

Hawkeyes swat away Illini

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Entering Tuesday's contest against Illinois, the Iowa Hawkeyes knew they were going to need to be clutch in order to keep their very slim NCAA tournament hopes alive.

At both ends of the floor, Iowa got the clutch performances it needed and managed to secure an enormous 63-55 victory over the Fighting Illini at Carver-Hawkeye Arena. The Hawkeyes are now 19-11 overall and in a tie for seventh place of the Big Ten with Illinois as a result of this win.

"It's a big win for us," freshman center Adam Woodbury said. "I mean, they've got a good RPI and all that kind of stuff. Hopefully, it will help us get in the [NCAA] tournament."

Iowa got it going early at the offensive end, as Woodbury and sophomore forward Aaron White accounted for the Hawkeyes' first nine points of the game. The lead would reach as many as 11 points in the first half, keyed by a couple of highlight plays involving junior guard Devyn Marble.

The first was a Marble dunk that came off an inbounds play where freshman guard Anthony Clemmons bounce-passed the ball to Marble, who then went up for a dunk. Then following an Illinois bucket, Iowa beat the Fighting Illini in transition when Marble lobbed a pass from beyond half-court to senior forward Eric May for an alley-oop lay-up.

"We got the ball out quick and they didn't get back," Marble said about the alley-oop to May. "I saw May. A bad pass. He made me look good. Other than that, it was a great play by him."

While Illinois would get back in the game and even led briefly

by one point late in the first half, Iowa remained in command thanks in large part to its play at the defensive end. Not only were the Fighting Illini an abysmal 18-of-63 from the floor, but the Hawkeyes also recorded 12 blocked shots on the night, including six of those blocks coming from sophomore center Gabe Olaseni.

"They're always active offensively, so we need to be there defensively," Olaseni said. "I think we made sure we made that extra rotation and obviously it paid off."

Iowa went back up by 10 points early in the second half as a result of Marble catching fire en route to a game-high 21 points. Illinois would trim the Hawkeye lead down to two points when the most crucial moment of the game took place.

Sophomore guard Josh Oglesby, who was demoted from the starting lineup Tuesday in favor of May, buried a pair of 3-pointers that turned a 2-point Iowa lead into an 8-point advantage. These shots came after starting the game 1-of-6.

"Obviously, when you make your first shot, you get a little confidence and the next ones are easier," Oglesby said.

The two shots forced Illinois to burn a timeout as the crowd at Carver-Hawkeye Arena erupted and Oglesby would be mobbed by teammates coming over to high-five him on his way back to the bench.

"Everybody knows he's struggling," Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery said. "They see him working hard, they see him coming in and getting extra work in, they see what he does in practice."

"It's just a matter of time. I mean, he has done it this year in games. He just hasn't done it as much as he would like or as we thought."

Iowa plays its regular season finale on March 9 when it plays

host to Nebraska on what will be May's Senior Day. Tip-off is scheduled for 1:15 p.m. Central and the game will be televised nationally by the Big Ten Network. The Cornhuskers won the first meeting between these teams back on Feb. 23, 64-60, over in Lincoln, Neb.

With a win over Nebraska, the Hawkeyes would assure themselves of either the No. 6 or No. 7 seed in next week's Big Ten Tournament, pending the outcomes of games involving Purdue, Minnesota and Illinois.