COMMENTARY: Technicals mask ongoing problems (premium)

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CEDAR FALLS, Iowa — As the McLeod Center emptied and the Iowa Hawkeyes walked off the court 80-60 losers to in-state rival Northern Iowa on Tuesday, the narrative became the four technical fouls called on Iowa in the second half. Head coach Fran McCaffery was ejected from the game with 4:47 remaining after he picked up his second technical and was escorted to the locker room.

Fans can question the officiating and the free-throw discrepancy all they want. Heck, McCaffery even did so when asked about the Panthers shooting 33 free throws to the Hawkeyes' nine attempts from the foul line.

However, the narrative shouldn't be as much about McCaffery unleashing his wrath on the officials. What it ought to be about is how some of the same issues that have plagued this Iowa team came arose yet again on Tuesday.

Yes, the Hawkeyes were without senior guard Bryce Cartwright, who suffered a hamstring injury during Iowa's win over Brown last weekend. Yet sophomore guard Devyn Marble, who started in place of Cartwright, ended up playing 37 minutes on Tuesday and had a team-high 14 points. As vital a role as Cartwright plays on this team, his absence wasn't why the Hawkeyes ended up losing this game.

Let's get to the obvious issue — perimeter defense. Iowa scored the first 10 points of this game, yet it was UNI who was ahead 32-27 at halftime and never allowed its lead to vanquish on this night.

Why? Because the Panthers shot 11-of-21 from 3-point range. In total, UNI shot 20-of-44 from the floor and 29-of-33 from the charity stripe.

Now look, the 33 free throws is indeed glaring, but to the Panthers' credit, they sunk all but four of those attempts. That number got heavily inflated during the final stretch of the game when those technicals were being called. If the officiating is going to be in question, then it's probably also worth noting how ticky-tack calls were being made both ways during that first half.

But let's go back to that 11-of-21 from behind the arc. 3-point shooting is how UNI climbed back in this game and eventually managed to bury the Hawkeyes for good. Iowa shot nearly 60 percent from the floor in the first half and trailed at halftime because six of UNI's 10 first-half field goals came via the 3. In fact, the Panthers called a timeout right before the half and came out of it converting a four-point play when sophomore forward Melsahn Basabe was called for a foul on a made 3-pointer by UNI's Chip Rank.

That is alarming, and what should make it even more troubling for Hawkeye fans is that this has been an ongoing trend. The four games Iowa has lost, teams have nailed 3s against it.

Conversely, the Hawkeyes were 1-of-12 from 3-point range and 3-of-9 from the free-throw line. That will rarely, if ever, get it done for a team playing on the road against a good opponent. And make no mistake, UNI is an NCAA tournament-caliber team this season.

Before the technicals occurred, McCaffery and the players were right — Iowa was toe-to-toe with UNI. But guarding the perimeter better and free-throw shooting are two areas that need to be better, otherwise this is the result that will take place most nights and those will be the reasons why.

Again, the narrative will be about how this game got out of

hand. But it's not as though those technical foul calls were the only thing that kept the Hawkeyes from prevailing on this night.