

COMMENTARY: Good, but still not great (premium)

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Anyone who follows No. 15 Iowa or No. 7 Michigan State extensively had to figure when these teams met Tuesday inside Carver-Hawkeye Arena, it would come down to the final minutes yet again. After all, this had become the script over recent meetings between the two.

From that perspective, Tuesday's clash lived up to the hype. Also living up to its billing was how the script unfolded. Once again, it was Michigan State taking advantage of missed opportunities by Iowa and in this instance, squeaking out a 71-69 win in overtime over the Hawkeyes.

This was as good an opportunity as Iowa has had to overcome this hurdle known as Michigan State, yet still wasn't able to. It shouldn't seem stunning given the Spartans having won six straight and being ranked higher, but it was. This was a team without two of its key players and the Hawkeyes looked poised to finally take that next step in becoming a legitimate Big Ten contender.

But instead, Iowa finds itself back at, let's say "Square 3." Not Square 1 because it's not as though the Hawkeyes are in complete rebuild mode, but Square 3. Good, but still not great.

There are two components necessary for any team to win a Big Ten title. One is protecting home court as much as possible. The other is finishing with at least 4-5 road wins. Looking at a team like Michigan State, the Spartans just secured their fifth road win in league play Tuesday and did so coming off a

disheartening home loss to Michigan just three nights earlier. Even without Adreian Payne or Branden Dawson, they showed the mettle necessary.

As far as the Hawkeyes' Big Ten title hopes go, this is as crippling a loss as one could imagine. It's hard to see how Iowa has any chance of winning the conference after Tuesday night.

But there were a few troubling aspects to this. One is something Fran McCaffery harped on afterwards, which was toughness. This isn't the first time this has been a topic of conversation with his teams during the four years he has coached at Iowa, but when talk of this particular group having a "business-like" approach night after night, seeing this come into question is a red flag.

Another thing that's a red flag and will continue to be going forward is 3-point shooting from opposing teams. Michigan State took a page from the same playbook used by its intrastate rival last week in Ann Arbor. Out of 59 shots the Spartans took Tuesday, 29 of them were from behind the arc and they knocked down 10 of them, including both 3-point attempts they took in overtime.

Actually, this is the same thing Villanova did back in November. So it's safe to say it's not just a trend in Iowa's defeats, but rather a recipe for success against the Hawkeyes.

Then there are the obvious things that stand out, like Iowa going nearly 15 minutes without a field goal between the second half and overtime or missing 13 free-throw attempts. Part of the field goal drought was Michigan State's defense. The missed free throws are something that, again, have surfaced before and ended up re-surfacing Tuesday.

Simply put, this team has flaws that will likely prevent it from winning the Big Ten and likely be what leads to an exit from the NCAA Tournament come March. Iowa is still a good team

and maybe even still a team capable of a deep tourney run.

But at the end of the day, the Hawkeyes aren't that great team that will be remembered for years to come. That's not a bad thing necessarily. It's just a reality that seems to be hitting Iowa fans harder than it has in quite some time though.