

COMMENTARY: Hawkeyes learn to close out (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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STATE COLLEGE, Pa. – A monumental step was taken by the Iowa Hawkeyes on Thursday. Not because they managed to eek out a 74-72 road win over Penn State at the Bryce Jordan Center, but because of how they did so.

Iowa is now two-thirds of the way through its grueling 18-game Big Ten slate and sits at 5-7. The reason this record isn't better is because time and time again, the Hawkeyes found themselves squandering leads inside of the last two minutes. Four such losses have haunted and will continue to haunt this team, including the prior three road contests it played prior to visiting Penn State.

Yes, the Nittany Lions came in winless at 0-11 and remain winless at 0-12. But a win is a win, right? Sure, Iowa could of and probably should have buried this team with the opportunities it had to do so. But in all honesty, the way this played out might actually be better for the Hawkeyes in the long run.

Now they're seeing they can close somebody out and winning on the road (even against a team like Penn State) is never a sure thing this season in the Big Ten. Now they're making those plays down the stretch that they didn't make against Michigan State, Purdue, Minnesota or Wisconsin.

Simply put, this team still hasn't peaked and even if the end result is another NIT berth instead of a trip to the NCAA Tournament, it's evident this team is capable of a big run now.

A lot can be said of the rotations used by head coach Fran McCaffery on Thursday. One such rotation that nearly damaged his team's chances of winning came in the first half when Penn State put on a 16-0 run and scored half of those points with all five starters getting breathers.

But to McCaffery's credit, he found a rotation that worked for the game's final 6:29. Not only that, but this team played smart basketball at both ends of the floor in those final two minutes, even when another late-game collapse appeared inevitable.

On the defensive end, it was senior forward Eric May in a one-possession game forcing a tie-up when Iowa had the possession arrow. It was also junior forward Melsahn Basabe making a big-time block and junior guard Devyn Marble wisely committing a non-shooting foul with 1.5 seconds remaining and the Hawkeyes ahead by three.

Then at the offensive end of the floor, it was free-throw shooting. Yes, not every free throw was made, but Iowa made the free throws it needed to in order to stay ahead. Marble even missed one intentionally with one second on the clock and Penn State not having any timeouts at its disposal.

Just when the script looked like it'd have the same feel to it yet again, the Hawkeyes showed what they've learned through all the losing. Again, this can be taken for what it's worth since the Nittany Lions are the conference's worst team. But what I saw was a team that finally managed to take a maturation step that was needed if it had any serious thoughts about remaining capable of reaching the NCAA tournament.

Winning breeds confidence and while Iowa won't win every game left on its schedule, I'm pretty sure this team's confidence is only to grow here between now and when it heads to Chicago next month for the Big Ten Tournament.