

COMMENTARY: Missed opportunity results in bad loss (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – The Iowa Hawkeyes had a golden opportunity in front of them on Thursday and let it slip away in a 79-73 loss to Nebraska on Thursday at Carver-Hawkeye Arena. Instead of cementing a victory that would have put Iowa back at .500 in Big Ten play, the Hawkeyes walked off the court with a defeat that stings.

This loss was worse than when Iowa lost to Campbell, folks. Much worse, in fact. At least Campbell, in hindsight, has proven to be a pretty respectable non-conference opponent.

I know Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery wasn't going to take any credit away from the Cornhuskers and the effort they gave, especially in the second half. But when this team talks about "expecting to win," losing a game like this at home to a team that was 2-6 in the Big Ten ought to feel inexcusable.

For the second straight contest, the Hawkeyes had an 11-point lead in the first half. Just like last week in a 75-68 loss to Purdue, the opposing team opened the second half erasing a deficit of multiple possessions to tie the game up. This time around though, Iowa still held a 61-56 lead in the game's final minutes and let Nebraska outscore it 23-12 to close things out.

Consider this for a second: The Cornhuskers scored 48 points in the second half alone. They didn't even score 48 points total two weeks ago in a game they lost at Wisconsin. Shoddy

defensive play in the game's final minutes is what turned what felt like a game Iowa should have been in control of into what many will view as a head-scratching loss.

Some might use the excuse of the Hawkeyes having nine days between games being a reason why they didn't come away with a win. But the first-half play – well, at least the bulk of it – wasn't an issue. Yes, Nebraska was hot shooting the ball early on making seven of its first 10 field goal attempts, but again, Iowa was up 31-20 at one point in the half.

The Hawkeyes had no business losing this game on Thursday. With all due respect to the Cornhuskers, their win over Indiana last week in Lincoln told me more about the Hoosiers and how they might not be as good as their home wins over Kentucky and Ohio State may suggest.

But back on point here – Iowa was coming off three wins over a seven-game stretch that many, including myself, thought it'd be lucky to get one win out of, if that. To come out of that with a pair of victories over teams like Wisconsin and Michigan – both of whom will have a major say in how the Big Ten shakes out – and then lose a game like this at home to Nebraska is taking a gigantic step backwards. There's just no way around that.

If the Hawkeyes manage to miss out on any sort of postseason play, this loss ought to look more glaring any other defeat. Even the Campbell game. This is a game Iowa had to win, and it simply missed on this opportunity.