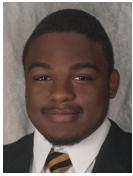


Hawkeyes had the right character for success

Written by Jim Ecker

Saturday, 26 November 2016 06:36 -



IOWA CITY - Character counts in college football, perhaps more than sheer talent.

For a prime example, look no further than the 2016 Iowa Hawkeyes.

Given up for dead three weeks ago after a 41-14 shellacking at Penn State, the Hawkeyes rebounded by shocking No. 2 Michigan, shutting out Illinois and whipping No. 15 Nebraska.

The Hawkeyes looked like a broken football team after that debacle in Happy Valley, perhaps headed for a late-season meltdown and a losing record. Instead, they buckled down and made it a November to Remember.

Iowa put an exclamation point on the regular season Friday by stomping Nebraska, 40-10, in the Heroes Game at Kinnick Stadium to finish the campaign with an 8-4 overall record and 6-3 mark in the Big Ten West.

The Hawkeyes will finish in a four-way tie for the Big Ten West Division title if Minnesota upsets Wisconsin Saturday. Nobody thought that was remotely possible three weeks ago, and even if Wisconsin beats the Gophers the Hawkeyes will finish in a second-place tie in the West Division with Nebraska.

Iowa Coach Kirk Ferentz said it was a long, unhappy ride home from Penn State three weeks ago, with a lot of soul-searching by coaches and players alike. He knew he had good people in the program, and the way they responded the past three games made him proud.

"You learn a lot about yourselves in November," he said. "I don't know if we could have gone any lower than we did three weeks ago."

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"We had a tough loss to open the month, but what these guys have done, day-in and day-out the past three weeks, it's been really amazing to watch."

As Ferentz has said before, the Hawkeyes had two choices after surrendering 599 yards to Penn State and looking like a whipped puppy: Give up and go home, or dig deeper and fight back.

His players had the character to fight back.

"It's been a good three weeks, but it really began in January," he said. "Win, lose or draw tonight, this team has done things 'right' for the most part, whether it's academics, or citizenship, (or) with the way they approach football with the workouts and training.

"They've been trying extremely hard from January on. So to me, it's really fitting that they would turn in a dominating performance like this. To me, it's a culmination of a lot of good effort and a lot of good attitudes."

The Iowa defense held Nebraska to 217 yards of total offense for its third stellar performance in a row. The Hawks held Michigan to 201 yards and limited Illinois to 198, making three straight weeks of smash-mouth football.

The offense produced a string of big plays Friday with a 75-yard touchdown by Akrum Wadley, a 77-yard pass play from C.J. Beathard to Riley McCarron for another score, and a 56-yard jaunt by LeShun Daniels that led to his own 4-yard score.

Ron Coluzzi performed more magic with his right foot, twice pinning Nebraska at its own 10-yard line with terrific punts. And on punt returns, Desmond King broke loose for a 44-yarder to set up a score and McCarron had a 29-yard return.

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King, an All-American who won the Jim Thorpe Award as the top defensive back in the country last season, unselfishly threw a tremendous block to spring McCarron on the 29-yard return even though the Hawkeyes were holding a commanding lead at the time.

"To me, that was a Kodak moment tonight," said Ferentz. "It speaks to the kind of guys we get to work with."

Tight end George Kittle returned from a foot injury to catch a pair of touchdown passes and looked like the happiest Hawkeyes in the ballpark as he proudly held the Heroes Trophy and smiled for the cameras.

Daniels ran for 158 yards and raised his season total to 1,013 in his senior year. Wadley rushed for 105 yards and raised his total to 966, making Daniels and Wadley the most prolific tandem in school history, more productive than Owen Gill (920) and Ronnie Harmon (907) in 1984 and better than Nick Bell (1,009) and Tony Stewart (844) in 1990.

Wadley has a great shot at cracking 1,000 yards in the bowl game, which would put both of Iowa's superb backs over the 1,000-yard mark in the same campaign.

Daniels battled injuries for much of his career, but he was one of the 14 seniors who left Kinnick Stadium Friday with a happy feeling, knowing they bounced all the way back from that debacle at Penn State. Daniels admitted he wasn't sure where the Hawks were headed after they got thoroughly squashed by the Nittany Lions.

"That was the most frustrating loss that I've ever been a part of since I've been here," he said. "But we knew, especially the senior class, that we couldn't go out like that."

Instead, they went out like champions.

"We got knocked in the mouth against Penn State and then we came back and battled," said

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Beathard. "It's a credit to the team and it shows what we're made of."

The Hawkeyes have posted a 20-6 overall record the past two years, making them one of the few programs in the country with that many victories in 2015 and 2016.

"We know we're not finished yet," said Daniels. "We know we still have one more to go get. Nobody on the team has won a bowl game yet."

Iowa's last victory in a postseason game was a 27-24 verdict over Missouri in the 2010 Insight Bowl, before any of these Hawkeyes arrived on campus. Since then, the Hawks have lost to Oklahoma in the 2011 Insight Bowl, to LSU in the 2014 Outback Bowl, to Tennessee in the 2015 Taxslayer Bowl and to Stanford in the 2016 Rose Bowl.

There was a lot of talk Friday about the Hawkeyes possibly being headed to the Holiday Bowl or the Music City Bowl, but that will be sorted out after the league championship games in December.

For now, the Hawkeyes are proud of what they've accomplished this season and looking for more.