

COMMENTARY: Leaving with more questions (premium)

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STATE COLLEGE, Pa. – Various factors that have led to Iowa losses under head coach Fran McCaffery appeared to all culminate at once Thursday in the Hawkeyes' 69-64 loss to Penn State at Bryce Jordan Center.

There were times where poor shooting surfaced. There were times when bad defense took place. There were times that Iowa would go to the free-throw line and see players who normally sink their free throws toss up bricks.

Turnovers at inopportune times. Not having enough depth. Players not playing to their potential. The list goes on.

There have been instances throughout the course of the season where one of these factors played a major role in Iowa not being able to secure a victory. On Thursday, it was pretty simple how Iowa lost.

The Hawkeyes shot 7-of-26 in the first half and allowed runs of 15-2 and 11-3 in the first half of a game they trailed 38-24 at halftime. In other words, all but 12 of Penn State's points came at junctures where the momentum was clearly in its favor.

Now Iowa did shoot better in the second half – 13-of-23 to be precise. Six of those field goals came from senior guard Matt Gatens, who finished with a game-high 21 points. But with 19 of those points coming in the second half, one has to wonder why it took so long for either Gatens to get going or for his teammates to recognize he was on Thursday night.

Then there's the matter of depth. With senior guard Bryce Cartwright sidelined with a high ankle sprain, that paved the way for freshman guard Josh Oglesby to make his first career start. But the Cedar Rapids native was only able to muster three points in 27 minutes of play and missed a critical free throw in the final minutes of the game. Meanwhile, sophomore forward Melsahn Basabe played 20 minutes off the bench and came away with seven points. However, Basabe also missed two critical free throws down the stretch.

Two questions emerge as a result. The first is what happens with the starting lineup going forward? McCaffery said after the game Cartwright would likely be doubtful for Iowa's game against No. 18 Indiana on Feb. 19. If that's the case, is it worth sticking with Oglesby at the 2 guard despite the fact he only shot 1-of-7 while playing 27 minutes, or does McCaffery decide to try and match up the Hoosiers' size by putting Basabe back in the starting lineup along with White and McCabe?

The second question is what does it take for this team to completely get better at free-throw shooting? Yes, the overall team percentage from last season to this season is better. But to have solid free-throw shooters such as Oglesby and Basabe missing them in the final minutes of what ended up being a two-possession game has to leave fans concerned. Iowa shot 18-of-27 from the charity stripe Thursday. Those nine free throws make a world of difference.

Finally, let's discuss late-game situations. Iowa is down three points and Penn State calls timeout with 25 seconds remaining and only 10 seconds showing on the shot clock. The Hawkeyes foul one of the worst free-throw shooters on the team, which makes sense. However, there was no reason that foul couldn't have come sooner than it eventually did.

The question here becomes whether or not McCaffery and his staff learn from this moving forward. One would assume the

answer being yes, but there's no way of knowing that until the next time Iowa's in this position again.

Can this team do the little things during the remainder of the season? This is perhaps the biggest question I find myself asking about the Hawkeyes at this point in time. With 26 games in the books, the answer to this question is probably "no." But there's still no way of knowing for sure whether Iowa can or can't right the ship the rest of the way.