

An exciting (and bumpy) year for Hawkeyes?

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 25 September 2016 06:25 -



From this angle, it doesn't look like the Iowa Hawkeyes will have too many easy victories in the Big Ten this year.

Maybe none at all.

If nothing else, that's what the last two games have taught us about the 2016 Hawkeyes.

Iowa is good enough to beat just about anyone on its schedule - although Wisconsin and Michigan could be a stretch at this point - but it also appears the vulnerable Hawks could lose to anyone.

The 23-21 setback to North Dakota State last week was an eye-opener. And scoring only 14 points against Rutgers in a 14-7 victory Saturday also raised some eyebrows.

The Hawkeyes did not score in the first 29 minutes of the game Saturday in New Jersey. And if Rutgers star Damarian Grant had not suffered a serious ankle injury late in the first half, the Hawkeyes might have limped home with a loss in the Big Ten opener.

Grant is a special talent, as he displayed when he eluded four UI tacklers on a 76-yard pass play late in the first half. Iowa cornerback Desmond King accidentally stepped on Grant's right ankle when he tackled Grant at the 3-yard line, and that turn of events may have decided the game.

Rutgers did not score from the 3-yard line, Grant did not return after catching 5 passes for 98 yards in the first half and the Hawkeyes were able to prevail on Akrum Wadley's 26-yard touchdown scamper with 8:35 left in the game after Brandon Snyder forced a Rutgers fumble and recovered the ball at the Rutgers 21-yard line.

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You can look at Iowa's remaining schedule and say the Hawkeyes should beat Northwestern, Minnesota, Purdue, Penn State and Illinois, but would you bet on it? All of those games, except this Saturday's date with Northwestern, are on the road.

Iowa's three toughest games - at least on paper - are against Wisconsin, Michigan and Nebraska. Those should be three raucous affairs at Kinnick Stadium before sellout crowds and national TV audiences, but do you want to bet on the Hawkeyes in any of those games?

The Hawkeyes have a very capable ballclub. Personally, I think they're headed for an 8-4 record and a spot in a nice bowl game. Wisconsin looks like the best team in the Big Ten West right now with top-10 victories over LSU and Michigan State, but things can change.

Iowa needs another reliable wide receiver to take some of the pressure off Matt Vandenberg, who caught four passes for only 17 yards against Rutgers. Tight end George Kittle is Iowa's second-best receiver right now, but it tapers off quickly after those two. Jermaine Smith has shown promise as a speedy wide receiver, but needs to do more.

Iowa's running game picked up steam as the game went along Saturday. Wadley carried 12 times for 84 yards and LeShun Daniels finished with 13 carries for 77 yards. Daniels got robbed of a 75-yard touchdown on the first play of the second half when Ike Boettger was called for a dubious chop block, a call that irritated Coach Kirk Ferentz.

It seemed to help that Iowa's No. 1 offensive line was back on the field with center James Daniels and right guard Sean Welsh both healthy again. The Hawkeyes rushed for 193 yards, which is a healthy amount.

One of the hidden aspects of Iowa's victory on Saturday was the kicking game. Grant is a fantastic special teams player for Rutgers with his kickoff returns and punt returns, but Iowa punter Ron Coluzzi booted them high enough and deep enough to prevent Grant from doing anything special while he was still in the game. The same held true with Iowa's kickoffs.

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Iowa's 99-yard touchdown drive in the final minutes of the first half was a thing of beauty, but the only other touchdown "drive" on Saturday began at the Rutgers 21-yard line after Snyder's big play. Snyder also had 13 tackles, making him the defensive star of the game.

The Hawkeyes should cherish Saturday's victory and breathe a big sigh of relief. There probably won't be too many easy Big Ten wins this season, so every victory is precious.