

COMMENTARY: Depth makes difference again (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – The worst-kept secret about Iowa entering this season was how much depth the Hawkeyes would have to work with. That depth was illustrated well Tuesday evening inside Carver-Hawkeye Arena, as Iowa – who remained ranked 23rd entering its contest with Notre Dame – was able to pull out a 98-93 victory over the Fighting Irish to move to 8-1.

What's funny is that some of the talk afterwards was about the lack of playing time junior center Gabe Olaseni received in the second half after he went into halftime with nine points and five rebounds. Had Iowa lost, there would be some validity to the puzzlement about why McCaffery didn't give him more playing time late.

But with the kind of depth the Hawkeyes have at their disposal, McCaffery did something Tuesday he said he doesn't typically do – tighten the rotation. Believe it or not, this might actually be something that could end up being beneficial come Big Ten play.

After Notre Dame stormed back early in the second half to reclaim the lead (a lot of which was the result of center Garrick Sherman having his way inside), McCaffery made the decision to go with a smaller lineup. Yes, this "smaller" lineup still featured four players listed between 6-5 and 6-9. But it didn't feature either Olaseni or sophomore center Adam Woodbury.

And it worked. Sure, it might not have been the reason why Devyn Marble got into a zone and scored 13 straight points for

Iowa when it reclaimed its second-half lead that it never would relinquish again. But it worked, and McCaffery stuck with what worked.

Given all the different lineups McCaffery had been tinkering with up to this point, this was a valid question to ask – if he would stick with “the hot hand,” so to speak. He did on Tuesday. Yes, there were minor instances where Woodbury returned to the court and Basabe returned to the court. But those instances were brief. McCaffery relied on players that provide him length and that decision paid off against Notre Dame.

Which brings me back to the matter of depth. Yes, what worked for the Hawkeyes on Tuesday won't work in every game going forward. There are going to be times when Woodbury or Olaseni (or even both, which still hasn't happened yet after nine games) are going to be needed down the stretch.

But that's the beauty of the depth McCaffery does have. If there are nights where he needs either center, he has the luxury of having both Woodbury and Olaseni. If Iowa comes across another night like Tuesday where it plays more zone and goes with a smaller lineup in terms of height, it also has the luxury.

This is where the depth works to McCaffery's advantage. He doesn't know what the hot hands will end up being, but neither does the opposition. That alone is going to allow Iowa to stay close with teams it probably has no business beating down the road.

What Tuesday demonstrated is that when the hot hand is discovered, it's in McCaffery's best interests to stick with it. Especially when that hot hand changes from game to game. In a way, it still allows all the players getting minutes to see minutes on the court. But depending on the situation is, there might be some nights where going small is of more

benefit or nights where bigger lineups are more beneficial. Either way, McCaffery can find a way to tighten the rotation given what's working and continue to play to his strengths.

That's what he did Tuesday and it's a big reason why Iowa was able to come away victorious against a Notre Dame team it needed to beat in order to boost NCAA tournament aspirations. That's a lesson that could benefit this team going forward.