

COMMENTARY: Plenty of positives for Hawkeyes (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – Normally, a game like the one inside Carver-Hawkeye Arena on Monday isn't one where a lot can be learned about a team. The Iowa Hawkeyes defeated Central Arkansas, 105-64, and the game had the feel of a lopsided 41-point affair.

A win over Central Arkansas isn't the be-all, end-all, nor should it be. But the Iowa fans who were on hand Monday night at Carver-Hawkeye Arena or watched the game on TV or some sort of Internet stream ought to feel encouraged by a lot of what they saw in this game.

Let's start with what head coach Fran McCaffery was the most pleasing aspect of Monday's thrashing of the Bears. Iowa shot 42-of-76 from the floor and compiled a total of 32 assists.

This is worth repeating – 32 assists on 42 field goals made. It doesn't matter who you're playing. When those are the numbers being put together, that's pretty impressive. Fourteen of those 32 assists were between sophomore guard Devyn Marble and senior guard Bryce Cartwright, who had eight assists coming off the bench for the third straight game.

Since I brought up Marble just now, let's address his play. The 6-5 guard has now started the last four games and currently has a five-game streak going of scoring in double-figures. Since the calendar turned to December, Marble has played the best basketball of anyone on the team, hands down.

It was evident after the losses to Northern Iowa and Iowa State, and it's becoming even more evident in the last two games, both of which Iowa has won.

Marble finished with a game-high 19 points, had the aforementioned six assists, and left a solid impression on Central Arkansas head coach Corliss Williamson, who won a national championship at Arkansas in 1994 and went on to have a 12-year NBA playing career that includes a championship in 2004 with the Detroit Pistons. Yes, he was the opposing coach. But when someone of Williamson's caliber is heaping praise on someone, especially a player like Marble who is only a sophomore, that's telling.

What has stood out about Marble's play is how much better his free-throw shooting has been. He went 9-of-10 from the foul line against the Bears and over the course of this five-game stretch he has had, Marble has looked a lot better (and I mean *a lot* better) at the line than he was a year ago as a freshman.

Marble was one of five Hawkeyes to finish in double-figures scoring. Two others whose performances stood out Monday evening were freshman forward Aaron White and sophomore forward Melsahn Basabe.

White, for the second straight game, was effective off the bench for Iowa and scored 13 of his 17 points in the first half. If he starts to develop some sort of consistency here, that's going to pay dividends later in the season for this team. As for Basabe, he had a 14-point, 9-rebound effort against Central Arkansas. But what stood out was that he overcame early foul trouble and overpowered Bear players at both ends of the court in the second half.

McCaffery said how he challenged Basabe's effort defensively. I think it is safe to say he has responded thus far, and should Basabe stay on this path, that's huge for the Hawkeyes

going forward.

As far as the game itself goes, Iowa got off to a nice 24-5 start, but what may have been even more impressive was what occurred later in the first half. Central Arkansas trimmed the Hawkeye lead to 33-27. Senior guard Matt Gatens then nailed a 3-pointer to push the lead back up to nine points, and really from that moment on, the Bears were no match.

Iowa managed to build its advantage up to 55-42 at halftime, then proceeded to bury Central Arkansas with a 30-7 run to start the second half. That's the sign of a maturing team. Instead of panicking when the Bears started sinking 3-pointers and trimmed their deficit to two possessions, the Hawkeyes stuck with their game plan and beat a team they should beat in a convincing manner.

Again, the competition was far from the best, and this isn't to suggest that Iowa has suddenly righted the ship for good. But the maturation process is starting to show in games, and that might be the most encouraging sign for this Hawkeye squad that plays one final non-conference game before Big Ten play starts next week.

And while the start of its league slate remains brutal, it might not be nearly as overwhelming now for Iowa as it initially appeared.