

Iowa had its opportunities to tie the game in the fourth quarter but failed to convert on a pair of fourth down plays. The first was, shockingly, a fake punt where the snap went directly to Weisman, who was only able to pick up two of the three yards he needed to move the chains.

"You got a choice there – try to pin them down there again and try to play field position, or we figured we'd take a shot right there," Ferentz said. "It was just one of those things where if you make it, it's the right decision and if you don't, it's probably the wrong decision.

"We got the look we were looking for, but didn't convert it."

The second missed opportunity came in the red zone on the following Hawkeye series. Facing 4th-and-1 from the LSU 19, Beathard threw a pass intended for senior tight end C.J. Fiedorowicz that was intercepted by Tiger safety Craig Loston.

"It was a bootleg pass and their defensive end was coming up the field and I didn't feel like I could get around him," Beathard said. "It was fourth down, so I was just trying to give someone a shot. It's hard to throw across your body like that and it was just picked off."

It appeared LSU had put the finishing touches on a victory in the final minutes when Hill scored his second touchdown of the game from 37 yards out. But senior wide receiver Jordan Cotton responded on the ensuing kickoff, returning it all the way to the 4-yard line to set up a Beathard touchdown pass to Martin-Manley and cut the Tiger back to one possession at 21-14.

LSU's Connor Neighbors recovered the ensuing onside kick attempt by Meyer and the Tigers were able to run out the rest of the clock.

"The bottom line is they deserved to win," Ferentz said. "They made the plays you need to make to get it done and credit to them on that.

"We came up short today, but I'm extremely proud of these guys. It has been a lot of fun to be around them on a daily basis. It has really been a great 13 months."