

COMMENTARY: Perimeter defense a nagging problem (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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ANN ARBOR, Mich. – A glaring weakness in the Iowa Hawkeyes was exposed yet again in a 87-73 loss to Michigan on Sunday at Crisler Arena – perimeter defense.

Look, Iowa is 21 games into the season. I understand that head coach Fran McCaffery is going through a bumpy first season at the helm, essentially working with a program rebuilding from the ground floor up.

But the Hawkeyes are at a point in their 2010-11 campaign where problems that don't appear to be fixed now are probably not going to evaporate into thin air anytime soon.

A few weeks back during a press conference back in Iowa City, McCaffery identified his team's perimeter defense as something that needed to be corrected. Teams like Iowa State, Illinois, Purdue, Northwestern, and now Michigan, have taken advantage of the woes Iowa has had.

Sometimes teams have hot nights shooting, and to that, the Wolverines ought to be credited. Instead of Manny Harris or DeShawn Sims torturing the Hawkeyes like they did when they donned the Maize and Blue, it was sophomore Darius Morris posting a triple-double on Iowa.

Then the shooting, especially from 3-point range. Michigan simply could not miss a shot.

What has to make this loss frustrating not only to the team, but its fans, is that the Wolverines' game plan was fairly obvious. They were attacking the rim looking to kick it back

out for open 3-point shots. They succeeded to the tune of 33-of-56 shooting in total, with 14 of those 33 field goals coming from behind the arc, where Michigan shot 50 percent.

In the second half alone, when the Wolverines began to separate themselves from the Hawkeyes, they were 7-of-11 from 3-point range. There's absurd shooting, and then there's absurd shooting that comes courtesy of poor defense at the other end.

It wasn't that Iowa didn't follow the game plan. If you listen to McCaffery and the players speak, they knew what they were supposed to do. But as McCaffery said in his postgame press conference, Iowa was slow reacting, and Michigan made the Hawkeyes pay.

The question it left me wondering (and probably everyone else for that matter) is why was Iowa was so slow? Why did it take longer than it should have to recognize what Michigan was attempting to accomplish?

"You know, I can't say that 'we get it,' because we haven't gotten it buttoned up," McCaffery said. "They're understanding the importance of it. That defense, against a lot of teams, is good enough.

"[Michigan] has too many good 3-point shooters, so obviously, it's not good enough."

Maybe there will be a few performances between now and season's end where teams don't shoot clinics on the Hawkeyes. Heck, there might even be a time where Iowa finds a way to win a game because of a key defensive stop.

But I go back to what I said earlier. The Hawkeyes have played 21 games. There is enough body of work to conclude that something has to change at the defensive end. Whether that change is tactical or mental, who knows.

It just needs to happen soon for Iowa, otherwise what everyone witnessed on Sunday will likely occur again and again.