

COMMENTARY: Staying the course (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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DES MOINES, Iowa – Sitting there at the podium, talking very softly into the microphone right in front of him, Iowa senior forward Melsahn Basabe sat there after his team – ranked 23rd nationally at the moment – defeated Drake 83-66 in Saturday's Big Four Classic at Wells Fargo Arena and made a comment about "staying the course."

For someone like him and other veteran Hawkeye players, this has been a staple to their success. It allowed them to be even-keeled in the first half Saturday as the Bulldogs made 3-pointer after 3-pointer, yet couldn't build off that success.

The Hawkeyes stuck to what they believed coming in would work and as the game progressed, the plan came to fruition. Iowa was dominant on the glass and eventually began making more high-percentage shots. Meanwhile, there was Drake going broke from 3-point range in the second half.

Saturday's contest might prove to be a good lesson for Iowa down the road. This wasn't a game where the Hawkeyes really buried the competition until late in the second half. It took longer than many inside "The Well" probably anticipated it would for Iowa to establish its identity against Drake, but it was still able to.

The Bulldogs gave what by their standards should be a valiant effort. Yes, they lost, but they fought. But so did Iowa. It stuck with what it believed in and that decision ultimately paid off for head coach Fran McCaffery and his team.

At the forefront of this showing was Basabe, one of four players to score in double-figures. It wasn't just that he had a team-high 15 points, but he was getting those points in an efficient manner by shooting 7-of-10 from the floor while also hauling in eight rebounds.

Iowa knew it had a height advantage and used that – along with its length – to its advantage. This is why Basabe played well. This is why senior guard Devyn Marble came away with 14 points. This is why sophomore center Adam Woodbury looked as productive as he has all season, even with just six points and six rebounds.

Then there's freshman guard Peter Jok. Returning to Des Moines, there weren't any jitters. Jok had a stretch where he scored seven straight Hawkeye points and he ended up with 14 of them on the night. He did enough to warrant staying on the floor and as a result ended up being as key a contributor as anybody.

But perhaps the most telling thing about this "stay the course" method was that there wasn't as much experimenting done by McCaffery and his staff with rotations. There was only one rotation that was used for the first time all season on Saturday. The rest of the lineup combos McCaffery utilized, he had seen before. He knew what could work in certain situations and on this night at least, managed to push the right buttons.

A similar showing will be needed Monday for the Hawkeyes. Yes, Fairleigh Dickinson is an inferior opponent in contrast to Drake. But let's face it. There's a certain game happening in Ames on Dec. 13 and Iowa can't really look ahead to it, even though the fans and media and everyone else in the state will be.

Right now, it's simply a matter of "staying the course." This method is something that if they practice it now can prove very beneficial for it come Big Ten play, when the stakes get

bigger.