

COMMENTARY: Basabe continues to impress (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – Fran McCaffery's arrival to Iowa City last spring was exactly what was needed for Iowa to re-energize its men's basketball program. Because of this, there's a second factor that needs to be recognized.

Aside from the ones that are "one-and-done players", it's not often that freshmen evolve right away into immediate impacts on a team. While Melsahn Basabe might not be NBA-caliber just yet (if ever), his presence on this Hawkeye squad deserves recognition, even after Iowa lost to No. 2 Ohio State on Tuesday, 73-68.

First of all, he originally wasn't intending to play at Iowa. Basabe committed to McCaffery at Siena, only to follow suit when both the Hawkeye head coach and assistant Andrew Francis came to the Hawkeye State.

Now fast forward from back then all the way to earlier this week before Iowa's game against the defending conference champion Buckeyes. Basabe had played the last two games against Louisiana Tech and Illinois while battling sickness. This was something McCaffery acknowledged after both contests and again on Jan. 3 during his Big Ten teleconference.

As far as Tuesday's game was concerned, Basabe had the assignment of defending Ohio State freshman phenom Jared Sullinger, a 6-9 forward from Columbus, Ohio, that might just be the best player in college basketball right now.

Basabe used his prior playing experience against Sullinger in

AAU to his advantage, and was outperforming him for most of the first half on Tuesday. When Iowa went into halftime leading the Buckeyes 35-29, Basabe already had 16 points and six rebounds. He also was knocking down free throws.

He also gave the 9,810 fans in attendance reason to believe that the Hawkeyes had a chance to pull off an upset that would've sent shockwaves through the college basketball landscape, or at the very least, giving those in Columbus celebrating Ohio State's Sugar Bowl win on Tuesday a severe buzz kill.

When I first saw Basabe play in the Prime Time League this summer, I knew right away he would be a starter for this team from Day One. He won't admit it, but the Glen Cove, N.Y., native has a swagger to his game that has reinvigorated teammates and fans who had suffered through tumultuous times over the past few years. Basabe had this trait seven months ago when he first arrived in Iowa, he has it still today, and there's no reason to think it won't stay with him the rest of his Hawkeye career.

Take away the two games he was playing sick (and it was apparent in both cases), and Basabe has elevated his play since hitting somewhat of a wall early on when the Hawkeyes were playing at the Paradise Jam earlier this season. It hasn't always resulted in wins for Iowa, and the times it doesn't, Basabe isn't one to talk about his individual performance, but rather how the team could continue to improve.

When asked about coming back from illness to post a career-high 22 points along with 13 boards against one of the country's best teams, Basabe wouldn't use being sick as an excuse. What his performance Tuesday evening indicated to me though is that when he's healthy, Basabe is capable of playing beyond his years and really being a difference-maker. There's no doubt in my mind this will continue as his Hawkeye career

continues to progress.

Another thing he said following the Hawkeyes' loss to Ohio State was how they (meaning the Hawkeyes) "should have won." Basabe's intent with saying this wasn't to disrespect the Buckeyes, but rather show confidence in himself, his teammates, and the coaches. He really felt Iowa had what it took to pull the upset, and that almost came to fruition.

If you've followed the Hawkeyes closely all season long, ask yourself this: How good would this team be right now if Basabe wasn't around? Would Iowa be 7-7 at the moment if he stuck to his commitment at Siena? The more I watch him play and the more I see how Basabe impacts this team, the more I realize just how vital he is to whatever success this program has not only now, but in the years to come.

Tuesday night's game is evidence. Basabe held his own against Sullinger. When this season's over, most college basketball aficionados will probably be able to count on one hand the number of players in the country that could come away saying that.

For now, Iowa fans ought to appreciate what they have in Basabe. If he continues to impress the way he already has, then his name is one that could be talked about in Iowa City for a long time.