

COMMENTARY: An established role (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – It wasn't a boost that was necessarily needed Sunday afternoon, but the No. 25 Iowa Hawkeyes received a highly-anticipated energy spark in their 86-61 win over Arkansas-Pine Bluff.

Taking the Carver-Hawkeye Arena hardwood for the first time all season Sunday was junior guard Josh Oglesby. When he entered the game at the 15:48 mark of the first half along with both Zach McCabe and Gabe Olaseni, Oglesby played saw his first action since breaking his foot two days before the season began.

That first half couldn't have fared any better for Oglesby. Wanting to make amends for a dreadful sophomore campaign as far as 3-point shooting was concerned, he came right in and drained his first four 3-pointers taken Sunday against the Golden Lions. As he was knocking down these shots from the perimeter, what was a 6-point lead for Iowa when he came in suddenly skyrocketed up to a 25-point advantage.

Given the circumstances of Oglesby's foot injury, the timing of his return probably couldn't have been better for Iowa. For one thing, he was able to see some playing time before the Hawkeyes open Big Ten play next week. If there was to be any signs of early rust, it would've been better to have that Sunday than nine days from now when Iowa plays Nebraska.

But Oglesby looked anything but rusty, at least in the first half. If anything, his performance Sunday validated his importance to the team – not that it needed validation in the

first place – and his return now gives Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery to present even more different lineups than he already had, which could perhaps catch some of Iowa's competition in the league off guard.

Oglesby's role is actually pretty well-established – he's the single biggest X-factor now for the Hawkeyes going forward.

No, really. He is. Think about it. Think about all those shots that didn't fall for him last season, one where the Hawkeyes faced a very slim margin of error and found themselves settling for another NIT appearance.

Let's just say the Oglesby that showed up Sunday is what Iowa consistently gets throughout Big Ten play this season. Maybe he doesn't knock down his first four 3-pointers each night, but he gets into enough of a shooting rhythm early on that the looks that didn't drop for him a year ago begin to fall for him now.

Now this isn't to say other players don't have more important roles on this team. But because there isn't as much familiarity this season (one out of 13 games and the one game coming against an overmatched opponent), Oglesby's improvements should be enough to alter opposing game plans, at least initially.

The early part of league play is where Iowa has to distinguish itself if it wants to legitimately be in the discussion for a Big Ten crown this season. With Oglesby back and with this window where unfamiliarity – at least on the surface – can play to the Hawkeyes' benefit, this is when they need to jump on teams with that depth and the ability to throw so much at their opposition.

Looking at Iowa's first seven Big Ten games, four of them – the three games at home and the return trip to Northwestern – appear winnable on paper. There are three tough games at No. 4 Wisconsin, No. 3 Ohio State and Michigan. Those three games

might see Iowa as an underdog, but those three games are all contests the Hawkeyes are capable of winning with what they have. Winning any of those three games specifically is what could be the difference between a good season and a great season.

Oglesby's return to the lineup really doesn't make things as difficult for McCaffery as one might think because he has an established role. If Oglesby sticks to his role and can provide consistency with that role (i.e. keep playing like he did Sunday), the window's going to be open for Iowa. How long it's open remains to be seen, but it's open.

How Oglesby progresses now will likely determine how much Iowa progresses over this stretch of games coming up.