

COMMENTARY: How the first half set the tone (premium)

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Sometimes how one starts becomes a direct cause for how one ultimately finishes. This was definitely the case inside Carver-Hawkeye Arena on Saturday, as the Iowa Hawkeyes managed to defeat Drake, 82-68.

This win was significant for Iowa in that it managed to avoid going 0-for against its three intrastate rivals for the first time ever. Winning this game also allowed the Hawkeyes to move back above .500, as they now sit at 6-5 overall through 11 contests.

But perhaps the biggest takeaway from Saturday is how Iowa came out focused from the get-go. I would make the argument after this game the Hawkeyes played their best half of basketball all season during the first 20 minutes of play.

One such catalyst for Iowa on Saturday was freshman forward Aaron White. Only 70 seconds had come off the clock before White was substituted in for sophomore forward Zach McCabe, as he was getting a cut near his eye looked at by trainers. White ended up scoring four of the Hawkeyes' first eight points and wound up being incredibly effective throughout the first half, in which is when he scored nine of his 10 points on the night and hauled in all five of his rebounds.

Then there was the play of senior guard Matt Gatens, who really put the team on his back Saturday evening. Gatens scored 12 of his team-high 20 points in the first half, and kept Drake sharpshooter Ben Simons to a mere five points. Gatens also ended up playing all 40 minutes. That ought to be

a strong indication of how much faith and confidence Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery has in the 6-5 Iowa City native.

As the Hawkeyes built up their lead in the first half, two of the more defining moments of the game came in the half's final minutes, and both involved freshman guard Josh Oglesby. Both occurrences led to McCaffery initially being irate because Oglesby passed up on open 3-pointers despite having the green light to shoot whenever he's open from beyond the arc.

But both moments did result in Hawkeye buckets. The first came with Oglesby passing up an open 3, and instead dishing the ball to senior guard Bryce Cartwright, who found an open McCabe inside for the easy score. The ensuing Iowa possession, Oglesby passed on the open 3, but managed to make a move inside and swished a mid-range jumper that extended what was a double-digit lead.

Drake head coach Mark Phelps said point blank the game was decided in the first half, and he's right. The second half was a wash, not just in the scoring (Iowa and Drake both had 38 second-half points), but the two teams practically exchanged fouls in the last 20 minutes. In fact, the Bulldogs put Iowa in the double-bonus less than seven minutes into that second stanza.

Was this a complete win for the Hawkeyes on Saturday? It probably wasn't, but it was close. Iowa managed to emerge victorious because it set the tone and Drake had to respond to what the Hawkeyes dictated. Considering how the Bulldogs beat the same Iowa State team that nearly ran Iowa out of Hilton Coliseum last week, the effort proved key.

McCaffery will continue to look for that complete game, but the first 20 minutes of Saturday's win ought to prove there's potential that it could come at some point later this season.