

# COMMENTARY: Falling back with the pack (premium)

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*HawkeyeDrive.com*

IOWA CITY, Iowa – Tuesday night's game against Ohio State provided the 17th-ranked Iowa Hawkeyes with opportunity. They had an opportunity to not only sweep the Buckeyes this season, but also create further separation from the rest of the Big Ten and establish themselves as the clear-cut No. 3 team in the league.

Instead, Iowa took a step backward Tuesday, falling 76-69 to the Buckeyes. By not taking advantage of the opportunity placed in front of them, the Hawkeyes saw two things happen. They saw their chances of winning the Big Ten get hamstrung even more than they already were. They also saw themselves inch closer to the cluster that is the middle of the Big Ten standings.

Oh, sure. Iowa's still alone in third place right now. But after Tuesday's game, does anyone see this team winning out and finishing 14-4 in the Big Ten? That looks doubtful right now. The Hawkeyes might still finish in the top four and get a first-round bye in next month's Big Ten Tournament, but they just made that task a little more difficult on themselves to accomplish now.

Iowa currently sits alone in third, but is now only one game ahead of three teams, two of which now have head-to-head victories on the Hawkeyes. Northwestern, the one team Iowa has two victories over this season, still looks like a team that's smoke and mirrors right now and how long it continues to overachieve like it has remains to be seen.

But Ohio State and Wisconsin are still two legitimate programs despite both falling out of the AP top 25 this week and both are still capable of preventing Iowa from obtaining that first-round bye that would really be beneficial to it once everyone is congregating in Indianapolis next month.

That's probably the biggest takeaway from this game on Tuesday. Yes, Iowa did a lot of things to shoot itself in the foot. 3-of-20 shooting from behind the arc, Between 12-of-19 shooting from the free-throw line and 13 turnovers, those are the kinds of things that prevent teams from winning games on a stage like the one the Hawkeyes have experienced the last few weeks. But this game was just as much Ohio State winning as it was Iowa losing.

The Buckeyes predicate themselves on defense. Three weeks ago at Value City Arena, Iowa attacked at will and got 84 points en route to what remains the Hawkeyes' biggest victory of the season (one could even argue that argument got validated Tuesday). This time around, Ohio State held Iowa to 69 points and on the offensive end, managed to average 75 points in two games against the Hawkeyes this season.

This was also a team that had finally figured out how to gut out a win on the road just three days earlier when it went to the Kohl Center and beat Wisconsin, something Iowa couldn't do last month when it played up there against the Badgers. Now they've done it twice in four days in two difficult venues against two good teams. In that respect, Ohio State deserves a lot of credit.

Now that being said, let's get back to the 75 points per game average the Buckeyes have on Iowa. Ohio State scored 45 points in the second half and Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery said this was where the game got lost. The Buckeyes shot over 50 percent from the floor in the second half. They also got a boost in the second half when it led 50-47 and got a flagrant foul called on Iowa center Gabe Olaseni. Amir Williams knocked

down a pair of free throws, then the Buckeyes got the ball back and scored on that ensuing possession. Just like that, it was a seven-point game. Then Ohio State sealed it with an alley-oop from behind the basket with two seconds on the shot clock.

Iowa made mental mistakes on both ends of the floor, but especially at the defensive end. Considering that its next game comes Feb. 8 against No. 10 Michigan, another team that scored 75 points on the Hawkeyes the first time they met two weeks ago, Iowa has to get things straightened out on that end of the floor to avoid falling even further back with the pack.

At this time two weeks ago, the Hawkeyes looked like a top 10 team because they were playing like a top 10 team. That hasn't been the case lately and one now has to wonder whether they can continue regrouping after losses like they've managed to up to this point.

One thing is for sure, however. The road to achieving goals that looked realistic when the night began now got a little bit steeper.