

COMMENTARY: Having to prove something (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

CHICAGO, Ill. – The Iowa Hawkeyes did what they had to do Thursday night. Knowing full well what's needed of them this weekend, Iowa imposed its will from the get-go on Northwestern and tamed the Wildcats 73-59 in the first round of the Big Ten Tournament.

That's all fine and good, but if this team has serious hopes of possibly securing a bid in the NCAA Tournament next week, this alone won't be enough.

Not to take anything away at all from what the Hawkeyes were able to do, but Northwestern's awfulness had as much to do with the outcome. Yes, the Wildcats came in depleted with injuries. However, Northwestern head coach Bill Carmody burned four of his team's timeouts in the first half and used the last one less than one minute into the second half.

Carmody's all but on his way out of Evanston and while his players fought back enough to get within single digits, there was never a doubt Iowa was going to win this game.

The first half in particular was a microcosm of the Hawkeyes' season to this point. Shooting was less than stellar, but play at the defensive end was so strong that Northwestern couldn't do anything. Iowa has shown time and time again this season it can handle teams like the Wildcats.

Now the challenge comes in having to play a team like eighth-ranked Michigan State on Friday. Sure, the Spartans are vulnerable enough that the Hawkeyes can pull off the upset.

But Michigan State has had Iowa's number, having won the last four meetings.

The stage is set for the Hawkeyes. Winning Friday night might not be enough, but it would give Iowa something it needs more of between now and Selection Sunday – a signature win.

Beat Michigan State – which Iowa won't do if it plays anything similar to the way it did against Northwestern on Thursday – and the Hawkeyes can walk out of the United Center with a more legitimate argument for being an NCAA tourney squad. At least it would be a more compelling case.

Two things seem clear regarding the selection committee's criteria – who have you beaten and where? Iowa does have a few solid wins on its résumé, but every single one of those wins (Iowa State, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Illinois) all came at home. The non-conference strength of schedule is what's damaging to the Hawkeyes' hopes right now. More so than RPI, more so than the close losses in Big Ten play.

Yet despite all that, the opportunity is there for the taking Friday night inside the United Center and possibly even beyond Friday. If Iowa isn't able to beat Michigan State, it would be 21-12 and simply lacking the things necessary to make the field of 68 this season.

Whatever ends up happening, the Hawkeyes are going to be deserving of what they get. If they get in, they did what they had to do (kind of like they did on Thursday). End up in the NIT again, and they have no one to blame except themselves.

Iowa can prove something to many Friday night. But for all that can be said and will be said, it's time for the Hawkeyes to take action if they are going to accomplish their goals for this weekend.