

COMMENTARY: When it all falls apart (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

INDIANAPOLIS, Ind. – Right now, the Iowa Hawkeyes' 2013-14 season resembles that of a Jenga puzzle.

Game after game for the past few weeks, Iowa's play has deteriorated much like a Jenga puzzle when the piece that gets removed causes everything to collapse. Even the simplest pieces aren't holding their weight.

Now let's apply it here to basketball and specifically with this team. Right now, there are several layers regarding what's wrong with the Hawkeyes and their 67-62 loss to Northwestern on Thursday proved evident of that.

If we're being honest, this was a game Iowa should have had zero business losing. Northwestern was a team the Hawkeyes beat twice by 26 points each time. For a first round game, this was as favorable a match-up as there could have been.

Yet the issues that have plagued this team where it has played seven games and lost six of them reared their heads again. Defensively, Iowa allowed the Wildcats to shoot over 50 percent from the floor and they nearly shot 50 percent (11-of-23 to be precise) from 3-point range. Not only that, but Northwestern was also able to come away with scores as the shot clock was winding down.

Afterwards, players were saying in the locker room how their communication was dreadful on defense. That's not something that should be happening in March when teams are hoping they start to peak. Nor should it be something that becomes a

recurring theme in losses at this point in the season.

But it goes beyond lack of fundamentals. Something mentally isn't there and quite frankly, that something hasn't been there for most of the season, if not all of it.

How else do you explain Iowa out-rebounding Northwestern, making more free throws than the Wildcats attempt and having fewer turnovers yet losing the game? Shooting was seriously the only statistical edge Northwestern had the entire evening, but it proved to be enough to get the win.

I do believe there's a bond of togetherness with this team. The fact that all the players wore T-shirts paying homage to head coach Fran McCaffery's son Patrick – who is having surgery next week to remove a tumor from his thyroid – suggests there's a unison of sorts. But that didn't really show in this defeat.

Are roles in question? Perhaps. It might explain why Aaron White scored the first five points of the game for Iowa, only to not even shoot the ball the rest of the contest. How does that happen with a guy who has owned Northwestern throughout his career, who is considered one of the best players on this team and who has shown moments such as when Iowa lost to Michigan back in January where he'll put the team on his back if need be? Throw in the fact that Northwestern essentially played a 6-man rotation the entire night and this is even more baffling.

But White was far from the only player not scoring. Both Mike Gesell and Melsahn Basabe finished with only one point. In fact, Gesell shot 0-of-10 from the floor Thursday and from that standpoint played one of the worst games of his career. Not to mention Iowa didn't get any scoring or rebounding whatsoever in 15 minutes of play from Adam Woodbury.

This was a collective effort all around and while it may not actually be one piece causing everything to topple over, the

bottom line is everything is toppling over and the timing couldn't be any worse for this team.

It's alarming when a team on the cusp of its first NCAA Tournament appearance since 2006 – and make no mistake, Iowa will still be playing in the NCAA Tournament next week – isn't playing like a team close to something special, something that fans have waited a long time to see happen again.

Now it might be too little, too late. Mainly because like that Jenga puzzle, everything's falling apart.