

# COMMENTARY: Defense key in Hawkeye victory (premium)

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*HawkeyeDrive.com*

IOWA CITY, Iowa – In his postgame press conference, Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery said he didn't believe in "signature wins."

With all due respect to McCaffery, I would absolutely call the Hawkeyes' 51-39 win over Northern Iowa on Tuesday at Carver-Hawkeye Arena "signature."

This victory has Iowa at 5-4, meaning this is the first time in two seasons the Hawkeyes have gotten an opportunity to feel like they're a winning team. For the guys that did stick around after the debacle that was last season, this is significant for them. All winning this game and being above .500 will do is help make them more confident.

McCaffery can downplay the rivalry aspect all he wants, but the fact is any wins over UNI, Iowa State and Drake are going to help shed some positive exposure on a program that is in desperate need of it. Also consider that this Panther squad the Hawkeyes defeated on Tuesday reached the Sweet 16 last season as a No. 9 seed in the NCAA Tournament.

The Hawkeyes beat the Panthers at a game that was basically their style, their tempo, their pace. Iowa held UNI to 39 points. Think about that for a second – 39 points.

What makes Tuesday's win for the Hawkeyes "signature" was their play at the defensive end of the court. Panther guard Kwadzo Ahelegbe scored 11 points in the first half, only to be held without a single point the entire second half. This is

one of UNI's best players we're talking about, not some scrub coming off the bench.

Another thing to consider from Iowa's perspective was how this game basically played out the way McCaffery said it needed to in order for the Hawkeyes to come away with a win. He said in his teleconference on Monday how taking quick shots would result in UNI running Iowa out of Carver-Hawkeye Arena. For the most part, the Hawkeyes grinded out every possession for what it was worth. Iowa did only shoot 40 percent from the field, but considering how well they played defensively, it wasn't going to matter with the Panthers shooting an abysmal 5-of-28 in the second half.

During this same teleconference earlier in the week, McCaffery praised the play of his post-players and said he liked the development of his big men. That development was on full display against the Panthers, given the performances in particular of freshman forward Melsahn Basabe and senior center Jarryd Cole.

Basabe led the Hawkeyes in scoring with 14 points and also tallied seven rebounds. Cole posted a double-double for the Hawkeyes, compiling totals of 10 points and 15 rebounds.

What makes Cole's rebounding efforts even more impressive is that seven of those 15 boards came at the offensive end of the floor, meaning the Hawkeyes were actually the ones controlling the tempo, even though it was a slower pace than normal.

Take the 24 combined points from Basabe and Cole and compare that to their counterparts, Jake Koch and Lucas O'Rear. The Panthers' front-court duo combined for 14 points and were basically non-factors down the stretch.

What I took away from watching this game is that the Hawkeyes are capable of finding different ways to win games, and that is going to suit them nicely by the time Big Ten play begins. When Iowa State comes to town on Dec. 10, Iowa will probably

need to play a faster tempo than it did on Tuesday in order to beat the Cyclones.

To McCaffery, this might just be another win to his name. But this is the kind of victory that sets up nicely in the future for a program still working its way back up.

And if the defensive play continues to remain strong for this Hawkeye team, it's going to eventually pay off down the road.