

COMMENTARY: Season of heartbreak continues for Hawkeyes (premium)

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MADISON, Wis. — The number 4 is one that might start haunting Fran McCaffery and the Iowa Hawkeyes after Wednesday's contest at the Kohl Center to Wisconsin.

For starters, the difference in this game — much like the last time these teams met on Jan. 19 — turned out to be four points. Except this time around, it was the Badgers emerging with a 74-70 win over Iowa.

This loss for the Hawkeyes now has them at 3-7 in the Big Ten, four games under .500. Not only that, but it was the fourth time during league play where Iowa saw a game it led in the final minutes of regulation completely disappear and become defeat.

After watching this team lose three days earlier in a similar fashion to Minnesota, my first thought was, "This is what Iowa is this season." But now, I can't help but wonder how much of this is really luck (or in the Hawkeyes' case, no luck).

It's one thing to lose games like Iowa has and make no mistake — the Hawkeyes have had plenty of mental lapses down the stretch in all four of the Big Ten games they've lost by a combined 13 points that could've easily been four victories.

But Wednesday's game felt like watching lightning strike in the same spot twice. The 3-pointer Wisconsin made near the end of regulation to tie the game hit the front of the rim and the backboard before going through the hoop. Then the following

possession – the last one of regulation – sophomore guard Josh Oglesby gets a good look at a game-winning 3-pointer that was about three-quarters of the way through the basket before rattling back out. The odds of those shots happening in that sequence back-to-back at the end of a game are so rare.

What seems amazing is that this team has, at least to this point, managed to keep everything afloat. The players have continued to show fight, even when they dig themselves into a deep hole. Now the question's whether this is something they can continue doing.

Players like Mike Gesell and Eric May said afterwards Wednesday evening how they believe they're getting better as a team from having to deal with all these close defeats they've endured. Yet that moment hasn't arrived where everything clicks and there isn't one small facet that swings the pendulum away from Iowa and toward its opponent.

It's amazing to think how close to being a Big Ten contender the Hawkeyes are right now, and they've proven they can be a cusp. But patience is wearing thin among Iowa's fan base and after an ending like the one endured by the Hawkeyes on Wednesday, it's easy to understand why.

Iowa might be on par with what people were thinking it would be record-wise. But to have so many heartbreaking defeats in one season – it's not a matter of when things turn around, but how the team itself can handle the heartbreak it has endured night after night in this conference.

A season that began with promise is now setting up to finish with a scenario that barring a miracle taking place in Chicago next month has the Hawkeyes back in the NIT and spending an entire offseason wondering "What could have been?" How some of these players handle their situation is one thing. But now whether Iowa will still have everyone on board remains to be seen.