

COMMENTARY: Cartwright now key cog (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – After Iowa's 111-50 victory over Southern Illinois-Edwardsville on Friday at Carver-Hawkeye Arena, one thing became very clear – Bryce Cartwright is the Hawkeyes' most important player.

Sure, it's easy to make this statement about any point guard, but considering the make-up of this Hawkeye squad, this is an eyebrow-raising statement to make on Thanksgiving weekend after six games.

Understand the distinction between best player and most important player. Right now, junior Matt Gatens and sophomore Eric May are probably the best players on the Hawkeyes, and not too many would argue.

But with Iowa not having sophomore point guard Cully Payne for an indefinite amount of time now because of a sports hernia, Cartwright, who already looked to have a big role coming into this season, just became more significant.

Last season, depth at the point guard spot killed this program. Payne was a freshman playing an abnormal amount of minutes, and behind him on the bench was a walk-on that also happened to be the head coach's son and probably had no business playing at the Division-I level.

Cartwright came to Iowa last summer with a little bit of D-I playing experience, having originally played at Fresno State as a freshman. But after transferring to Iowa from Paris Junior College in Texas, Cartwright came to Iowa City as a bit

of an unknown.

On one hand, he filled a position that was in need of being filled. But having not played at all in the Prime Time League last summer, no one in Iowa got a first-hand glimpse of Cartwright and his playmaking abilities on the hardwood before seeing him in a Hawkeye uniform.

Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery made no secrets when practices started last month about how much he hoped to use Cartwright throughout the course of this season. Now Cartwright is being asked to carry even more of the workload because of Payne's injury.

Whether or not Cartwright outperformed Payne prior to Friday's contest is simply irrelevant to this discussion. Both had roles. Payne's absence makes Cartwright's role (which was already big to begin with) all the more enormous now.

There was a point during the second half of the Hawkeyes' 61-point win over the Cougars on Friday where Cartwright was completely hacked going up to the bucket. An intentional foul was called on Southern Illinois-Edwardsville, and when it first appeared that Cartwright was going to head back to the Iowa locker room when substituted out, he stayed near the tunnel and eventually sat on the Hawkeye bench.

Imagine if his fall led to something more serious. Or if there's a future situation where Cartwright struggles shooting or gets in foul trouble. Iowa has bodies – unlike last year – but none of those active guys have been asked to lead the team under McCaffery's style of play the way Cartwright has.

For however long Payne is out, at the very least, no one player is going to be more critical to this team's success going forward than Cartwright. When he's on the court, this team plays better.

And should Cartwright meet this challenge head-on, everyone

would then realize why he came to Iowa, why McCaffery wanted him, and why he is the most important player on this basketball team.