

COMMENTARY: Overcoming mental hurdles (premium)

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Two games into the 2013-14 season and there's a glaring concern regarding this Iowa basketball team – consistency with effort.

The focus shown by the Hawkeyes two nights ago in an 82-39 shellacking of UNC-Wilmington wasn't there Sunday afternoon against Nebraska-Omaha. Yes, Iowa did come back to beat the Mavericks 83-75 and sit at 2-0. But it took a rally because the Hawkeyes saw themselves trailing 43-36 at halftime.

Sure, the Mavericks might be a good team and turn out to be an impressive team by season's end. But this is the kind of game where Iowa needs to play like it did last Friday. That same intensity and focus needs to be there right from the start. It didn't show up Sunday until the second half.

Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery said Sunday's performance was one that would've ended in a loss in years past, and he's right. This game had shades of the Hawkeyes' inexplicable loss to Campbell two years ago and even bits of last year's game against Gardner-Webb where they overcame a 20-point halftime deficit to win.

McCaffery also said with the way his team looked in the first half, it was fortunate to only be down seven and not 17. Again, he's right. But this is the bigger issue at hand for Iowa as one looks at this long-term.

The Hawkeyes' first half not only resulted in them trailing by seven points. It featured 12 turnovers. It featured Nebraska-

Omaha hauling down nine offensive rebounds. Iowa shot 10-of-29 from the floor, but was an anemic 1-of-8 from behind the 3-point line during these first 20 minutes.

With the amount of depth and experience now in place for McCaffery, that can be overcome against a team like the Mavericks, and it was on Sunday. But against No. 2 Michigan State? Against No. 7 Michigan? Against No. 11 Ohio State? Heck, against Iowa State one month from now inside Hilton Coliseum in Ames? That type of first half is going to lead to a loss in circumstances against those teams and when the conversations arise in the winter about the Hawkeyes and who they've beaten, these are going to be viewed as missed opportunities, much like last season when Iowa had to settle for another NIT bid instead of making the NCAA Tournament.

Let's be perfectly honest here – an 8-point win over Nebraska-Omaha isn't exactly going to impress many in the world of college basketball. If anything, eyebrows will be raised because those same people will be thinking, "Wait, Iowa only beat this team by eight points?"

If there is good news for the Hawkeyes here, it's that this should be a valuable learning experience for them going forward, especially because they received the benefit of not having this be a blemish on their résumé. When McCaffery can delegate what needs to be said inside the locker room to someone like junior forward Aaron White, and then that same player can walk the walk and guide his team to a victory, it shows maturity on White's part and it reinforces that the pieces are in place for this to be a memorable season for the Hawkeyes.

But with that said, the challenge now for this team is mental. Can that focus be there on a nightly basis? Can that intensity be there on a nightly basis? Iowa isn't a team that can afford to just coast through games.

That's what separates the good teams like many believe Iowa is from the elite teams like McCaffery and his players believe they can possibly become.