

COMMENTARY: A bigger statement made (premium)

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MINNEAPOLIS, Minn. – In March of 2010, the Iowa men's basketball program had hit rock bottom following consecutive road losses at Wisconsin and Minnesota to end that regular season. The Hawkeyes lost 67-40 to the Badgers, 88-53 to the Golden Gophers, and Todd Lickliter lost his head coaching job just over a week later.

Twenty-two months after the darkest moments of a disastrous season, Iowa followed up a statement victory at the Kohl Center over then-No. 11 Wisconsin with a 64-62 win over Minnesota on Wednesday at Williams Arena. The Hawkeyes now have a winning record in Big Ten play (2-1) for the first time since Steve Alford's last season of 2006-07. That campaign also marked the last time until Wednesday evening Iowa had won consecutive road games in conference play.

Senior guard Matt Gatens was a part of that aforementioned downfall back in 2010. Not only had he not forgotten the humiliation of those two losses ending that season, but it was something he thought about deeply this past week with the Hawkeyes preparing to play at Minnesota following its seven-point win over Wisconsin last weekend.

"I remember those two trips, a couple of years ago, were terrible," Gatens said. "It feels good to come back and get a little redemption on them."

The significance of leaving the Kohl Center with a victory over the Badgers hasn't diminished, nor will it diminish. But to follow that up with the type of win Iowa secured over

Minnesota on Wednesday speaks volumes to how much this team has grown over the past month and how this program has changed over the past two years under McCaffery.

Six weeks ago, this same Hawkeye squad lost to Campbell at home by 16 points. Now it finds itself possessing a winning record in the middle of a seven-game stretch opening Big Ten play where, in all honesty, 0-7 looked realistic.

Think about this. Iowa is sitting at 2-1 in the Big Ten during a stretch featuring six teams with winning records – four of whom are ranked in the top 25 – and with four of those seven games being played away from Carver-Hawkeye Arena. Iowa's 2-1, and both of those wins have come on the road.

Now this team could very well lose each of its next four games. The next three are against No. 6 Ohio State, at No. 10 Michigan State, and No. 18 Michigan, respectively. After that, Iowa travels to West Lafayette to face a Purdue team that gave it that one Big Ten loss. But the good news for the Hawkeyes is that all three of those ranked teams they're about to play are only on the schedule once.

Iowa's finding success in the most brutal portion of its season, and make no mistake about it. The Hawkeyes' schedule from February on is as favorable as it gets for any team in what many consider the toughest conference in the country.

By winning this game over Minnesota, Iowa took a monumental step forward proving it can handle short-term success. If this trend continues (the adage is "two's a trend," right?), and this team starts to sustain long-term success over the course of this season because of this current two-game winning streak, it will become safe for fans to say "Iowa basketball is back," perhaps sooner than expected.

In a span of five days, two more demons have been exorcised and the Hawkeyes are now starting to see more of that light at the end of the tunnel.

Should Iowa lose any or all of its next four games, it's not taking a step back. The Hawkeyes won't be favored in any of those games, just like they weren't favored in each of the last two contests they've won. But if this past week is any indication, Iowa should become a more confident team as it continues navigating through the Big Ten and that's what will pay off in the long run.

If and when that happens, remember this night inside "The Barn," a night the Hawkeyes made an even bigger statement to the rest of the conference.