Politics

Iowa Fallout: Huckabee as the New 'Darling'

Ex-Arkansas governor could use this week's debate to keep up the momentum

By Liz Halloran
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The post-Iowa straw poll days have gotten so heady for second-place finisher Mike Huckabee that even his staffers have half-jokingly begun referring to the GOP presidential candidate as the newest media "darling": the cover of the *National Review*, a splashy feature in the *Washington Post*, a growing list of interview requests.

Mike Huckabee (Scott Morgan/Getty Images)

But on the eve of Wednesday's televised Republican presidential debate in Durham, N.H., the question remains: Can Huckabee, a Christian conservative polling at only 3 percent in national GOP preference polls, parlay his modest mid-August Iowa success into something beyond a bump in poll numbers in Iowa and New Hampshire and a fleeting moment as the darling? Could he become the fall campaign season's most unexpected player?

The former Arkansas governor's performance at the debate, which will be televised by Fox News Network, could provide an answer. And, in this first matchup in the post-Labor Day high-gear campaign season, it will be interesting to see how far Huckabee might go to sustain his momentum and attract more people who want to give him money.

What he really needs out of the debate, says GOP strategist Chris Wilson, is a sound bite.

"The funny thing about these debates is that they're all about sound bites," says Wilson, who has specialized in opinion research for campaigns. "And Huckabee has had more memorable sound bites" in earlier debates.

If he comes out aggressively, Wilson says, and uses a sound bite to illustrate the differences between himself and Iowa and New Hampshire front-runner Mitt Romney, for example, or Sen. Sam Brownback, a fast-fading competitor for the Christian conservative vote, and even soon-to-announce candidate Fred Thompson, he may be able to sustain his nascent traction.

But don't expect Huckabee—or anyone else on stage at the University of New Hampshire—to aggressively attack the other participants. After all, isn't that what Democratic front-runner Hillary Clinton is for? Candidates like Huckabee don't have the money to fend off a counterattack from a well-funded candidate like Romney or Rudy Giuliani, and those guys have little need to engage at this point in the campaign. So when do they start focusing on each other?

"It's the $64,000 question, and one that all the campaigns are dealing with right now," says Wilson. "It's a game of chicken—and who has the biggest bank account." Wilson is among those who predict that the GOP intraparty attacks won't begin in earnest until just a few weeks before caucus and primary voters start going to the polls in January. "Just in time for Christmas," he says.

For candidates trying to conserve their money in a highly competitive race for the nomination, taking off after competitors in their own party two days after Labor Day on a stage in New Hampshire could simply be political (read: financial) suicide.

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