

# COMMENTARY: Woes in Champaign continue (premium)

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*HawkeyeDrive.com*

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. – The Iowa Hawkeyes saw their best opportunity in years to win at Assembly Hall pass them by. Instead of securing a win over a reeling Illinois squad that would've put Iowa at 8-8 in Big Ten play with two games remaining, the Fighting Illini played their best game in nearly a month on Sunday, defeating the Hawkeyes, 65-54.

Had Iowa prevailed Sunday, demons would've been exercised. The Hawkeyes' last road victory over Illinois came back in the 1998-99 season, Tom Davis' last as Iowa's head coach. With this next season's lone meeting between these teams being back in Iowa City, this was Iowa's last chance until at least 2014 to leave Assembly Hall victorious.

Coming into this contest, Iowa looked like it'd have the upper hand, even though this game was in a house of horrors. The Hawkeyes had just come off two straight wins at home over top 25 teams in Indiana and Wisconsin. A win Sunday would've kept Iowa alone in seventh place in the league standings.

Meanwhile, Illinois had lost nine of its last 10 games (strangely enough, the lone win came over a Michigan State team that locked up the top seed in next week's Big Ten Tournament). Not only had the Fighting Illini been losing games, but over the past week, all signs had been pointing to Bruce Weber possibly being dismissed as head coach after the season concludes.

Basically, one team was in complete shambles, while the other had a few basketball experts thinking a five-game winning

streak to conclude Big Ten play might be enough to put it in discussion for the NCAA tournament.

Instead of being able to deliver a knockout blow to Illinois' season, Iowa players not named Matt Gatens – who reached the 20-point plateau for the fourth straight game – shot 3-of-20 in the first half. The Hawkeyes picked up one point – a second half free throw by sophomore forward Melsahn Basabe – from the bench over the course of the entire game.

While Iowa only scored one bench point, the Fighting Illini had 44 points from the bench, 39 of which came from two guys that had been starting the majority of the season for Illinois in guard Brandon Paul and center Meyers Leonard. Both played 36 minutes. Leonard proved to be the biggest difference-maker for the Fighting Illini finishing with 22 points and 14 rebounds. The seven-footer was also a perfect 8-of-8 from the foul line.

Basically, it came down to this on Sunday: Illinois scored when it needed to, Iowa didn't.

Something to keep in mind now is that there's a good chance these teams will meet again in Indianapolis next week. As of Sunday evening, they would meet in the 8-9 game of the Big Ten tournament, with the winner playing Michigan State. The chance at redemption could be there for the Hawkeyes.

But for now, the story is how Iowa had its chances and wasn't able to capitalize. The Hawkeyes came close to coming back in the second half, trimming Illinois' lead down to 38-34 before a momentum shift ultimately swayed in the Fighting Illini's favor.

They came close to pulling off a win that would've kept discussions going about possibly being a bubble team. Now those conversations are dead.

What isn't dead is the streak of woes that continue to happen at Assembly Hall.