

COMMENTARY: Being fragile at a bad time (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery used the word “fragile” to describe the psyche of his team after it lost 66-63 to Illinois on Saturday. For the Hawkeyes, it was their fifth loss in their last six games.

When the rankings come out Monday, Iowa will no longer be in the top 25 for the first time since November. In losing to the Fighting Illini, the Hawkeyes also saw any hopes of obtaining a first round bye in the Big Ten Tournament go out the window. Now in order to win that tourney, they’ll have to win four games in four days.

Three games in three days might have been doable. Four games in four days seems unlikely though, especially if Iowa now falls to the No. 6 seed and has to go through both Michigan State and Wisconsin just to reach the title game.

Let’s say Iowa does fall to the No. 6 seed. The path would likely start with playing a Purdue team that is the only team the Hawkeyes have beaten over the last three weeks, and even that win left some doubt. Playing the Boilermakers again in less than two weeks and doing so in the state of Indiana probably isn’t a good thing.

Now let’s say Iowa is able to get by Purdue and has to play Michigan State again for the fourth year in a row. Between what happened in East Lansing two nights ago and the previous three meetings with the Spartans before that, is there really any reason to believe something different happens next week?

McCaffery just acknowledged his team is fragile. If and when Iowa plays Michigan State again, the Hawkeyes are probably going to crack like they usually do because the same sequence of events will occur.

Other Big Ten teams such as Ohio State and Wisconsin have also endured stretches where, like the Hawkeyes, they both lost five of six games. But there's a difference between having that turbulence in the middle of January like those teams did versus dealing with it now in the middle of March and right before tournament play begins.

One thing does need to be established here and now: Iowa is still going to make the NCAA Tournament. Yes, it possesses the exact same regular season record of 20-11 that it had last year. Yes, it's 9-9 again in Big Ten play. But here's the difference: Last year's squad wasn't able to win games like the ones Iowa has won this season against Ohio State and Michigan. Those two victories alone are enough reason that the Hawkeyes will dance.

In saying that, however, that first NCAA Tournament appearance since 2006 might end up being just as brief as that one was. Barring a phenomenal weekend in Indianapolis, Iowa's staring at the very real possibility of being an 8 or 9 seed in the NCAA Tournament.

That means being podded with a No. 1 seed and with the way it works now with geography, it's as unfavorable as it could get. Having to potentially play a team like No. 1 Florida in Orlando or a team like No. 3 Arizona in San Diego that first weekend won't benefit a team with a fragile psyche (again, McCaffery's word).

Are the Hawkeyes damaged beyond repair? Probably. But there are at least two games that remain to be played and how Iowa manages to finish this out could prove telling as far as what the future holds.

If that fragility isn't figured out now, it might not ever be.