

# COMMENTARY: Welcome to the Big Ten (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – The Iowa Hawkeyes didn't prevail on Wednesday in a situation most didn't see them performing well in.

Losing at Carver-Hawkeye Arena to No. 23 Illinois, 87-77, was still enough for fans to complain about a 7-6 start to the season with a team that few didn't expect to struggle throughout 2010.

To me, this week was a turning point, but for a slightly different reason. What I took away from this contest was that Iowa is heading in the right direction, but isn't there quite yet.

While the Fighting Illini were doing all those things necessary to win road games this winter in the Big Ten, there was also a mixture of what Iowa didn't do well.

For instance, Illinois shot 32-of-48 from the field on Wednesday, or to put this in more broader terms, hit two of every three shots taken last night. It doesn't matter who you play – when your opponent is putting together those types of numbers, you're going to have little to no chance anyway.

I expect many of the other Hawkeye men's basketball games we see down the road this season to be contests that Iowa is not favored to win in, yet they keep battling.

Yes, the Hawkeye players were disappointed they let a team like Illinois manage to dictate the tempo of the game, but it's also something that good teams will continue to exploit

because they can right now. That's what will happen when young teams like Iowa face more experienced and talented teams like the Fighting Illini, who were clearly the best team the Hawkeyes had faced up to this point all season.

Losing to a team the caliber of an Illinois should not feature much shame, if any. Iowa didn't quit, and while the Hawkeyes came out on the short end, they showed they could at least compete. In a conference like the Big Ten where the opponents are of high-quality, this is important.

Eventually, the day will come that this Iowa basketball program is going to win a game against an opponent that it isn't expected to beat. And while I don't know when that day will be, I do believe that if the effort everyone saw from this team being able to hang with the Fighting Illini is any indicator, it's only a matter of time.

Right now, though, the growing pains are likely to continue. Up next for the Hawkeyes is No. 2 Ohio State, who is undefeated and has one of the top freshmen in the country right now in forward Jared Sullinger. From there, three of the next four are away from Carver-Hawkeye Arena, and all three contests are against teams currently ranked (including this second-ranked Buckeye squad).

This is where I remind all of you of something I've said throughout the summer and preseason – the direction of this program is up, but things beyond Iowa's control (the performance of these other Big Ten teams) might be what keeps it down a little longer than expected.

For those who remain patient through what is a difficult Big Ten slate, the results fans want from this team will slowly begin to follow.