

2/25/2013: Iowa men's basketball notebook



Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game against Purdue during his press conference held Monday, Feb. 25, 2013, at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in Iowa City.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – Before this past weekend, Iowa had suffered five excruciating Big Ten losses this season by four points or less. In four of those five defeats, the Hawkeyes held leads inside the final two minutes of regulation.

Iowa's record following each of those four losses in particular is 3-1. The one defeat was another such heartbreaker at Wisconsin that followed losing at Minnesota earlier this month. For the most part, this team has shown it can bounce back from games that have taken a lot out of them emotionally.

But then came last weekend. Making up a game originally

scheduled to be played two nights earlier at Nebraska, the Hawkeyes suffered another gut-wrenching 64-60 loss at the hands of the Cornhuskers. Except this time around, the stakes seemed greater and the fall seemed steeper after Iowa followed a 41-point first half by scoring a mere 19 points in the game's final 20 minutes.

Not only did the Hawkeyes only score just 19 points, but they also allowed Nebraska to score 39 points while shooting 15-of-24 from the floor in the second half. Making matters more sickening for Iowa is that the Cornhuskers entered Saturday's contest last in scoring among all Big Ten teams, averaging a mere 56 points per contest.

"I was upset with what I thought was collective tentative play offensively. We were more tentative than we should have been," Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery said. "But the reason we had so much pressure on us offensively was because our defense was so bad. That was like one of our performances last year when we were non-existent at the defensive end of the floor.

"Guys were just going by us, throwing it in the post, turning it into scoring. We were not as effective as we have been."

With talk of Iowa being on the bubble now subsiding after last weekend's loss, the question surrounding this team becomes "How much is too much?" As resilient as the Hawkeyes (17-10 overall, 6-8 Big Ten) have shown to be after all of those close losses, Iowa wasn't favored in any of those games like it was against Nebraska on Saturday.

"A lot of us came in yesterday – it was our day off from practice. A lot of us came in and got shots up, got our workouts in," junior guard Devyn Marble said after scoring a team-high 18 points in that loss to Nebraska. "I met with a few of the coaches, watched clips and stuff on just ways I can improve myself individually.

"I think we're doing pretty good. We've just got to keep a

mental focus and look at the next challenge that's ahead of us. We can't really look back in the past."

Prepping for Purdue

The Hawkeyes look to take their minds off last weekend's meltdown by seeking payback Feb. 27 against a Purdue squad that handed them one of those earlier single-digit losses last month back at Mackey Arena. On an afternoon where Iowa shot the ball abysmally, it still carried a 54-52 lead into the final minute before the Boilermakers would tie the game and eventually defeat the Hawkeyes in overtime, 65-62.

Purdue comes to Iowa City off a 31-point win over Northwestern on Sunday that snapped a three-game losing streak. In fact, the Boilermakers have only won two of their last seven contests since beating the Hawkeyes back on Jan. 27.

But considering that those five losses include two to top-ranked Indiana, another at home to Michigan State, and road losses to Illinois and Northwestern prior to its injury decimation, McCaffery believes Purdue's woes have merely been a result of its schedule.

"We tend to get carried away sometimes with winning streaks and losing streaks," McCaffery said. "I think you look at them the way I do: No. 1, they're going to guard you; No. 2, they're going to rebound.

"I think they pride themselves on being the tougher team any time they take the floor. Doesn't mean they're going to win them all, but they're going to compete in a way that's going to challenge our team and any team that plays them."

One of the positives for Iowa that day was the play of freshman guard Mike Gesell. He not only scored a team-high 18 points, but a majority of that scoring came in the second half while playing the point. This, in part, prompted Gesell's move back to starting at point guard after playing nearly two

months alongside fellow freshman Anthony Clemmons in the starting lineup as the 2-guard.

But for all the strides he has made this season, Gesell said his bigger concern is with what lies ahead.

“All we’re thinking about is finishing this season on a positive note and going out at the end of the season and doing what we know we’re capable of doing,” Gesell said.

Once again, the key match-up will likely take place inside with a pair of 7-foot freshmen centers duking it out in Iowa’s Adam Woodbury and Purdue’s A.J. Hammons, who is currently averaging 10.9 points and 6.4 rebounds per contest.

“He affects the game at both ends of the floor,” McCaffery said. “We’ve got to make sure that we recognize that and deal with him accordingly.”

Understanding Woodbury’s role

Perhaps the heaviest topic of dialogue between McCaffery and reporters Monday afternoon was regarding the play of Woodbury this season. The 7-1 Sioux City native came in as one of Iowa’s most-highly touted recruits in years and has started every game for the Hawkeyes this season.

However, his scoring average of 4.8 points per game with just two weeks left before the Big Ten tournament has raised concern from fans about Woodbury’s play. McCaffery has always emphasized having Woodbury focus on other aspects such as rebounding and getting other players involved.

Woodbury said the pressure of not scoring was something that got to him early on in the season, but not something he still allows to linger now.

“I haven’t been pressing on the offensive end at all,” said Woodbury, who is also averaging 5.1 rebounds per game. “I’ve been trying to get other guys open and be a facilitator in

that sense, so I think my whole mindset has changed over the season.”

Woodbury also mentioned how the offseason would be key for him in terms of being able to build more strength than he currently has. Meanwhile, McCaffery continues to stress patience with Woodbury, saying the scoring will come with time.

“He has had a hard time scoring over people at this level. He didn’t have that problem last year,” McCaffery said in reference to the transition Woodbury had to make from high school to college. “The thing you’ve noticed about him is he does not back down. He’s not soft. He just keeps coming, keeps battling, keeps believing in himself.

“I think that’s the thing that has been impressive to me.”