

COMMENTARY: Key stretch now awaits Hawkeyes (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

EVANSTON, Ill. – The No. 10 Iowa Hawkeyes secured a much-needed 76-50 victory over Northwestern on Saturday, one that assures they remain alone in third place of the Big Ten at 5-2 by the end of the weekend. Considering how Iowa had just lost to No. 21 Michigan three days earlier in Ann Arbor, one would think there would be some joy in picking up a road win immediately following a tough defeat.

But one thing seemed evident inside Welsh-Ryan Arena afterwards. The Hawkeyes are fully aware of what lies ahead of them now.

When the Big Ten schedule was first released back in late August, there was a four-game stretch on Iowa's schedule that stood out. Not only because it featured the four teams the Hawkeyes only played once each of the previous two regular seasons, but because of the specific layout.

It starts Jan. 28 with No. 3 Michigan State coming to town. Iowa then travels to Illinois on Feb. 1, then plays two straight home games against No. 17 Ohio State on Feb. 4 and No. 21 Michigan on Feb. 8.

Now Iowa gets the luxury of playing three of its next four at Carver-Hawkeye Arena, a place it has won 20 straight games in. Those three games come against the three teams picked at the beginning of the season to finish atop the Big Ten yet again. The lone road game is inside an arena the Hawkeyes have only won once in since 1987.

Beating a team like Northwestern by 26 points twice is one thing. Just like the last time the Hawkeyes and Wildcats met, Iowa was expected to win like it did and while Northwestern had been playing better, Saturday was still no exception.

But these next two weeks are going to be the biggest mental hurdle for this team. The Hawkeyes realize their margin for error is such that any loss at home probably destroys whatever chances still remain of them winning the Big Ten. If there's one challenge that lies ahead for Fran McCaffery and his staff, it's making sure the enormity of what's coming up doesn't make players tighten up.

That's not to say every Iowa player should be exclusively loose for the next 160 minutes of basketball they're about to play. These guys have done a solid job of not allowing the moment to become bigger than it is, but it's going to be more difficult than ever before for each of them because none of them have experienced anything like what they're about to deal with.

If that's not enough, the most winnable game (at least on paper) is against Illinois and again, the State Farm Center (formerly known as Assembly Hall) has been a house of horrors for decades now when it comes to this program.

The next two weeks might not just be the difference in seeding both for the Big Ten and NCAA Tournaments, but it could also be the difference between a great season, a good season and a disappointing one.

A 2-2 mark would put Iowa at 7-4 and the chance of still finishing the season on a high note would exist. Going above .500 puts Iowa in a position to maybe finish first or second and possibly open the NCAA Tournament in a place like Milwaukee or St. Louis. Going below .500 won't kill the Hawkeyes' tourney hopes, but questions about how good they actually are would resurface.

At this point in time, it's safe to say Iowa has met expectations not just locally, but nationally. Two weeks from now, that may or may not still be the case.

It's now in the Hawkeyes' control. Now, it's time to see what they truly are.