

COMMENTARY: Costly loss in numerous ways (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – In more ways than one, Saturday's 70-66 loss to Northwestern proved costly for the Iowa Hawkeyes.

Iowa entered its regular season finale with an opportunity to secure its first winning season in five years. A win would've put the Hawkeyes at 17-14, which is exactly what their record was in Steve Alford's final season as head coach. A victory also would've given Iowa a 9-9 Big Ten record, which already included four wins over top 25 teams.

Considering where this program has been in recent years, a .500 conference mark in Fran McCaffery's second season at the coaching helm would've been an enormous accomplishment. Many expected the Hawkeyes to be build off their 11-20 record last year, but to win 16 games and be on the cusp of reaching .500 in what is considered the toughest conference in college basketball isn't something many outside the program envisioned for this team.

Saturday was Senior Day at Carver-Hawkeye Arena. This was an opportunity for Iowa to send guard Matt Gatens and company out on a fitting note, as the Hawkeyes had a four-game winning streak going on their home floor.

At one point in the first half of Saturday's game, Iowa had a 28-13 lead on Northwestern, a team fighting for its first ever trip to the NCAA tournament. But like the first time these teams met, the Wildcats benefited from their 1-3-1 zone, forcing 18 Hawkeye turnovers. Northwestern also managed to secure 14 offensive rebounds and scored 11 second-chance

points. The two things Iowa couldn't allow to happen Saturday happened.

Now the Hawkeyes have a tough road ahead. For one, postseason play isn't as much of a foregone conclusion as it may have been a day ago. If Iowa loses in the first round of the Big Ten Tournament, does the CBI want a 16-16 team?

Speaking of the Big Ten Tournament, the Hawkeyes could've secured the No. 7 seed, which would've given them a first round match-up with a Minnesota squad they've beaten twice already this season. A third victory over the Golden Gophers would've set up a quarterfinal contest that would've likely been against Michigan, a team Iowa beat by 16 points at home back in January.

Instead, the Hawkeyes are the No. 8 seed. They're playing in the first game of the first round on March 8 against Illinois, a team that beat Iowa 65-54 last weekend in Champaign and in the process, exposed some severe mismatches. If the Hawkeyes are fortunate enough to deal payback to the Fighting Illini, they have to take the court 24 hours later against a Michigan State squad that pulverized Iowa by 34 points last January and could be the Big Ten's outright regular season champion, playing for a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament.

To be quite honest, Saturday's game played a similar script to some of the more painful losses the Hawkeyes had in Big Ten play this season. Iowa had the lead. It had the momentum. All of that went by the waist side as Northwestern used a 19-2 run in the final five minutes of the first half to go from trailing double digits to holding a seven-point lead at halftime. The Hawkeyes stayed in position to win, but couldn't make the plays when they needed them. The same things that plagued Iowa in some of those losses – things like turnovers and offensive rebounds – were the culprits again Saturday.

The season might not be over, but short-term success just

became more difficult for Iowa to obtain.