

COMMENTARY: Hawkeyes had their chances (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. – A couple of weeks following Iowa's season-opening loss to South Dakota State, I wrote that the players needed to be given a chance to learn from the defeat and not let that loss derail the Hawkeyes right from the get-go.

Iowa came into Lawrence Joel Veterans Memorial Coliseum on Tuesday with a 3-3 record. While the Hawkeyes were defeated 76-73 by Wake Forest, they didn't go down without putting up a fight.

Yes, heartbreaking losses are tough to deal with. Seeing Demon Deacon guard J.T. Terrell hit a 25-foot shot with 2.7 seconds on the clock had to feel a bit demoralizing for this young Iowa basketball team.

But even head coach Fran McCaffery made the point during his postgame press conference – Iowa had its opportunities to come away with what would have been a monumental win of sorts for this Hawkeye program.

Had the Hawkeyes emerged victorious Tuesday evening, it would have put Iowa above .500 through seven games. That might not sound like too big a deal, but considering how the Hawkeyes were never .500 at any point last season, any positive mojo, even if it's the smallest of things, should be viewed as a big deal right now.

Another thing to consider – this was a road game that was also a part of the Big Ten/ACC Challenge. Wake Forest might not be

among the ACC's elite this season. In fact, the Demon Deacons were picked in the preseason to finish dead last in the ACC given what they lost from a year ago, which includes hiring Jeff Bzdelik from Big 12 cellar dweller Colorado to replace Dino Gaudio as head coach.

I don't want to harp too much on the previous coaching regime, but in the three years Todd Lickliter was Iowa's head coach, the Hawkeyes won a total of six games away from Carver-Hawkeye Arena. Six wins in three years, and three of those came during Lickliter's inaugural campaign. Iowa's lone road victory last year was at Indiana, one of just two teams the Hawkeyes finished better than in Big Ten play a season ago.

Winning this game would have further validated how McCaffery is slowly turning things around. Heck, the fact that Iowa overcame a 10-point second-half deficit to actually hold a lead in the final minutes speaks volumes.

I say that because this was a game where the Demon Deacons came back from 18 points down, and established that 10-point advantage the Hawkeyes rebounded from with a 41-13 run. Those kinds of runs by opposing teams were frequent last season. Iowa finding a way to claw back into the game and have the outcome be decided on a last-second shot wasn't frequent.

But I digress. The Hawkeyes had Wake Forest by the neck on Tuesday. They didn't get the job done, but as I said before, they'll learn.

Anyone who watched this game saw the heart this team played with in the final few minutes. This is how fans come back. This is how interest in the basketball program resurfaces.

Were the Hawkeyes able to build on their lead when Eric May's 3-point play with 3:17 left gave Iowa a 71-70 lead? No. Did Matt Gatens hit the open shot he had in the final minute? No. But did the Hawkeyes quit? The answer to this is also "no."

There was a lot to take away from this game on Tuesday. The most important thing from Iowa's standpoint is that it was in position to steal this victory from Wake Forest.

It didn't happen against the Demon Deacons on Tuesday. But if this game was any indicator, the day it does happen just might be sooner than expected.

And as long as the Hawkeyes give themselves chances to win every night, the games this season will at the very least be entertaining.