COMMENTARY: A memorable defeat

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

DAYTON, Ohio – “Memorable” usually isn’t a word thrown around to describe an event that left many disappointed. But even in losing 78-65 to Tennessee on Wednesday in the first round of the 2014 NCAA Tournament, the overtime defeat is one that won’t be forgotten inside the Iowa program anytime soon.

Sure, it seems crazy to say that about what somehow ended up being the Hawkeyes’ worst defeat of the season in terms of point differential. Of Iowa’s 12 losses coming into Wednesday’s First Four contest at UD Arena, only one (March 6 at Michigan State) came by double figures (10 points). It might also seem crazy to suggest a loss in what was the Hawkeyes’ first NCAA Tournament game since 2006 would be memorable.

But it ended up being just that, and in a variety of ways. Let’s start with the obvious, which has nothing to do with anything on the court. Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery might not have won the basketball game he coached Wednesday, but he and his family had a victory of sorts earlier in the day.

His son Patrick had surgery Wednesday at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics to remove a tumor from his thyroid. McCaffery flew back to Iowa City to be there for his son – who turns 14 on Thursday – during his operation. As he flew back to Dayton, he said through a statement issued by the UI that Patrick’s surgery went according to plan.

Throw in on top of that the outpouring of support the McCafferys received from all across the United States and

that’s bigger than any game. That’s something that will always be memorable to him.

As for what took place on the court at UD Arena, let’s start with, well, the start. This should prove memorable because in the game’s early minutes, it looked like Iowa might ride that wave of emotion to a win and a trip to Raleigh, N.C. for the second round of the NCAA Tournament. But it wasn’t the scoring that made this memorable. It was seeing the energy from everyone on that roster being back on display like it was during the first 20 games of the season when Iowa was 16-4.

The Hawkeyes looked as loose as they had been in weeks and it was probably no coincidence they played some of their best basketball in weeks on Wednesday. Again, it’s crazy to think Iowa lost this game by 13 points when the Hawkeyes led the overwhelming majority of regulation.

It will also prove memorable because of the play of two specific players, both of who will be returning next season. One is sophomore center Adam Woodbury and the other is freshman guard Peter Jok.

Woodbury not only played his best game of the season Wednesday by tallying team-highs of 16 points and eight rebounds. He played the best game of his career. Not just because of the stats he posted, but because of the tone he set. He was active, he was talking to guys on defense, he got open in the paint and had his way with Tennessee’s bigs.

On the biggest stage any of those Hawkeye players had ever played on, Woodbury reminded Iowa fans why McCaffery keeping him in-state and not seeing Roy Williams poach another in-state kid to play at North Carolina at his expense was significant in the revival of this basketball program.

Then there’s Jok. He played 16 minutes off the bench and scored 10 points. He didn’t seem rattled at all by the moment and when combining that with what he provided the previous

three games prior, the development in his game is beginning to blossom. That’s an incredibly positive sign for Iowa looking ahead to 2014-15.

Is it heartbreaking for a team when its season ends in the NCAA Tournament? Sure. But even McCaffery said afterwards how everyone has this goal, yet 67 of the 68 teams invited see their seasons end in agonizing defeat.

This team – at least the players returning – now realize what they’re capable of and how they can improve in light of that. This program hadn’t tasted what many would consider to be success for eight years, until Wednesday night.

Now that it has gotten a taste, a new chapter is being written regarding Iowa basketball. The first page of that chapter came Wednesday night.