

Hawkeye fans need to wait and see

Written by Jim Ecker

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IOWA CITY - University of Iowa football fans should probably wait a few weeks before making their reservations for the Big Ten championship game in Indianapolis this December.

The Hawkeyes might get there again, but they have a lot to prove following their 45-21 victory over Miami of Ohio in the season opener before 68,390 fans at Kinnick Stadium Saturday.

The Hawkeyes certainly looked good at times, especially with the 1-2 punch of Akrum Wadley and LeShun Daniels combining for 204 yards and four touchdown at tailback. C.J. Beathard looked good throwing the ball, especially in the first half when he was 10 of 11 for 151 yards, and the defense came away with three big fumbles that helped fuel the offense.

But there were also some disquieting moments for the Hawkeyes, who had trouble getting the RedHawks off the field at times as the visitors mounted three long, time-consuming drives for touchdowns.

Iowa jumped to a 21-0 lead in the first quarter with a fast start, but Miami of Ohio patiently worked itself back into the ballgame and trailed only 35-21 with nearly 10 minutes left in the game.

The Redhawks had three touchdown drives that measured 75, 75 and 74 yards in the ballgame, all against Iowa's top defense. All three of those drives lasted approximately seven minutes - 6:59, 6:56 and 7:10, to be exact - as Miami quarterback Billy Bahl led his club up and down the field.

Iowa scored its six touchdowns in a hurry, especially in the first quarter when they reached the end zone three times in a total elapsed time of just 4 minutes and 14 seconds. The Hawks also reached paydirt on drives that took 3:04, 3:23 and 1:58 later in the game, so when they moved the ball they moved quickly and efficiently.

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Nonetheless, some of the final statistics in this game are cause for a little concern:

+ Miami beat the Hawkeyes in first downs, 25-17.

+ Miami beat the Hawkeyes in total yards, 424-404.

+ Miami beat the Hawkeyes in total plays from scrimmage, 70-50.

+ Miami beat the Hawkeyes in time of possession, 36:21 to 23:39.

As somebody once said, tell your statistics to shut up, because the only stat that really counts in the final score, where the numbers showed a 45-21 victory for the home team.

Nonetheless, there's plenty of room for concern.

The 17th-ranked Hawks took a 35-7 lead early in the third period on a 12-yard touchdown pass from Beathard to Jerminic Smith, and the oddsmakers who tabbed the Hawks a 28-point favorite appeared to be right on the money. However, the RedHawks battled back and were trailing by only 14 points midway through the fourth period and were within striking distance.

It didn't happen, but the Hawkeyes need to strengthen their defense before facing tougher competition in the Big Ten campaign. Miami of Ohio has vastly improved from a year ago, when it finished 3-9, but a Big Ten contender like Iowa should not have to struggle to put away a team from the Mid-American Conference in the home opener.

"Our run defense was not what it needs to be today," said Iowa Coach Kirk Ferentz. "I want to give Miami credit. Not that I'm an expert, but I think they're an improved football team."

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"They tested us, more than we wanted at times. Those are things we'll have to work on this week."

The Hawkeyes have been picked to win the Big Ten West Division title this year, but Wisconsin's 16-14 upset victory over fifth-ranked LSU certainly puts the Badgers in the conversation.

Iowa's defense suffered a blow early in the game when star linebacker Josey Jewell was ejected for targeting with 12:03 left in the first quarter when he hit a Miami of Ohio player in the head on a punt return, negating a terrific 69-yard return by All-American Desmond King and sending Jewell to the locker room for the rest of the day.

The Hawkeyes undoubtedly missed Jewell as the game went along, despite the 21-0 start. "Obviously Josey is a leader of our defense and it stinks when he's out that early in the game," said Beathard.

Ferentz did not complain about the call in his post-game press conference.

"It's one of those things," he said calmly. "It's really tough to coach it and it's tough to officiate. And I fully understand why the rule is in there."

Perhaps the best news for the Hawkeyes came at tailback, where Wadley and Daniels wowed the crowd with several exciting runs. Wadley carried 12 times for 121 yards and Daniels finished with 10 carries for 83 yards, including a 43-yard touchdown.

Wadley enjoyed three 100-yard games last season, including a dazzling 204 yards against Northwestern, but he could be ready for a truly significant role this season.

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"He's got that extra spark to him," said Beathard. "He can turn a three-yard run into a big play. We've all seen that when he was young. It was just a matter of him maturing and grasping the offense."

The Hawkeyes host Iowa State this Saturday night at 6:30 and should be able to handle the Cyclones, who lost their opener under new coach Matt Campbell to Northern Iowa, 25-20, Saturday night in Ames. The Hawks could be tested the following week, however, when FCS power North Dakota State comes to Kinnick Stadium on Sept. 17.

There's no doubt the Hawkeyes have weapons, but there's also no doubt they need to improve if they hope to make the Big Ten title game again.