

COMMENTARY: Still a long journey (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – After months of build-up surrounding the landscape of Big Ten basketball, New Year's Eve brought the day many had looked forward to with conference play finally getting underway.

In the case of the Iowa Hawkeyes, Monday afternoon provided an enormous opportunity to bolster their résumé against a top-5 opponent in fifth-ranked Indiana. Iowa had its chances, but ultimately fell short in a 69-65 loss to the Hoosiers that sets them at 11-3 overall and 0-1 in the conference.

But let's look at this big picture for the Hawkeyes. While the result of Monday's matinee wasn't what the players, coaches and fan base all desired, no one on the outside is going to feel sorry for them here. It's the Big Ten. Indiana might end up being the best team Iowa plays all season long, but this is far from the only shot it'll have to become a name getting discussed heavily in the coming weeks and months for the NCAA tournament.

It's kind of fitting that the Big Ten Network has a weekly series profiling Big Ten hoops called "The Journey," because that's exactly what this is for Iowa, Indiana and the other 10 teams the Hawkeyes are going to exchange blows with over the next 11 weeks.

I know that Fran McCaffery and everyone inside the Iowa basketball program understand. This is aimed at the fans who live and breathe Iowa basketball. This game isn't making or breaking whether the Hawkeyes dance next March. It just isn't.

None of the players or coaches are looking at this as a moral victory, and they shouldn't. No one should. Again, Iowa had plenty of chances and to its credit, performed well enough defensively to not let a team like the Hoosiers run them out of the gym. That's something that would've happened during each of the last two seasons.

The biggest reason Iowa didn't win was because shots just weren't falling for it. Yes, the Hawkeyes started the second half shooting 9-of-10 to get back in the game, but they were 8-of-34 in the first half. Iowa got good looks at the hoop. Shots just didn't fall. As I wrote a few weeks back after a game the Hawkeyes won, this will likely be the team's ultimate downfall – shots not falling against a good team like Indiana.

This isn't a call for anyone to lower expectations. To shoot that miserably and still only lose by four points to a top-5 opponent is, to some degree, an encouragement. It gives the sense that Iowa can beat anyone on any given day. Some people might need to temper expectations after Monday's game, but again, this isn't what will define the Hawkeyes' 2012-13 season.

Again, this is a journey and it's a long one at that. It's not getting any easier for this team, either. Six days from now, Iowa has to play at the Crisler Center against a Michigan squad that's ranked second and is one of only four undefeated teams nationally entering the new year. As a matter of fact, there are four other teams on the Hawkeyes' schedule still that are all ranked at this time and three of them are ranked between 8th-11th nationally.

To the fans of this program who reads this, don't let this one game deter your hopes or expectations. If anything, take it as a realization that what was on display Monday is what is going to be needed regularly and then some in order to take the steps that are now expected.

Because right now, it's still a long journey.