

COMMENTARY: Getting back to defensive basics (premium)

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Over the course of this 2012-13 season, the Iowa Hawkeyes' identity has come from their play at the defensive end of the floor. It was an area stressed heavily during the offseason and a facet of basketball where Iowa had consistently been making strides.

After blowing a 19-point lead last weekend at Nebraska – in large part to what head coach Fran McCaffery said was a porous defensive effort – the Hawkeyes returned to the basics defensively on Wednesday. The end result was a 58-48 victory over Purdue where a strong defensive effort proved necessary.

Consider how just four days earlier, Iowa allowed a Nebraska squad that statistically had the worst offense of any Big Ten team to shoot 15-of-24 from the floor and score 39 points on it in the second half of its meltdown in Lincoln. On Wednesday, the Boilermakers were held to just 19-of-52 shooting for the entire game. Not only that, but the Hawkeyes forced Purdue into 16 turnovers on the evening as well.

This defensive effort Iowa put together Wednesday was vital, especially since the Hawkeyes went over one quarter of the game – 13:41 to be exact – without making a single shot. Iowa made free throws, which contributed to it never relinquishing its lead during the field-goal drought. But let's face it – most basketball teams can't overcome a shooting drought of that magnitude.

Sure, part of it was Purdue not being anywhere close to as good as it had been in previous years. But some credit has to

be given to Iowa and what it managed to do defensively. The Boilermakers were never able to get into a rhythm despite having the game played at the exact tempo Purdue head coach Matt Painter said he wanted the game played at.

Purdue's two leading scorers on the night – Donnie Hale and A.J. Hammons – shot a combined 11-of-18 from the floor. Neither player started. The rest of the squad was just 8-of-34 shooting. Boilermaker guard Ronnie Johnson had 10 points and six assists, but also committed six of those 16 Purdue turnovers.

That's a tribute to Iowa's defense, folks, and it was a collective effort inside Carver-Hawkeye Arena on Wednesday. The Hawkeye bench accounted for five of the 10 steals Iowa had and three of the Hawkeyes' five blocked shots on the night. In addition, the Boilermakers were held to just 3-of-14 shooting from beyond the arc and Purdue guard D.J. Byrd shot just 3-of-11 the entire game.

Now against a team like Iowa's next opponent, No. 1 Indiana, the 13 minutes without scoring would kill the Hawkeyes. But to hold a team like Purdue under 50 points while playing the game at the Boilermakers' tempo ought to be an encouraging sign for Iowa.

As long as it remains committed on the defensive end of the floor, it will have a minor chance at pulling a major upset this weekend. That's not to say the Hawkeyes will leave Assembly Hall with a stunning win because points are going to need to be produced and done so without the services of freshman guard Mike Gesell. But good defense across the board will at least prevent a blowout from unfolding and from there, who knows?

For Iowa, it's sticking to the basics on defense that has allowed it to have opportunities this season and will continue to provide future opportunities before this season comes to a

close.