

COMMENTARY: When the moment arrives (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – What I'm about to say here is with all due respect to the Fairleigh Dickinson Knights, a team that No. 23 Iowa just pummeled 92-59 Monday night at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

That game had the feel of a glorified exhibition. There's really no other way to put it, quite frankly. Sure, Fairleigh Dickinson might end up being a formidable team in its conference, but Monday's game was nearly a polar opposite of what the Hawkeyes are about to witness later this week.

This game lacked suspense, which if you're Iowa was a good thing. This was the kind of performance where other guys had to elevate their games and that's exactly what transpired Monday. The Hawkeyes weren't relying on players like Devyn Marble or Aaron White to put the team on their backs. Instead, they were getting double-doubles from three different guys, two of which are reserves.

In the second half with the outcome well in hand, Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery was able to tinker around with different lineups not used before this season, including the pairing of centers Adam Woodbury and Gabe Olaseni in the Hawkeye front-court. He was also able to empty his entire bench with 4:37 still showing on the clock.

But here's what makes something that should've been expected look impressive. Iowa not only did this less than 48 hours after playing in Des Moines at the Big Four Classic against Drake, but it put on this performance Monday without getting caught looking ahead to its next game, one that has the entire

state of Iowa buzzing.

Iowa and Iowa State (currently ranked 17th nationally) will face each other while both being ranked in the top 25 for the first time since 1987. To put that into perspective, I was born in 1987. So I could make a case that Friday's showdown at Hilton Coliseum is the biggest Hawkeye/Cyclone basketball game in my lifetime.

Now factor in that every player on this Iowa roster is even younger. It would've been easy for the Hawkeyes to overlook Fairleigh Dickinson, mainly because everyone else was. The crowd looked like something from the previously forgetful era of Iowa basketball and nothing like the sellout that will be witnessed in Ames on Friday. Throw into the equation having just played two nights earlier in a completely different city and this had the ingredients to be a win where the Hawkeyes looked anything but impressive.

If there's a lesson McCaffery was able to successfully implement into his players entering this game, it was that they can't afford to overlook anybody. And if we're being honest here, that would've been real easy to do Monday. It would've been real easy for Iowa to play nonchalantly for 40 minutes and still come away with a double-digit win over an inferior opponent like Fairleigh Dickinson.

But to the players' credit, that didn't end up being the case. After spotting the Knights with six early points, Iowa stormed out to a 19-0 run and stepped on their throats the rest of the way. It did what a good, experience-laden team ought to do against an opponent like this on a night like this.

Now comes that moment everyone around here has waited for. Iowa vs. Iowa State. Yes, this game will have no bearing on whether either wins its respective conference. But it'll be a real solid indicator of just how far the Hawkeyes have come as a team. If they're able to leave Hilton Coliseum victorious –

something another Big Ten team, Michigan, wasn't able to do earlier this season – then the expectations around Iowa should only skyrocket.

The moment has arrived. Now it's time to see what this program is made of.