

Illini prove to be too much for Hawkeyes

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. – The Iowa Hawkeyes climbed out of its first major deficit on Saturday against Illinois. But as it turned out, it would be the second major deficit that proved insurmountable.

Thanks in large part to the play of its three senior leaders, the Fighting Illini forced Iowa to play catch-up, and time ran out on the Hawkeyes as Illinois emerged victorious at Assembly Hall, 81-68. As a result, Iowa fell to 10-18 overall, and the Hawkeyes are now 3-13 in the Big Ten with two conference games remaining before the Big Ten Tournament.

After falling behind 10-0 in the earlygoing, Iowa managed to claw its way back and tie the score up at 13-13 apiece. The Fighting Illini retook the lead and wouldn't relinquish it, but the Hawkeyes kept things interesting the rest of the first half and only trailed 36-31 at halftime following a 3-pointer at the buzzer from junior guard Bryce Cartwright.

Then came the start of the second half. Suddenly, Illinois began to dominate at both ends of the court and went ahead by as many as 17 points with a 60-43 lead. This is where Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery felt the game was ultimately lost for his team.

"We can't let it get to double-digits as quickly as it did," McCaffery said. "I thought at that point, you know, they're at home. They're relaxed. They were comfortable. They were scoring the ball."

“You got to keep it closer than we did.”

The Hawkeyes were led by their big men in freshman forward Melsahn Basabe and senior center Jarryd Cole. Basabe finished with 17 points and seven rebounds, both of which were team-highs, while Cole came away with 15 points on 6-of-10 shooting on the evening.

But it was the Fighting Illini's frontcourt that stood out. Center Mike Tisdale and forward Mike Davis combined for 45 points on 18-of-26 shooting.

“We knew they were going to be looking into Tisdale a lot more,” Cole said. “We knew they were looking to go more inside. He just happened to have the upper-hand tonight.”

Other notables for Iowa were junior guard Matt Gatens and the aforementioned Cartwright. Gatens finished with 14 points, while Cartwright had eight points and nine assists in a game he almost didn't play in because of an illness he came down with earlier in the week.

He said afterwards that he was “maybe 90 percent” by game-time.

“This morning we had a shoot-around, and I was able to go then,” Cartwright said. “I just wanted to play and be out there with my team.”

The Hawkeyes return to action on March 2, as they play their final road game of the season at Michigan State. Iowa won the first meeting between the two teams on Feb. 2 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena, 72-52. Tip-off is scheduled for 5:30 p.m. Central, and the game will be aired nationally on the Big Ten Network.

“I'm sure they're going to be gunning for us for what happened at Carver,” Gatens said about the upcoming match-up in East Lansing, Mich. “We got to keep our composure and execute, and

hopefully we'll come out on top."