

# COMMENTARY: Evidence of progress on full display (premium)

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – I don't want to sound too hyperbolic when saying this, but the scene inside Carver-Hawkeye Arena on Tuesday was truly surreal.

The Iowa Hawkeyes were in a postseason game for the first time since 2006, a memory that stings anyone associated with the Black and Gold as Iowa was shockingly sent packing from the NCAA tournament that year by Northwestern State. No one then could have envisioned the turbulence that would surround this program.

Yet two years after hitting what many regarded to be rock bottom, here were the Hawkeyes on Tuesday not only playing in the NIT, but winning their first round game over Dayton, 84-75. Considering that the Flyers came into Carver-Hawkeye Arena with 20 wins and were actually a higher seed – Dayton was the site of the NCAA tournament's "First Four" games Tuesday and Wednesday – calling this victory a step in the right direction for Iowa would be an understatement.

The excitement buzzing around Carver-Hawkeye Arena for an NIT game was rare on numerous fronts. For one, it's not often any school, let alone one such as Iowa, would seem thrilled about playing in the NIT.

There have been NIT games at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in years and decades past where there was absolutely no buzz at all. I'm guessing with time, it will be more like this again for any



future NIT appearances.

The other bit of significance is that while the NIT attempted to make things look as much like a tournament game as possible – Iowa wearing road uniforms, being introduced first, PA guy announcing only announcing scores of other NIT games, locker room access for the press after the game, etc. – make no mistake. This was a home game.

It didn't matter what uniform the Hawkeyes were wearing or how unenthusiastic the PA guy had to sound after each Iowa bucket. The Hawkeyes knew this was a rare opportunity and wanted to make the most of it by putting on a show for their fans. Consider that successful.

Yes, there was point in this game where Dayton managed to come back and tie it. But for the most part, Iowa was in command. And what made this even more impressive is that three of the biggest performances on this evening came from guys that are all going to be back next season, guys that are the poster-childs for the notion many had of "Iowa being in the NIT is going to help in the long run."

Freshman forward Aaron White and sophomore forward Zach McCabe both went off for career-highs in points (McCabe tied his career-high). White had 25 points, McCabe had 20. Even sophomore forward Melsahn Basabe got in on the fun scoring 15 points in 14 minutes of action. Players who are young now but will be counted on for leadership next year and beyond stepped up in big ways for this team Tuesday night.

And of course, there's Matt Gatens. He didn't have the shooting performance he probably envisioned himself having in what turned out to be his last game on his home floor. But he got to leave on a high note, draining a 3-pointer on a play Iowa normally designs for him and he got the crowd pumped in the final minute. This mattered to him, and it showed. It showed enough that it also mattered to all those on hand.



Whether the Hawkeyes' season ends in Eugene, Seattle, Evanston or New York City remains to be seen. But what's clear is that not only is the future of Iowa basketball bright, but the excitement level for it only continues to soar.

This night won't be forgotten by anyone who witnessed this NIT game. It was that special.