

COMMENTARY: The bad loss surfaces (premium)

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LINCOLN, Neb. – Up until Saturday, the Iowa Hawkeyes had a somewhat decent NCAA tourney résumé. The signature wins might not have been there, but Iowa had also avoided severely bad losses, thus keeping it in the conversation.

Not anymore. Whatever hopes of dancing in March existed before the Hawkeyes entered the Devaney Center on Saturday are no longer there.

Iowa suffered that first real crippling loss at the hands of the Nebraska Cornhuskers. A game the Hawkeyes once led by as many as 19 points late in the first half turned into a 64-60 loss. Because Iowa was unable to avoid this land mine, the Hawkeyes are now eyeing a second straight trip to the NIT barring a miraculous week in Chicago next month.

This was the kind of defeat the Hawkeyes had to avoid. With all the close losses suffered earlier in Big Ten play, the margin for error was razor thin and now it's gone.

A fair argument could be made that this is as demoralizing a loss as Iowa has had since Fran McCaffery first took over as head coach in 2010. Yes, the Hawkeyes' loss to Campbell could be viewed as embarrassing, but that came at a time when the program as a whole was still working its way back towards respectability.

The fact of the matter was Iowa was being discussed nationally all week, especially after just coming off a 21-point shellacking of a Minnesota squad that despite its recent tail

spin is still going to make the NCAA tournament. The Hawkeyes were being looked at as a team that had a favorable schedule remaining, could make a big run, and make the Selection Committee give them serious consideration.

As deflating as some of Iowa's losses have been this season, none have been more so than this one. It was obvious. For as much as the team should be commended for the business-like approach it has managed to carry through adversity this season, this one had more of a sting than usual.

They knew what was at stake and for 20 minutes, looked every bit the part of a team that could play its way into the NCAA tournament. Then it all fell apart. Not only that, but the fashion Iowa lost in was so strikingly similar to losses past that it makes one wonder how much this team has truly learned.

For the Hawkeyes, there aren't any positives to take away from a game like this and there's no reason to sugar-coat it either. To only score 19 points in one half of basketball against a team it's supposed to be flat out better than shouldn't fly.

This was a team that looked like it was ready to finally take that next step. Instead, it's back at the bottom and has even more of a treacherous climb ahead.

Even if the Hawkeyes win three of their last four, they might still be stuck playing in that same 8-9 game in the Big Ten tournament they were in last year. That means playing the 1 seed in the quarterfinals if they were to win (which will likely be the same Indiana squad that's currently ranked No. 1 nationally and plays Iowa at home next weekend).

When it's all said and done, the Hawkeyes will still have a postseason and still have a shot at playing on a big stage (Madison Square Garden in New York City). But they'll be doing this knowing full well that a better opportunity got away from them because they played their worst half of basketball and

did so at the worst possible time.