

COMMENTARY: Making a fair assessment (premium)

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WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. – Three weeks ago, the Iowa Hawkeyes began Big Ten play with a daunting seven-game slate. Between where the program currently is in Year Two under head coach Fran McCaffery and the caliber of opponents, no one could be blamed for thinking the absolute worst, sitting in the conference cellar at 0-7.

That seven-game slate concluded Tuesday evening with Iowa losing a hard-fought battle to Purdue 75-68 inside Mackey Arena. But instead of sitting here winless in Big Ten play, the Hawkeyes find themselves in the middle of the pack at 3-4 and really could be sitting at this juncture with a winning record.

What makes the 3-4 even more incredible is that two of those victories came away from Carver-Hawkeye Arena, and two of the three came against teams that were ranked in the top 25 when Iowa won those particular games. That, more anything, should indicate how the Hawkeyes are heading in the right direction.

But with that being said, the identity of this team is really starting to take shape. Some parts of the identity are encouraging. Some are discouraging.

Three facets of Iowa's loss to Purdue on Tuesday that played huge roles were the Boilermakers coming away with 16 offensive rebounds, the Hawkeyes turning the ball over nine times in the second half, and Iowa only making 19-of-30 free-throw attempts.

Here's another discouraging sign from this loss: Two starters – sophomore and junior forwards Melsahn Basabe and Eric May each scored one point on Tuesday, and May fouled out of the game while Basabe had four fouls in just seven minutes of play. In other words, 40 percent of Iowa's starting lineup combined for two points and nine fouls in what ended up being a seven-point loss. Whatever issues both players have need to be addressed, and maybe this upcoming nine-day stretch between games will suit them well. Only time will tell.

Meanwhile, you could argue the four players who played well Tuesday have really become the four key cogs to this team's current success. It may not show in the box score, but senior guard Matt Gatens is playing the best basketball of his Hawkeye career right now. He had his struggles in this loss to Purdue, but he quietly put together a 12-point evening and also led the team with six rebounds. He has been consistent at both ends of the court.

So has freshman forward Aaron White, who has been the team's sixth man all season, and honestly, an argument could be made for him starting as he continues to average 20+ minutes during Big Ten play.

Then there's the efforts of sophomores Devyn Marble and Zach McCabe. Marble's play this season hasn't gone unnoticed as he has started every game for the past month-and-a-half now. McCabe, on the other hand, has accepted his role and has thrived in that role for the most part this season. When he brings energy from the get-go, he can set a tone scoring like he has the last two games, and he brings a toughness and attitude this team needs on the court in order to succeed on a regular basis.

Looking ahead to these final 11 games before the 2012 Big Ten Tournament in Indianapolis, it sets up nicely for an Iowa squad that has already matched last year's win total and sits in a position where it expects to win more regularly. But in

order for success to continue, a combination of two things needs to happen.

One is consistent play from the four guys that have provided it throughout the bulk of league play. The other is getting players such as Basabe, May or even senior guard Bryce Cartwright out of the funks they've been in most of the year. Some of them might not recover, but if even one of those guys could play their roles consistently from here on out, the Hawkeyes will be better as a result.

Iowa has a legitimate chance to make noise for a postseason tourney spot. Maybe it's in something like the NIT or CBI instead of the NCAA, but either of those tournaments would be progress over the last five years.

If this loss to Purdue provides the Hawkeyes any lessons going forward, one of them is that when the opportunity sits in front of you like it did Iowa on Tuesday, that opportunity needs to be seized. The Hawkeyes didn't seize it and that cost them this game.

The opportunity to grow is there, but there's more of a body of work now to put together a fair assessment of how good this team actually is and what it can do moving forward. What stays the same and what changes dictates the rest of Iowa's season, plain and simple.