

# COMMENTARY: Learning on the fly (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

*HawkeyeDrive.com*

IOWA CITY, Iowa – With the Iowa Hawkeyes having completed the non-conference portion of their 2011-12 with an 81-72 victory over Boise State on Thursday at Carver-Hawkeye Arena, now seems to be a good time to make an assessment of sorts on this team as it enters its Big Ten slate.

The win over the Broncos puts Iowa at 8-5, and the Hawkeyes have now won three straight games. What makes this impressive is that the three wins have come over a span of six days, in December, with two of the three games coming against decent competition.

For Iowa, being able to find winning ways again before diving into conference play is huge for this team's psyche going forward. If you take a look at the Hawkeyes' first seven Big Ten games, they consist of the following match-ups: Purdue (twice), at Wisconsin, at Minnesota, Ohio State, at Michigan State, and Michigan.

Four of those six teams are currently ranked, Minnesota is currently 12-1 despite losing Trevor Mbawke for the season with an ACL injury, and the Boilermakers have a pair of lethal 3-point shooters in Robbie Hummel and Ryne Smith. Regardless of what the record ends up being, this is a grueling stretch for the Hawkeyes and it was among the things that stood out when the schedule was originally released.

Going back to this current winning streak, what Iowa has demonstrated is that its players are learning by example how to have success. Considering how Thursday's game against Boise

State was the first time all season the Hawkeyes played a game decided by single digits, this is the kind of victory that can pay huge dividends down the road.

As deep and talented a league as the Big Ten is, Iowa had its fair share of games last season where one or two possessions ultimately proved as the difference between winning and losing. This is where the strides being made by some of the younger players recently like sophomores Devyn Marble and Melsahn Basabe or freshman Aaron White are significant.

All three players I mentioned played vital roles in the Hawkeyes defeating the Broncos in a game that, quite frankly, I'm not sure Iowa wins a year ago. Since the calendar turned to December, Marble and Basabe both have played incredible. But perhaps more importantly, both have brought consistent efforts night in and night out.

Meanwhile, White is a guy that in each of these last three victories, was an immediate spark for this team when he would get his first action coming off the bench. On Thursday, White played a total of 27 minutes despite not starting and both he and Marble finished with a team-high 18 points.

The Hawkeyes are going to need efforts like this from all three players going forward if they're going to prove they can hang with the Big Ten's elite. But the nice thing about this situation if you're Iowa is that all three still have plenty of room to grow, as does this entire team.

Winning a game like the one it won Thursday, one where the Hawkeyes and Broncos were practically back and forth, is something that will help in late-game situations. I don't see why learning on the fly as Iowa has the last few games can't be beneficial. It's how improvements are made, and the more time spent on the court together, the more guys are going to understand each other, whether it's personality or tendencies, you name it.

A lot of encouraging things have happened over the past week. If any of those continue on through this upcoming seven-game stretch, then maybe Iowa has a legitimate shot at winning two or three of those games, which then puts the Hawkeyes in more of a favorable situation as the schedule gets slightly easier.

Where those wins can come from remains to be seen, but the path is slowly proving to be the right one for this team.