

# Streaky Illini shooting dooms Hawkeyes in Big Ten opener

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Usually whenever a basketball team allows its opponent to shoot lights out from the field, it ends up being a long evening. On Wednesday, the Iowa Hawkeyes learned this lesson the hard way in a 87-77 loss to the No. 23 Illinois Fighting Illini at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

It was the Big Ten opener for both teams, and while the Hawkeyes did manage to jump out to an early 15-11 lead in the first half, Illinois reminded everyone why it was a top 25 program coming into Wednesday's contest.

The Fighting Illini responded with 16 unanswered points to build a 27-15 lead suddenly. While Iowa managed to keep it close at times, it never could accomplish quite enough to actually overcome the deficit throughout the remaining duration of the game.

What really killed the Hawkeyes in this contest was Illinois' ability to drain 10 3-pointers in the first half alone en route to a 12-point halftime advantage.

"It felt like everything was going their way," senior center Jarryd Cole said after his 10-point, 9-rebound outing on Wednesday. "Our defense wasn't rotating like it should have been. A lot of their shots were wide open.

"Not to take anything away from them because they hit great shots, but we couldn't handle them with our defensive pressure."

Illinois had five players reach double-figures for points in

the win, while Iowa was led in scoring by junior guard Matt Gatens with 21 points. Also helping lead the way for the Hawkeyes was fellow junior guard Bryce Cartwright, who had 13 points and five assists in defeat.

The performance at the defensive end of the floor, especially during the first half, was something that didn't sit well with any of the players, nor with head coach Fran McCaffery.

"I don't think we were as quick with our rotations as we need to be," McCaffery said after the game. "We were close, but not close enough, and we have to do a better job with those. We'll work on it and get better."

Iowa now shifts its attention toward No. 2 Ohio State, who has a game at Indiana on Dec. 31 before visiting Iowa City. The Buckeyes are led by one of the nation's premier freshmen in Jared Sullinger, and the Hawkeyes realize a tall task will be in front of them once again.

One thing that may prove beneficial to Iowa though is having nearly a full week to prepare for one of the country's lone remaining unbeaten teams visiting campus on Jan. 4. The game is set for 8 p.m. Central that evening, and will be televised by the Big Ten Network.

"They have a lot of weapons. They're a great team, ranked second in the country, so it should be a good test," Gatens said. "Having that week, we'll definitely study them."