

Illini too much for Hawkeyes

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. – An early rally sparked by two starters who came off the bench proved to be the difference Sunday, as the Iowa Hawkeyes found themselves on the losing end of a 65-54 contest to Illinois. It was the Fighting Illini's first win in almost a month, while the Hawkeyes saw their two-game winning streak snapped and an opportunity to reach .500 in Big Ten play evaporate into the Assembly Hall rafters.

Iowa now sits at 15-14 overall and 7-9 in the conference with two games remaining before the Big Ten Tournament.

The Hawkeyes jumped out to an early 5-0 lead and looked to be the more disciplined team at both ends of the floor early on. At the 15:42 mark of the first half, Illinois subbed in guard Brandon Paul and center Meyers Leonard. Despite being two of the Fighting Illini's best players, both found themselves coming off the bench after both performed poorly during "competitive drills" in the practices leading up to Sunday's contest.

Suddenly, what was a 5-0 Iowa advantage quickly became 13-5 in favor of Illinois.

Leonard emerged with a double-double of 22 points and 14 rebounds, and shot a perfect 8-of-8 from the free-throw line. Paul finished with 17 points, and the Fighting Illini bench outscored the Hawkeye bench by a 44-1 margin.

The performance by the 7-foot Leonard proved to be the biggest difference (literally) in the game for Illinois.

"We don't have a big team, and he took advantage of it," Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery said. "They went to him early. I

thought his biggest impact was on the glass.”

While the Fighting Illini continued to build their lead, the Hawkeyes found themselves struggling to shoot the ball, going just 8-of-27 from the floor in the first half and finishing the game 18-of-49 shooting. Iowa also committed 17 turnovers, which led to 20 Illinois points.

“The thing with this game was we just didn’t play well all-around,” freshman forward Aaron White said. “We played hard enough. We just didn’t play well.”

One player who was performing well in the first half for Iowa was guard Matt Gatens. The 6-5 senior had 15 of the Hawkeyes’ 23 points. He finished with 22 points for the game, marking the fourth straight contest Gatens scored at least 20 points.

Trailing 34-23 at halftime, Iowa found itself rallying at the start of the second half and trimming Illinois’ lead down to 38-34 despite the Fighting Illini keying in defensively on Gatens.

But following the 11-4 Hawkeye run, the momentum shifted completely in Illinois’ favor on a call that McCaffery could only describe afterwards as “big.”

On a play where Iowa was originally given possession after the ball went out of bounds, the call was reversed by official Ted Valentine with Illinois retaining possession. The Fighting Illini then scored five straight points to go up 43-34. From that point forward, Illinois remained in control.

Iowa would get it down to 55-48 in the final minutes, but a 3 from Paul proved to be the finishing touch for Illinois.

“It was good to see us respond, but it just wasn’t enough at the end,” Gatens said.

Iowa plays its final road game of the regular season on Feb. 29 when it faces Nebraska. Tip-off from the Devaney Center in

Lincoln, Neb., is set for 8 p.m. Central with the game airing nationally on ESPNU. The Cornhuskers won the first meeting between the two teams in Iowa City 79-73 back on Jan. 26.