

12/30/2013: Iowa plus-minus data and observations (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

If you recall last season, I had a series of posts during the Big Ten portion of Iowa's basketball schedule that examined individual plus-minus statistics and what could be made of such data.

All offseason, the talk surrounding Iowa basketball has been the Hawkeyes' depth. Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery is currently using an 11-man rotation and has every intent of sticking with this over the next 18 games. So what I've done and will continue to do in a series of posts this season is not only collect individual plus-minus data, but look at plus-minus data for every 5-man lineup McCaffery has on the floor at any given moment this season.

First, let's look at individual plus-minus for these 11 players through each of Iowa's 13 games. These are unofficial numbers I've compiled by hand and math skills. It should be noted that Josh Oglesby has only played in one game all season due to a foot injury, which I'll expand on more here in a little bit:

Devyn Marble: 735-550; (+185); 333:43

Aaron White: 662-496; (+166); 302:31

Jarrold Uthoff: 623-456; (+167); 274:58

Mike Gesell: 571-411; (+160); 267:31

Anthony Clemmons: 540-372; (+168); 239:02

Melsahn Basabe: 483-375; (+108); 232:41

Adam Woodbury: 458-334; (+124); 216:02

Zach McCabe: 521-349; (+172); 215:34

Gabe Olaseni: 463-303; (+160); 210:26

Peter Jok: 398-285; (+113); 183:43

Josh Oglesby: 43-35; (+8); 20:51

Now this is probably what you would expect with the No. 22 team in the country that possesses an 11-2 record entering conference play. All 11 players have pluses and the 10 that have played in all 13 games to this point currently have a positive plus-minus that is triple figures.

Examining specific rotations though tells a greater story. I'm not going to list the numbers for every single one here because through 13 games, McCaffery has used 91 different lineups if you also include the likes of Darius Stokes, Kyle Meyer, Kyle Denning and Okey Ukah.

Here's what I will tell you, however. Earlier this month, a source within the Iowa basketball program aware of my research voluntarily reached out to me and confirmed two things of note. One is that the data I've compiled, while unofficial, has been "on the money." The second thing I can confirm via this same source is that McCaffery and his coaching staff do use plus-minus as a measuring tool. Not only that, but they also started this season compiling plus-minus data for 5-man lineups like I have and have actually had discussions about such data during closed-door meetings.

With that in mind, I'm going to share 10 observations I've made to this point about the data I've found.

1. Dissecting 91 lineups

This number mostly came with a 10-player rotation. Now it's 11 players with Oglesby returning and the number of different lineups McCaffery continues to use is going to easily reach triple figures after about 3-4 Big Ten games. Of the 91 that have been used, 71 of them have come in non-emptying the bench situations. Uthoff has been involved in 51 lineups, the most of any Hawkeye player to date.

2. The best lineup combinations

Before Oglesby returned for Iowa's most recent contest against Arkansas-Pine Bluff, McCaffery was using his 10-man rotation almost like a hockey coach with lines. The only two lineups to have appeared in all 13 games thus far have been the starting 5 (Marble, Gesell, White, Basabe, Woodbury) and what I nicknamed "The Second Line" (Clemmons, Jok, Uthoff, McCabe, Olaseni). These lineups have played the most minutes together on the floor for the Hawkeyes and have the best cumulative plus-minuses to date. The starters have played a combined 121:49 together this season and are currently +71. "The Second Line" has seen the floor together for a combined 57:30 in 13 games and possesses a +59. Of the remaining 89 different combinations used, there are currently six others with a plus-minus of 10 or better. Which leads to my next observation...

3. Marble is Iowa's most valuable player

Not that much evidence was really needed to make this claim, but this specific set of data validates this point even further. I mentioned how in addition to the two "lines" that there were six other lineups with a +10 or better. All six of those particular lineups have one commonality, and it's Marble.

4. Others noteworthy in value

Examining these six specific lineups a step further, Marble's

the only one in all six of them, but three players – White, McCabe and Olaseni – are featured in four of them. There are also three other players – Clemmons, Gesell and Uthoff – who are featured in three of them.

5. When Uthoff is most effective

One of Iowa's newcomers this season is sophomore forward Jarrod Uthoff. As mentioned, he has been involved in the most rotations of any player to date. But the majority of the lineups featuring him that have proven most effective have featured a backcourt of Clemmons and Marble. There are seven lineups that feature this trio of players. Three of those seven have plus-minuses of +17, +16, and +13.

6. Woodbury benefits most from Marble and White

This may be somewhat skewed by all three players being starters, but the numbers don't lie. Woodbury's best plus-minuses are a result of playing alongside Iowa's two best players. One example of this would be a game the Hawkeyes lost to Iowa State. Woodbury had 11 rebounds in that contest before fouling out and the bulk of his production that night came playing alongside both Marble and White.

7. Jok and Basabe go hand-in-hand

This might seem strange because one guy is a starter and the other is typically the 10th or 11th player, if you will, in this rotation. Not every lineup featuring both Jok and Basabe is a net positive. However, the overwhelmingly majority of the lineups McCaffery has used featuring both have been net positives. The best such example of this would be when Iowa played Drake, as both players had perhaps their best games of the season to date in that particular contest.

8. Uthoff/McCabe/Olaseni a positive

There are seven combinations that feature this front-court of

reserves. All seven of them are currently a net positive.

9. Gesell most productive playing alongside Marble

There are a handful of lineups just featuring Gesell that would be net positives, but none of them are significant net positives. The ones featuring Gesell that are among the best plus-minuses all feature Marble (going back to an earlier point). I think a lot of this stems from the ability of both players to play both the 1 and 2 spots without any issue. Nevertheless, Gesell is definitely among those who most benefits from playing alongside Marble.

10. How Oglesby figures in

The one game Oglesby has played in didn't really allow for any conclusions about what happens going forward to be drawn. Of the seven lineups Oglesby was part of in that contest, only two of them came in the first half. This is why I wrote afterwards how Oglesby is an X-factor for Iowa as far as getting off to a quality start in the Big Ten is concerned and also being in a position later in the season to legitimately compete for the league crown.

Looking ahead:

Iowa opens Big Ten play Tuesday against Nebraska, then travels to No. 4 Wisconsin on Jan. 5, then returns home Jan. 9 to play Northwestern. Much like last season, I'm going to continue writing about such data in 3-game increments. Given what is known, here are some things to key an eye on in each upcoming match-up.

Dec. 31 vs. Nebraska – In the Hawkeyes' two games against the Cornhuskers last season, there were three players who are back this season that were pluses in both contests – Basabe, Oglesby and Olaseni. I want to focus specifically on the Basabe part of this because one of the observations I listed had to do with how lineups featuring him and Jok have proven

effective.

This is a game where determining minutes for Oglesby and Jok could prove really challenging for McCaffery. On one hand, Oglesby has shown he can be effective against Tim Miles-coached teams. On the other hand, since Basabe has also been extremely effective against Nebraska since Miles got there, one would think this game would present a huge opportunity for Jok. The number of minutes Jok plays in what will be his first Big Ten game, along with how effective he is, could potentially be telling for how much he's used the rest of the way.

Jan. 5 at No. 4 Wisconsin – Going back to the point about Oglesby being an X-factor, here's a perfect example. Last season, he had one of his better games in terms of plus-minus when Iowa lost to Wisconsin. Except the lasting memory of that game was his open 3 at the end of regulation rattling in and out. This is a game where having him with the hot hand would be huge for Iowa. Another player I'd keep an eye on here would be Woodbury. He's going to be matched up against Frank Kaminsky and he's really the only big in the Badgers' starting five. If Woodbury stays out of foul trouble, this is a game where he could be a difference-maker for Iowa.

Jan. 9 vs. Northwestern – While the Wildcats have a new coach now in Chris Collins, this is a game I would expect Marble and White to both go off. This is also a game that presents favorable match-ups for Oglesby if last year's evidence is any indication.