

COMMENTARY: Mentally strong down the stretch (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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CHAMPAIGN, Ill. – Four nights after having their toughness questioned, the No. 15 Iowa Hawkeyes responded and may have cleared one of the more significant hurdles they will have faced after defeating Illinois 81-74 on Saturday.

Sure, the Fighting Illini might currently be sitting in last place of the Big Ten standings. But the issues that faced Iowa entering this game were mental and from that aspect, this was an important obstacle it just overcame.

Let's get the historical stuff out of the way first because while the past had no bearing on Saturday's game, it was part of the mental challenge. Iowa had not won a game inside the State Farm Center (previously known as Assembly Hall) since 1998-99, and that win 15 seasons ago was the only one in this building since 1987. To put this in perspective, Saturday was just the second time in my lifetime Iowa has won a road game against Illinois.

In a way, that's something that made this win significant for the Hawkeyes. Perhaps even more so was that this was the one road game sandwiched in the middle of a key two-week stretch for this team. Iowa had just lost a game at home to No. 7 Michigan State in overtime earlier in the week and the players had their toughness questioned by head coach Fran McCaffery afterwards.

McCaffery said then that the "toughness" was both a physical and mental thing. The reality is and has been for quite some time that the challenges facing Iowa were all mental. This

team is physically equipped to hang with any team in the country. The mental aspect is what was interesting to see unfold.

This hurdle was extremely important for Iowa to clear because had it not, had it unraveled in this situation like previous times before, it could've really started a downward spiral for this team. A loss would've added to the damage that was just done four nights ago to its mental psyche.

After the game, junior center Gabe Olaseni – who played the best game of his Hawkeye career with 15 points and 12 rebounds Saturday – made a telling comment. He said how the Hawkeyes focused more on trying to settle down as Illinois went on its run and how staying calm and keeping composure allowed he and his teammates to gain confidence late that they would prevail.

It was telling because he basically implied this Hawkeye squad tightened up in similar situations before and came to the realization that doing so again was going to lead to a damaging loss.

Along those same lines, McCaffery did something that was somewhat out of the ordinary (at least this season anyway). For the last 4:24 of the game, he stuck with one group of five guys. He put his trust in them and they delivered for him. That lineup of Olaseni, Mike Gesell, Devyn Marble, Aaron White and Josh Oglesby might not be his end-of-game lineup every time out now going forward, but McCaffery now knows he can go with this group and get results.

By winning this game, Iowa assured itself of staying alone in third place of the Big Ten and at the moment, the Hawkeyes are undoubtedly the No. 3 team in the league with a two-game edge on everyone else in the loss column. While a Big Ten title might seem unrealistic, what's plausible for this team is earning a first-round bye in next month's Big Ten Tournament. That would mean a maximum of three games in three days,

something the Hawkeyes have already done once this season and would be suited to do again.

Winning this game made the chances of that happening even better now. Winning this game showed the Hawkeyes can be mentally strong when they need to be and that's perhaps the biggest takeaway going forward.