

Hawkeyes survive Windy City scare

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

CHICAGO, Ill. – For three quarters, the Iowa Hawkeyes looked lethargic against Northern Illinois. Offensively, they were flat. Defensively, they were getting gashed up the middle, with the worst of it being a 73-yard touchdown run surrendered on a designed quarterback draw.

Fifteen minutes stood between Iowa and its first 0-1 start since 2000, which is also the last time the Hawkeyes had a losing regular season under head coach Kirk Ferentz.

But that fourth quarter proved to be one where all three phases factored heavily in the Hawkeyes scoring nine unanswered points to cap an 18-17 come-from-behind win over the Huskies on Saturday at Soldier Field.

Momentum began to swing completely in Iowa's favor when junior kicker Mike Meyer – who had already made three field goals earlier in the game – boomed one from 50 yards out to cut the Hawkeye deficit down to 17-12.

“I saw everybody yell and jump up and down. I didn't see it go through,” Meyer said. “I was just waiting for the call and whatever the coaches say, you just go out there and do it.”

From there, the defense played relentless. It forced Northern Illinois into a 3-and-out after it found a way to bottle up quarterback Jordan Lynch following that earlier 73-yard score. In fact, the Huskies only mustered 11 yards of total offense on their final five possessions of the game.

“I'm not super happy with how we played at times, but I'm

really proud of how we hung in there,” Morris said following his eight-tackle performance. “We stuck together and when we needed the juice, we found the juice. We were able to play well.”

Then came the key play of the entire game, which oddly enough, occurred at a moment where it appeared momentum had slipped away from the Hawkeyes. John Wienke, a fifth-year senior who switched over to punter and was beat out for the first-string job by true freshman Connor Kornbrath, was brought in for a pooch punt. Senior cornerback Greg Castillo, who had already entered the game for an injured B.J. Lowery, managed to down the ball at the Northern Illinois 1-yard line.

“I just saw the ball and I just touched it,” Castillo said, who added he wasn’t worried about the call being overturned after instant replay was used.

After another Huskie 3-and-out, Northern Illinois found itself punting deep out of its own end zone. With this in mind, senior cornerback Micah Hyde was determined to get good field position for the offense, which was continuing to struggle getting into the end zone. Hyde returned the punt 11 yards to the Huskie 24, with the offense being provided 3:41 to get the winning score.

“It was a great job by the return team of getting blocks,” Hyde said. “I’m thankful they blocked really well for it.”

Two plays got the Hawkeyes nowhere. Then came a gutsy 3rd-and-9 call, one that was discussed at halftime by offensive coordinator Greg Davis.

Senior quarterback James Vandenberg called two plays – one pass and one run – in the huddle. Iowa checked down to a run play it was attempting to get big plays on all afternoon. That big play it was waiting for finally arrived, when sophomore running back Damon Bullock found a hole on the outside and struck pay-dirt, scoring from 23 yards out and giving the

Hawkeyes their first lead since going up 3-0 after their opening drive.

“It was a matter of getting a hat on everybody,” Vandenberg said. “We knew we had been close earlier in the game on that play. We thought it was a good play, stuck with it and we were able to pop one through.”

The defense would get one more stop. The offense would pick up one more first down. The Hawkeyes would find a way to leave Soldier Field unblemished before their home opener Sept. 8 against Iowa State, a game scheduled to start from Kinnick Stadium at 2:30 p.m. Central.

“We expected this to be a very tough game,” Ferentz said. “I’m just really proud of our effort and the way the guys really hung in there.”

COMMENTARY: Sloppy, but not too surprising (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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CHICAGO, Ill. – If anyone who watched the Iowa Hawkeyes’ 18-17 win over Northern Illinois on Saturday came away completely surprised by anything, you shouldn’t be.

The offense had its struggles, but the struggles came in areas that are correctable. That’s what happens when a new system implemented by a new offensive coordinator takes place. This was something that was going to take time, and perhaps even patience.

What I saw at Soldier Field was an offense that was exactly what I suspected it'd be before this game even took place – a group that has potential to be lethal over the course of the season, but wasn't going to get there quite yet.

It was clear the passing game wasn't going to be in sync right away, which is why sophomore running back Damon Bullock became a focal point in Iowa's attack on Saturday. In his first real action as a running back – remember, Bullock switched back and forth between running back and wide receiver his freshman season – he had 30 carries and rushed for 150 yards, 22 of which came on his game-winning touchdown run with 2:15 left.

But before Bullock's score that, on the surface, masks some of the problems Iowa had, what stood out to me was that the offense was moving the football. It sputtered once it reached the red zone and found itself settling for field goals instead of scoring touchdowns. With time, those drives are going to end in touchdowns down the road.

Coming into this game, I felt it had to be the play of Iowa's defense that had to pave the way for the Hawkeyes to emerge victorious (and guess what, this is going to be the case again next week, which I'll get to later). The defense managed to make adjustments when needed.

Yes, there was that big play where Northern Illinois quarterback Jordan Lynch took a designed quarterback draw up the middle 73 yards for a touchdown run on Iowa's dime package. But two things need to be remembered here: 1. That play was Lynch's sixth carry on a third down play and he had picked up three first downs prior – all against Iowa's dime. 2. Just before that touchdown was when junior cornerback B.J. Lowery left the game with an injury. As a result, Iowa's dime package featured Greg Castillo in Lowery's spot and true freshman cornerback Kevin Buford in Castillo's old spot.

To get back on point, the defense did its job from that point

forward. It stopped using dime packages on third down and Lynch wasn't getting anything on the ground. Northern Illinois couldn't get anything going offensively. This was in large part to the play of the defensive line, which played much, much better in the second half.

A lot of the Huskies' offensive success through three quarters came in part because of atrocious tackling by the defense. But when the tackling got better, it was the rotation of seven guys up front that set the tone. One play that's going to be overlooked came early in the second half with Iowa trailing 10-6. Senior defensive end Joe Gaglione stripped the ball out of Lynch's hands and the fumble was recovered by sophomore tackle Carl Davis. Neither of those guys started. Iowa only got three points, but that was somewhat of a turning point.

There was also a sack from Dominic Alvis in the second half where he basically had a free shot at Lynch. These are the kinds of plays Iowa needed from its defensive line Saturday against an inexperienced Huskie O-line, and the Hawkeyes got them.

Now let's fast forward to next week's game at Kinnick Stadium. The same things are going to apply next week as they did Saturday. Don't be surprised if the offense looks sloppy again next week against an Iowa State defense that features two of the best linebackers in the country. Don't be surprised if next week's game comes down to the Iowa defense needing to make plays just as it did Saturday.

The Hawkeye defense might be more aggressive next week since Iowa State's offensive line isn't going to feature five new starters like Northern Illinois' did, but outside of that, the same things are going to need to apply.

It was sloppy, but not too surprising. It took a complete team effort for Iowa to avoid leaving Soldier Field embarrassed on Saturday. There will be a few more instances in 2012 where

this is all going to remain the case.

Don't be caught off guard.

Iowa-NIU video: Damon Bullock

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

CHICAGO, Ill. – Iowa sophomore running back Damon Bullock rushed for 150 yards on 30 carries and ran for a 23-yard touchdown with 2:15 remaining in the Hawkeyes' 18-17 win over Northern Illinois on Saturday at Soldier Field.

Iowa-NIU video: James Vandenberg

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

CHICAGO, Ill. – Iowa senior quarterback James Vandenberg completed 21-of-33 pass attempts for 129 passing yards on Saturday in the Hawkeyes' 18-17 victory over Northern Illinois at Soldier Field.

Iowa-NIU video: Dominic Alvis

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

CHICAGO, Ill. – Iowa junior defensive end Dominic Alvis recorded three tackles and a sack in the Hawkeyes' 18-17 win over Northern Illinois on Saturday at Soldier Field.

Iowa-NIU video: Micah Hyde

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

CHICAGO, Ill. – Iowa senior cornerback Micah Hyde finished with four tackles, one pass break up, and returned two punts for 21 yards on Saturday in the Hawkeyes' 18-17 victory over Northern Illinois at Soldier Field.

Iowa-NIU video: James Ferentz

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

CHICAGO, Ill. – Iowa senior offensive lineman James Ferentz started at center for the Hawkeyes on Saturday in their 18-17 win over Northern Illinois at Soldier Field. Iowa compiled 268 yards of total offense.

Iowa-NIU video: James Morris

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

CHICAGO, Ill. – Iowa junior linebacker James Morris recorded a team-high eight tackles for the Hawkeyes in their 18-17 victory over Northern Illinois on Saturday at Soldier Field.

Iowa-NIU video: Keenan Davis

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

CHICAGO, Ill. – Iowa senior wide receiver Keenan Davis had five catches for 41 receiving yards in the Hawkeyes' 18-17 win over Northern Illinois on Saturday at Soldier Field.

Iowa-NIU video: Brandon Scherff

By Brendan Stiles

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CHICAGO, Ill. – Iowa sophomore offensive lineman Brandon Scherff started at left tackle for the Hawkeyes in their 18-17 victory over Northern Illinois on Saturday at Soldier Field. Iowa compiled 268 yards of total offense.