

COMMENTARY: Playing with intensity (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – On paper, it appears as though the Iowa Hawkeyes were able to cruise to another win Tuesday night over an inferior opponent, downing South Dakota 87-63 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena. The only problem though is that games aren't won on paper.

Yes, the Hawkeyes were the better team and played like the better team. For the most part, Tuesday evening had the feel of a game where Iowa was simply going to impose its will.

But with all that being said, what the Hawkeyes displayed against South Dakota isn't going to cut it against Iowa State on Friday or at any point once they enter Big Ten play.

Look, there's a lot to be encouraged by when it comes to this Iowa squad. It does have more depth. It is playing better defense this season. To this point, it has won the games it's supposed to win. On Tuesday, the Hawkeyes scored 54 points in the paint.

Let me repeat: 54 points in the paints. That's good. Really good, in fact.

But there's also some bad. For instance, 2-of-16 from 3-point range. Not going to cut it against the big boys. Picking up dumb fouls. That can't happen. Allowing teams to hit 3s because, as head coach Fran McCaffery put it, the press is bad. Again, can't happen.

Anyone who attended this game or saw a stream of it online (since it wasn't televised) knows that the coaching staff

wasn't pleased. There were at least three, if not four, instances where the well-documented "Wrath of Fran" was on full display. When the game was tied 24-24 at the first half's under-8 timeout, McCaffery absolutely lit into the entire team.

It was all warranted though. You know why? Because McCaffery sees the obvious. He realizes that if Iowa is going to have any serious beef whatsoever come March of being a team that belongs in the NCAA tournament, it has to beat Iowa State at home Friday night.

This upcoming game against the Cyclones shouldn't define this season, not when there's still a full slate of Big Ten games for Iowa to play. But what it will be is a true barometer of how far this team is heading. The two games Iowa has lost have come to teams that have proven to be better than anticipated. Wichita State is now 24th in the AP poll and Virginia Tech is barely outside the top 25.

But here comes a game at home against an in-state rival that has had Iowa's number the last three years. In terms of talent, maybe the Hawkeyes have an upper hand at a couple positions. But considering how Iowa State made the NCAA tournament last year and is currently a team leading the nation in rebounding, Iowa will have its hands full.

There's not much to take away from a game like Tuesday's in the sense that an A+ effort wasn't probably needed for the Hawkeyes to beat a team like South Dakota. But as players were saying in their postgame interviews, they have to play with better intensity and more of it than what was shown against the Coyotes.

That's what separates teams from reaching the Field of 68 and maybe being back in the NIT. If Iowa's serious about moving forward in the right direction, its performance Friday night against Iowa State has to look substantially better, otherwise

it will be four straight losses to the Cyclones and no signature non-conference wins before Big Ten play starts New Year's Eve.

On paper, the Hawkeyes are probably an underdog to Iowa State. But again, games aren't played on paper.