

COMMENTARY: Defense the name of the game (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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INDIANAPOLIS, Ind. – The defensive effort of the Iowa Hawkeyes is why their season didn't die Thursday afternoon at Bankers Life Fieldhouse.

Iowa's defensive prowess, particularly in the second half, was instrumental in the Hawkeyes overcoming a 44-37 deficit to defeat Illinois in the first round of the 2012 Big Ten Tournament. This performance came against a team that had beaten Iowa by 11 points just 11 days earlier in Champaign.

Head coach Fran McCaffery said earlier in the week how he believed his team was playing its best basketball right now. The Hawkeyes had improved defensively over the past few weeks, but Thursday's win over the Fighting Illini seemed to be more of a vindication than anything else.

Four defensive factors played into how the Hawkeyes won this contest. For starters, let's look at how they handled Illinois center Meyers Leonard. In the first meeting back on Feb. 26, the 7-1 center finished with 22 points and 14 rebounds. He also shot 8-of-8 from the free-throw line.

On Thursday, it looked as though Leonard might have his way again with Iowa. Now he did finish with 18 points, but he only had six rebounds. He also only had one block. Conversely, the Hawkeyes attacked him and got in his head during that second half.

Secondly, let's look at two other key cogs for Illinois – guards Brandon Paul and D.J. Richardson. Paul had 17 points in

the previous meeting and was held to four points on 2-of-11 shooting Thursday. He also committed seven turnovers this time around. Richardson made three 3-pointers for the Fighting Illini in the first half, but was 0-of-4 from beyond the arc in the second half. Collectively, Illinois shot 7-of-26 from 3-point range.

Speaking of shooting, the next point of emphasis is something that startles me. I mentioned how Leonard was 8-of-8 from the charity stripe last time around. The Fighting Illini didn't go to the free-throw line once on Thursday. Not one single attempt. It's one thing to maybe see something like this occur in a high-school or AAU game. But a Big Ten tournament game decided by one possession? That's just unheard of.

Then there's rebounding. Iowa not only won the boards battle Thursday 39-35, but 16 of those rebounds came at the offensive end and all but two of those were in the second half. Coaches and players always talk about rebounding being all about heart and effort. What this suggests to me is that the Hawkeyes wanted this game more than the Fighting Illini did.

Iowa looked like a team that wanted to be at this tournament, that wanted to play Michigan State on Friday. Even though Illinois led most of the game, the emotions displayed by both teams down the stretch had a stark contrast. Even though the Hawkeyes went the last 9 minutes plus without making a shot, they looked more determined and it showed in the final moments. Iowa made the plays when it needed them and Illinois didn't.

Now facing Michigan State is going to be a much taller task for the Hawkeyes, but this performance against Illinois ought to be encouraging going into this game. As long as Iowa continues to show progress at the defensive end, it'll be able to hang with the Spartans.

And who knows? Maybe an upset does unfold.