

Last second 3-pointer silences Hawkeyes

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – As Illinois' Jon Ekey released a 3-pointer directly in the face of Iowa's Aaron White, the ball sailed directly through the netting and left what was a rowdy Carver-Hawkeye Arena in total disbelief.

That 3-pointer with 0.5 seconds left gave Illinois a 66-63 win over No. 24 Iowa on Saturday, which proved to be the Hawkeyes' fifth loss in their last six games. At 9-9 in Big Ten play, losing this game also assures that Iowa will be playing in the first round of the Big Ten Tournament, which takes place at Bankers Life Fieldhouse in Indianapolis.

As if all that wasn't enough, Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery also made a rather revealing comment afterwards.

"I think we're a little bit fragile," McCaffery said after his team finished with the exact same 20-11 record it had entering last year's Big Ten Tournament. "I think that's safe to say."

Saturday's game had a real ugly start to it for the Hawkeyes, as Illinois opened by making six of its first nine shots and jumping out to a 20-6 lead with 13:49 remaining in the first half.

Then the Hawkeyes began to put clamps down defensively and played nearly 14 minutes of its best defense in weeks. Not only was Iowa able to overcome that 14-point hole and take a 34-29 lead with it into halftime, but the Hawkeyes also held the Fighting Illini to just nine points over that stretch.

Illinois began to climb back early in the second half, but

Iowa would stay ahead thanks in part to the play of White and sophomore center Adam Woodbury. White posted team-highs of 12 points and eight rebounds, while Woodbury contributed with 11 points on 5-of-7 shooting.

But then came the drought. Iowa had a stretch of five-plus minutes where it wasn't able to score and the Fighting Illini proceeded to go on an 11-0 run to take a 59-54 lead with 6:37 remaining.

"Our defense wasn't awful like it had been. It was definitely improved and it can still get better," senior guard Devyn Marble said after being held under double figures scoring for the first time in Big Ten play on Saturday. "But our offense was stagnant, especially towards the end of the second half."

The Hawkeyes would tie the game twice. First, a 3-pointer by sophomore guard Mike Gesell tied it at 59-59, then after forcing Illinois to burn a timeout to avoid a 10-second call, Iowa came away with a steal and junior center Gabe Olaseni made a lay-up with 40 seconds left to tie it at 63-63.

With the game tied, Iowa had a foul to give, but didn't want to use it in that instance. Unfortunately for the Hawkeyes, Gesell would be called for a foul with 13 seconds left that allowed the Fighting Illini to take the last shot.

Ekey got the ball and with White in his face, heaved up a prayer that was nothing but net. Senior forward Zach McCabe then attempted an inbound pass to mid-court with the idea that Iowa can get off a catch-and-shoot, but the pass was intercepted and the clock ran out.

"I don't have the full grasp of what everyone is feeling, but me personally, I'm frustrated," White said. "Confused as to why we aren't playing like we were at the beginning of the year, or not even the beginning of the year, but two-and-a-half weeks ago, three weeks ago."

“We’ve got to play with a sense of urgency.”

Now the Hawkeyes wait and see. They’ll for sure be playing either Northwestern or Purdue on March 13 in the first round of the Big Ten Tournament, but seeding will hinge on the outcome of Sunday’s game between No. 22 Michigan State and Ohio State.

If the Spartans win in Columbus, Iowa would be the No. 5 seed and face the loser of Sunday’s Northwestern-Purdue game in the 5-12 match-up at approximately 1:30 p.m. Central. However, a Buckeye victory would drop Iowa to the No. 6 seed and it would face the winner of that Northwestern-Purdue contest in the 6-11 match-up at approximately 8 p.m. Central. The Big Ten Network will televise the 5-12 game, while ESPN2 will carry the 6-11 contest.