

Hawkeyes oust Illini, advance to face Spartans

By Brendan Stiles

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INDIANAPOLIS, Ind. – For the first time since 2006, the Iowa Hawkeyes will be playing a second game in the Big Ten Tournament.

With to a second-half surge led by senior guard Matt Gatens and freshman forward Aaron White, Iowa dealt payback to Illinois on Thursday at Bankers Life Fieldhouse, defeating the Fighting Illini 64-61 to set up a quarterfinal match-up with top-seeded Michigan State on Friday. It was the Hawkeyes' first tournament win since defeating Ohio State in the championship game six years ago and Iowa improved to 17-15 overall with the win.

"It was gratifying to finally get one," Gatens said following his 20-point showing Thursday. "Especially the way we got it just battling the whole game, the whole 40 minutes.

"It's just great to see all the smiles and just experience a win here."

In the early minutes of the second half, Illinois had extended its 31-27 halftime lead to 40-33, prompting head coach Fran McCaffery to call a timeout with 16:47 remaining. The Fighting Illini were ahead 44-37 when Gatens began the Iowa rally with a 3-pointer and lay-in off a steal trimming the Hawkeye deficit to 44-42 when Illinois burned a timeout.

Once Iowa was able to tie the game, White gave the Hawkeyes a 48-46 lead off a putback following a missed lay-up. Iowa finished off a 20-6 run to move ahead 57-50.

"We were limiting them to one shot and the offense was just coming easy because we were getting them in transition," sophomore guard Devyn Marble said. "They were sending everybody at the glass. We just got into our flow and it became a lot easier."

The biggest play of the game came in the final minute with the Hawkeyes up 60-56. Marble was sent to the line for a 1-and-1, and missed the front end. However, White came down with the offensive board and proceeded to get the ball to Gatens, who then was fouled and nailed a pair of free throws to give Iowa a 62-56 edge. White finished with a team-high nine rebounds to go along with 13 points.

"No offensive rebounds in the first half, coaches kept harping on it. That's something that I kind of pride myself in," White said. "That's something I do well, so I just tried to sneak in there, tap it out to myself and get it to our best free-throw shooter."

"It was something that needed to be done."

Illinois would get it down to 62-61 with 16.1 seconds remaining following a 3-pointer from Joseph Bertrand. Coming out of the timeout, senior guard Bryce Cartwright was able to dish the ball to Gatens, who broke away from a Fighting Illini trap and drew a foul with 10 seconds showing.

"They tried a trap and I just split it," Gatens said. "At that point, I wanted to get up the court and waste as much clock as I could. Those last few minutes seemed to take forever and you just want them to run out. But they came from behind and got me and it was a good find by Bryce."

After Gatens made two free throws, Illinois had a chance to tie it with a 3-pointer, but D.J. Richardson's shot came up short and the Hawkeyes preserved the victory. The Fighting Illini shot 13-of-34 in the second half after going 14-of-28 in the first half, and didn't attempt a single free throw the

entire game.

"We played aggressive, but we were playing smart," sophomore forward Zach McCabe said. "That just shows that we didn't let them get easy baskets or just let them force shots up like that. We got rebounds at the end of the game and that's what we needed."

Iowa will now play in the quarterfinals on Friday against co-Big Ten regular season champion Michigan State, who finished in a 3-way tie for the league crown but drew the tourney's No. 1 seed. Tip-off from Bankers Life Fieldhouse is set for 11 a.m. Central, with the game airing nationally on ESPN.

The Spartans won the lone regular season meeting between the two teams in East Lansing on Jan. 10, 95-61. This will also be the second straight season Iowa and Michigan State will meet in the Big Ten Tournament, as the Spartans eliminated the Hawkeyes in the first round last year.

"They shot the lights out, but the other thing they did was they beat us up," McCaffery said in reference to the game played two months ago. "They really took us out of what we wanted to do."

"It was an incredibly concentrated effort at both ends of the floor. That's why it was a 30-point game, so obviously we're going to have to do a much better job."