

COMMENTARY: Leadership needed (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – When I watch this Iowa men's basketball team right now, I see a team that has the necessary mixture needed to become a good team. What I don't see however is that one guy that can almost always be depended on in any given situation.

The Hawkeyes find themselves sitting at 0-3 in the Big Ten after a 62-59 loss to No. 22 Michigan State. The 0-3 start isn't completely unexpected since Iowa has played three of the six Big Ten teams currently ranked in the top 25.

But what has been unexpected is that for the second straight time, Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery questioned his team's toughness. When the Hawkeyes lost to No. 2 Michigan last weekend, it was their toughness at the defensive end of the floor that left him disappointed. Thursday night, it was issues at the offensive end that left McCaffery disgusted.

Yes, Iowa was missing Devyn Marble after the junior guard sprained his ankle in practice earlier in the week. But that's not the issue offensively. After all, Marble had a 1-of-14 shooting performance against Indiana just last week.

Ask the players and they'll tell you the unquestioned leader on this team is senior forward Eric May, which makes sense since he's the team captain. May does bring intangibles necessary in a leader and to his credit, McCaffery has considered him a consistent piece to Iowa's puzzle this season. His first start of the season though came Thursday night in Marble's place.

Then there are other upperclassmen like juniors Zach McCabe and Melsahn Basabe, both of whom stepped their games up enormously with Marble's absence from the lineup. Both have prior starting experience to their names, but both have assembled roles on this team that don't look to change anytime soon – Basabe being the sixth man providing an energy boost, McCabe being the glue guy that isn't afraid to take a charge or hustle for a basketball.

This team might be better than either Iowa squad coached by McCaffery the previous two years. But unlike those teams, this version of the Hawkeyes doesn't have that rock that someone like Matt Gatens or Jarryd Cole was on a nightly basis. That's not to say none of these guys will develop that trait, but they're not there yet.

McCaffery said it afterwards – he doesn't care what grade anyone is because he's expecting his guys to play once they're in the program. That tells me he needs someone to take control of this team like a Gatens did or like a Cole did when the going got tough.

Again, here's Iowa sitting at 0-3 in the Big Ten. On paper, it should be in decent enough position to get that first conference win this weekend against a short-handed Northwestern. But it's a road game and the Wildcats have had the Hawkeyes' number since McCaffery arrived in Iowa City. What happens if this team falls to 0-4, or 0-5, or 0-6, or just simply reaches a point where this season falls apart.

Who's going to be that player that puts Iowa on his back and stops the bleeding? That's the question I think needs to be answered right now. There's potential for any one of these guys to do it. But someone has to if the Hawkeyes want to have any shot at any sort of postseason.