

COMMENTARY: Step backwards coming at costly time (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

EVANSTON, Ill. – To call it “a missed opportunity” would be an understatement.

The Iowa Hawkeyes came into their contest with Northwestern on Thursday with a chance to sit alone in sixth place, a position that has provided the last two runners-up in the Big Ten Tournament. Instead, the Wildcats walked off their bright purple Welsh-Ryan Arena floor with an 83-64 thrashing of Iowa, who currently is tied for ninth in the conference with a 5-7 Big Ten mark.

No, this wasn't a missed opportunity. That was losing to a putrid Nebraska squad two weeks ago at home. This was purely a step backwards, and it might prove to be a costly one.

After winning two straight at home last week over Minnesota and Penn State, it looked like maybe the Hawkeyes had righted the ship and would put themselves in prime position to possibly get in the conversation as a bubble team. If there ever was a bubble in the first place, it burst in emphatic fashion Thursday night. Barring an epic miracle in Indianapolis next month, “Iowa” and “NCAA Tournament” won't be in the same sentence, nor should they be.

Now, there's still an outside shot at some sort of postseason play, possibly the CBI (College Basketball Invitational). But even then, the Hawkeyes are going to need to win at least 3-4 more games here in order for that to even be legitimately

discussed. Even then, setbacks like what occurred Thursday can't continue to happen.

McCaffery always preaches how becoming consistent is the next step. As he has eloquently stated numerous times in recent weeks, Iowa has shown glimpses of being a formidable foe to any college basketball team this season. But then the Hawkeyes find themselves back in positions of disappointment, maybe even perhaps a little confusion.

In fairness, Northwestern came into this contest a seven-point favorite, and deservedly so. Like Iowa, the Wildcats also entered Thursday with a two-game winning streak and just came off their first win at Illinois since the days of Evan Eschmeyer.

But with that being said, Iowa is now 25 games into the season. This was the kind of game it needed to win to not only keep momentum going, but to also make itself a serious threat here over the coming weeks. The Hawkeyes aren't in, and never really were in, a position to win the Big Ten. However, there's a big difference between where they are and where they could be.

This team had a chance to separate itself from the others in that second or third tier (depending on how you distinguish the top four teams in the Big Ten). Again, it's worth repeating – the No. 6 seed in the Big Ten Tournament has reached the championship game each of the last two seasons. Heck, Iowa won the 2001 Big Ten Tournament as a No. 6 seed. At that point, anything's possible and whoever that team is has a shot to play its way into March Madness.

There's an enormous difference between drawing either Penn State or Nebraska first followed by either Michigan or Wisconsin (both of whom Iowa has beaten already this season), and drawing a first-round game against a team like Northwestern or Minnesota and then with a victory, having to

play a team like Ohio State or Michigan State (both of whom massacred Iowa this season) the following day. That's why the stakes were high Thursday night.

Northwestern has a shot to possibly reach the NCAA Tournament for the first time in school history. Iowa still has a ways to go.