

COMMENTARY: An alarming defeat in Ann Arbor (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

ANN ARBOR, Mich. – To call No. 10 Iowa losing 75-67 on the road to No. 21 Michigan “an upset” would be a disservice to the Wolverines. Michigan is a legitimate Big Ten contender that protected its home court. That’s what it was supposed to do.

The Hawkeyes losing this game shouldn’t come as a surprise nor should it lead anyone in Iowa City to think the sky is falling. But that doesn’t mean what happened inside Crisler Center on Wednesday wasn’t alarming.

There are a few troubling aspects that should be viewed as legitimate concerns going forward. This was the second game in a row where junior forward Aaron White was invisible. He still managed to finish with team-highs of 17 points, seven rebounds and four assists. But even he acknowledged afterwards how he needs to exert himself more early and often.

Michigan may have keyed in on him, but the fact this has happened more than once (let alone two straight times) is something Iowa has to address. He kind of made up for it by scoring 14 of Iowa’s final 16 points, but that didn’t prove to be enough.

Here’s the biggest problem Iowa had Wednesday evening – lack of production from its bench. Part of what makes the whole “depth” narrative exist in the first place was the idea that the Hawkeyes could come at their opposition in waves. This was far from the case against the Wolverines.

Iowa had eight points from its bench. Maybe it's too much to ask for guys to come off the bench and be key contributors in a road game of this caliber, but considering the Hawkeyes' make-up, it's an essential component if they're going to win any of these road games.

The bench provided 43 points against Minnesota just three days earlier. To only contribute eight in a game like this? Not good. Especially when McCaffery is basically forced to play his starting five for 19 minutes (or nearly half of the game) like he did.

This wasn't like any of Iowa's previous three losses. In fact, the only similarity is that Michigan is ranked much like Villanova, Iowa State and Wisconsin all are. The Hawkeyes had second-half leads in those previous three defeats. Michigan never trailed in the second half on Wednesday.

Iowa may have only lost this game by eight points, but it's better than what it showed. At least it should be better than it showed. There were times it looked like Michigan was going to drub the Hawkeyes much like it in this same building a year ago. In that respect, Iowa deserves a little credit for showing the mental toughness it lacked against this team before.

But that being said, there's a blueprint for beating Iowa now that didn't really exist before. Michigan forced turnovers and scored off those turnovers. It knocked down 3-pointers. It made one of the Hawkeyes' best players a complete non-factor for half of the game.

Iowa is at its best when it gets consistency, especially across the board. That was missing Wednesday. When that consistency isn't there night in and night out, especially in a conference like the Big Ten, it doesn't matter who Iowa is playing or where the game is. This is going to be the end result.

The Hawkeyes are still a legit contender in this conference. But barring a Big Ten title and/or run to the Final Four, Michigan exposed what will likely be the downfall at season's end. That's what makes what happened Wednesday alarming from Iowa's perspective, perhaps more than anything else.