

# COMMENTARY: Now the true test begins (premium)

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*HawkeyeDrive.com*

IOWA CITY, Iowa – Five games into the 2013-14 season, and the Iowa Hawkeyes are exactly where they were expected to be at 5-0 following an 86-55 win over Penn on Friday inside Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

With the exception of an eight-point victory back on Nov. 10 against Nebraska-Omaha, the Hawkeyes have handled this part of their schedule the way many thought they would. Not just by beating the opposition, but crushing the opposition.

Now to the Quakers' credit, they might have been the second-best team Iowa has to played to this point. Yet the Hawkeyes still managed to win this contest by 31 points.

Iowa is 5-0. It should be ranked in the AP top 25 when the next release of that poll occurs Monday morning. The Hawkeyes are on the path they need to be on if they want to make an NCAA tournament.

But now it's about to get very interesting as things become more significant. Iowa will be one of eight teams participating in next week's Battle 4 Atlantis, which is taking place in The Bahamas. The Hawkeyes open up Thanksgiving night with a game against Xavier.

Talking big picture here, this next game against the Musketeers is the most important non-conference game Iowa will play this season. It's more important than playing Notre Dame in the Big Ten/ACC Challenge. It's more important than playing at Hilton Coliseum against an Iowa State squad that's

currently ranked 21st and will probably remain undefeated when the Hawkeyes head to Ames.

Yes, this game against Xavier is huge. Why? Pretty simple if the talk is big picture. Because the difference between winning and losing that one game might be enough to impact tournament seeding should Iowa find itself in the fortunate position of dancing this coming March for the first time since 2006.

If the Hawkeyes beat Xavier, a likely date with Tennessee awaits the following night, then a game against either No. 2 Kansas or Villanova the last night Iowa is down there in Nassau. That's a potential semifinal game against an opponent of equal caliber and then playing one of the best teams in the country should it reach the title game.

Lose to the Musketeers, however, and the tune changes. Then the Hawkeyes are probably looking at UTEP in the consolation bracket, followed by a game against either USC – who just had one of its top players suspended Friday – or Wake Forest, who is one of the two ACC teams not involved in this year's Big Ten/ACC Challenge. Point being, strength of schedule and RPI are going to be heavily influenced by what happens when Iowa plays Xavier and who the Hawkeyes get afterwards.

Seriously. That one game might be the difference between Iowa being, say, a No. 6 seed and sharing a pod with a team like a Florida or North Carolina (both of whom are good, but both currently vulnerable right now) versus being a No. 8 seed and sharing a pod with a team like Duke or Kentucky or Kansas. Being seeded between 7th-10th is probably the worst possible scenario because you're not only sharing a pod with a No. 1 or No. 2 seed, but the way pods work, those higher seeds are playing much closer to home.

If the Hawkeyes' résumé come Selection Sunday has wins over UTEP and USC instead of wins over Xavier and Tennessee, it's

just not going to look that impressive. Better than last season? Sure, but that's more because of Iowa's Big Ten slate being much tougher.

This is a huge week coming up for this program. Good things have taken place for Iowa and there's finally going to be a reward in having a number between 1-25 in front of its name. But now the Hawkeyes are in a position where they have to take advantage of this opportunity they're getting.

How they fare next week won't dictate how Iowa does in Big Ten play. But it will probably dictate what type of path will await the Hawkeyes should they reach the Field of 68. Again, big picture.