

COMMENTARY: Bubble not burst, yet (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. – A theme has slowly begun to define the Iowa Hawkeyes' Big Ten season: So close, yet still so far.

Sunday's matinee at Mackey Arena between Iowa and Purdue lived up to its billing. Two fairly even teams traded blows and five extra minutes were needed to decide the final outcome. But unfortunately for the Hawkeyes, it was the Boilermakers standing tall in the end with a 65-62 overtime victory.

At the moment, this loss looks costly for Iowa. The Hawkeyes could've been in a three-way tie for sixth place in the conference had they walked out with a win. Instead, Iowa sits at 2-5 in the Big Ten – tied for ninth place with Illinois – and sees itself with a 13-7 overall record after losing its second straight road game.

The phrase "must-win" is one that tends to be overused a lot in sports, especially college sports. Obviously, this was a game both teams were trying to win and Purdue did. But this wasn't a contest where the Hawkeyes' effort should be questioned.

Consider the following: Purdue jumped out to a 10-2 lead right away and Iowa couldn't hit water if it shot from a boat in the first half. The Hawkeyes were an abysmal 4-of-26 from the floor in that first stanza, yet only trailed the Boilermakers 19-16 at halftime. A single possession.

In the second half, Iowa found itself trailing 45-34. It looked as though Purdue had fully regained its swagger and

wasn't going to lose that on its home floor. Just three weeks ago, the Hawkeyes folded against Michigan once the Wolverines began imposing their will.

Yet five days ago against Ohio State, Iowa nearly overcame a 24-point second-half deficit and on Sunday, it put together a 19-5 run and held a 53-50 lead on the Boilermakers with 2:14 showing.

The Hawkeyes held that lead, just like they held a three-point lead late against Michigan State earlier this month. But once again, that wouldn't be enough.

Purdue would tie the game with 33.3 seconds left and a missed shot by junior guard Devyn Marble sent the game to overtime. From there, things like missed free throws down the stretch and poor shot selection doomed Iowa once again.

This team being 2-5 after seven Big Ten games isn't a total shock. But the depth of this conference gives the impression that while Iowa has plenty of winnable games on paper remaining, maybe this hole is too deep.

Iowa has four Big Ten losses by single digits. Add those deficits together, and it's four losses by a combined total of 19 points. For those that want to talk about this team's potential for a possible NCAA tournament bid in March, the bubble hasn't burst – at least not yet anyway.

But with that being said, it's hard to picture Iowa right now making the field of 68 without winning this game Sunday afternoon. Again, it's not impossible. But the tourney résumé is going to need wins if any discussion of the Hawkeyes is going to be taken seriously.

And should Iowa now find itself in the NIT for the second straight year, this might be the game everyone looks back to and says was a difference-maker.