

# COMMENTARY: Now the real test begins (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

*HawkeyeDrive.com*

IOWA CITY, Iowa – The Iowa Hawkeyes gave their fans a treat at Carver-Hawkeye Arena Saturday afternoon, laying a 80-50 smackdown on Coppin State. This victory puts Iowa now at 11-2.

Now, the real test for this team is about to start. Nine days from now, the Hawkeyes will open Big Ten play at home against No. 6 Indiana, a team that entered the season as the nation's top-ranked team and remained that way until losing to Butler last week. Iowa then has to follow that with a trip to Ann Arbor to play Michigan, who is currently 12-0 and ranked second nationally.

The Hawkeyes, to this point, have done what they've had to do to warrant discussion as a possible NCAA tournament team. Neither of their two losses came at home and both defeats are respectable as opposed to losing a game like last season to Campbell. Iowa also has victories over both Iowa State and Northern Iowa, with the latter occurring on a neutral floor.

Right now, Iowa's a middle-of-the-pack team in the Big Ten, which is far from a bad thing considering half of the conference is currently ranked in the top 20. While I can't see this team actually winning the conference, it can definitely compete with anyone.

Which leads me back to this Indiana game on New Year's Eve. On paper, the Hoosiers will be and should be favored. But what's going to be interesting to watch is the man-to-man match-ups this game will provide.

Anthony Clemmons vs. Yogi Ferrell. Mike Gesell vs. Jordan Hulls. Devyn Marble vs. Victor Oladipo. Aaron White vs. Christian Watford. Adam Woodbury vs. Cody Zeller. Heck, if Melsahn Basabe's ankle injury suffered Saturday isn't serious enough to prevent him from playing nine days from now, he'll probably be seeing minutes whenever Indiana has Will Sheehey on the floor. The Hoosiers might have edges across the board, but I feel like Iowa has the right personnel in place to match Indiana's starting lineup with.

Yes, the Hawkeyes haven't played anyone of the same caliber as the Hoosiers. But Indiana hasn't played a true road game yet, either. So the incentive is going to be there for both teams.

Indiana might be the best team Iowa plays all season. But the 18 games the Hawkeyes play are going to be like rounds of boxing. The one thing Iowa can't afford to allow itself to get totally knocked out when the punches are being swung at them.

As for the big picture, the Hawkeyes are in good position because a 9-9 record in what many believe to be the toughest conference in the country gets them to 20 wins entering the Big Ten Tournament in Chicago next March. Obviously, who they beat and when they beat those other teams will matter. But I'm telling you right now, Iowa's more than capable right now of going .500 or better in the Big Ten and if it does reach that 20-win plateau, Fran McCaffery has a valid argument in place for the NCAA's selection committee.

I understand he and his team are going to take this day-by-day, which is what they should do. I also get that performances like the one Iowa had against Coppin State on Saturday probably won't cut it against an Indiana or Michigan.

But with that said, I get the excitement fans have for this program right now. Iowa's entering Big Ten play with the exact same number of wins McCaffery had his entire first season coaching the Hawkeyes and with one victory than Todd Lickliter

had in his final season at Iowa just three years ago. This is also a program that hasn't danced since 2006 when it exited the first round in a shocking fashion to Northwestern State.

It's now to the point that a berth in the NCAA tournament is realistic for this team. It's now to the point where fans should feel optimistic about the Hawkeyes' chances of achieving this. Now it's up to Iowa and how it handles these next two-and-a-half months.

The real test has now begun.