Free-throw woes a concern, but not chronic (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Free-throw shooting is a facet of basketball that is needed for good teams wanting to become great. It can make the difference between winning and losing marquee games.

For the Hawkeyes, this didn't cost them a 70-53 win over Idaho State on Saturday, nor was this game with the Bengals one that would be considered marquee. But for the future ahead, this has become a chink in Iowa's armor.

Head coach Fran McCaffery even made reference to the Hawkeyes' struggles behind the charity stripe, as they mustered 12 makes out of 22 attempts.

"In some respects, you'd like to say, 'Well, sometimes free throw shooting is a function of not getting there enough. We got there 22 times," McCaffery said.

At one point in the second half, as Idaho State began climbing back into the game, Iowa was a mere 5-of-14 from the free-throw line. Freshman forward Melsahn Basabe grabbed an offensive board and was hacked on his way up with the put-back attempt.

Basabe would go to the line and sink both free throws to extend Iowa's lead, a moment in the contest McCaffery made mention of as being critical to his team.

"I feel like I earned the offensive rebound, got the foul, and I got to capitalize," Basabe said. "I go to the line, and I know this is money. I shoot them every day. I make them every day.

“You got to go confident. Even if you miss it, you still got to go confident.”

Through eight games, the Hawkeyes have shot 120-of-183 from the line, or nearly eight missed attempts per contest. While it is an alarming statistic, it is one that doesn’t seem to concern any of the players, who feel the misses aren’t a chronic problem throughout practice as well as games.

“It’s something that we work on in practice, so it’s going to keep getting better,” sophomore forward Eric May said. “I think guys have just got to relax, myself included. Get up to the line, and just relax.

“In practice, people are shooting free throws really well, so we just got to take it easy out there.”

With tougher games ahead for the Hawkeyes, free-throw shooting will be critical. Improvements in this area could be the difference between a giant win in conference play, or another heartbreaking loss.

Junior guard Matt Gatens acknowledged how Iowa’s struggles on Saturday were enough to allow Idaho State to crawl back into the game, but he also echoed May’s sentiments about the team performing better with free throws during practice.

“It’s too bad to not see us step to the line and make them, but you’ll have nights like that,” Gatens said. “We just have to avoid them. I think everybody has confidence to step up and knock them down.”