

COMMENTARY: First-half runs prove to be difference (premium)

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EAST LANSING, Mich. — In a matter of moments, the Iowa Hawkeyes found themselves trailing very early to No. 6 Michigan State Tuesday evening at the Breslin Center and could never catch up.

The Spartans prevailed 95-61, and yes, the game was as ugly as the 34-point margin would indicate.

This game was lost at the start for the Hawkeyes. Iowa found itself using not one, not two, but three timeouts in the game's first eight minutes. And all three timeouts were called before the under-16 media timeout, which took 8:17 to get to and not before Michigan State had already built a 23-9 lead.

The first timeout came 38 seconds in when junior forward Eric May called for one after grabbing a loose ball. The next one came in the middle of an 8-0 Spartan run that made it 10-2 with a made free throw immediately following the timeout. Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery looked to get a spark from his bench by subbing in three players — sophomore forward Aaron White, senior guard Bryce Cartwright and senior forward Andrew Brommer. The plan was to get them in following that first media timeout. Except the third timeout of the game had to be called to try and stop some of the bleeding.

After sophomore guard Devyn Marble's 3-point play cut Michigan State's lead down to 30-22, the Spartans then proceeded to go on a 16-2 run to end the half, with the two Iowa points coming

at the very end from senior guard Matt Gatens.

By halftime, Iowa was down and out. The Hawkeyes had already committed 14 turnovers, while Michigan State had 15 assists on 20 made field-goal attempts, a statistic that pleased head coach Tom Izzo afterwards. The Spartans were also unconscious with their 3-point shooting, making 6-of-12 attempts in the game's first 20 minutes.

Sure at night's end, a lot of talk will be made over the "Wrath of Fran" reaching epic proportions during the second half when the game was all but decided. But the numbers that still stick out to me are 8-0, 7-0 and 16-0. Those are three separate Spartan runs from the first half. Again, three separate.

That means there were three stretches in the first half alone where Michigan State mustered together 31 points while Iowa was unable to score, period. Spotting the No. 6 team in the country 31 points like that on its home floor is a recipe for disaster.

These types of runs heavily contributed to the downfall of the previous regime. Now by no means am I suggesting that McCaffery's on the hot seat. Not at all. Sure, his temper might flare like it did Tuesday, but that's become a characteristic his players have grown to appreciate because they see it at him sticking up for them.

But back on point here. Iowa was already coming off a 29-point butt-whooping from Ohio State at home last weekend. As great as Michigan State has been this season (this was their 15th straight victory after starting the year at 0-2), Izzo even said afterwards he thought his team played better than it had shown while the Hawkeyes played worse than they've shown.

What took place inside the Breslin Center on Tuesday was a superior team simply burying its competition. The Spartans deserve some credit here for playing as focused as they did.

But at the same time, to give up the kind of runs the Hawkeyes did in the first half Tuesday isn't a good sign. It's one thing to have scoring droughts, but it's another when you're not scoring while your opponent is scoring at will. That's what occurred Tuesday.

Runs are always going to take place in basketball, and they become noticeable in games like this one. Because what happened in this game had to be embarrassing to everyone within the Iowa program, and it's a feeling that's now going to linger three more days before another ranked opponent shows up on the docket.

Maybe it's a good thing for the Hawkeyes that Michigan State and Ohio State both only showed up once on this season's schedule. Because it's clear this team still has a ways to go.