

2/7/2011: Iowa men's basketball notebook



Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming match-up with No. 13 Wisconsin during a press conference with the local media on Monday, Feb. 7, 2011 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in Iowa City.

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HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – The Iowa Hawkeyes have had plenty of reason to smile this past week.

After wins over both Michigan State and Indiana, Iowa is currently riding a two-game winning streak in conference play, something it had not possessed since the 2006-07 season.

But reaching three straight won't come easy for the Hawkeyes, who play host No. 13 Wisconsin on Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. inside Carver-Hawkeye Arena. The Badgers are 17-5 overall and come into this contest tied for second in the Big Ten at 7-3 in conference play.

The one Wisconsin player who has caught the attention of Iowa

head coach Fran McCaffery is point guard Jordan Taylor, and rightfully so. Taylor currently has an assist-to-turnover ratio of 3.88, which leads the Big Ten. Since conference play began, Taylor has also averaged 20.7 points per game, which is second only to Purdue's JaJuan Johnson.

"He just seems to have that incredible knack to know exactly what his team needs at any particular point in time," McCaffery said. "He has got tremendous feel. If he's moving without the ball, he's always open. If he has the ball, he's great in ball screens. He's great in the open floor.

"I think this guy has established himself, not only in our league, but nationally."

One possible advantage that could work in the Hawkeyes' favor is home-court. The Badgers' lone Big Ten road win this season came at Northwestern, and Iowa actually defeated Wisconsin in overtime when the Badgers last visited Carver-Hawkeye Arena during the 2008-09 season.

The fan support is something the Hawkeye players are hoping for this week, but they also understand the importance of remaining consistent in their recent play.

"We want Carver to be filled, and it starts with our preparation and our output on the court," junior guard Bryce Cartwright said. "We want to continue that pace."

Leuer, Nankivil present challenging match-up

While McCaffery and junior guard Matt Gatens both spoke highly of Wisconsin point guard Jordan Taylor, who currently averages 17 points and four assists per contest, the match-up being talked about most is in the frontcourt.

Senior center Jarryd Cole and freshman forward Melsahn Basabe will draw the assignments of having to contain the Badgers' dynamic duo of 6-10 center John Leuer and 6-8 forward Keaton

Nankivil. On Monday, Leuer was named the Big Ten's Player of the Week after averaging 22 points and 9.5 rebounds in home wins over Purdue and Michigan State.

"He looks like he's almost playing in slow motion, but he is a terrific athlete," McCaffery said about Leuer. "He's one of those guys, he goes by you, and he gets open. You think you can get up into him, but it's his length and he has got a great first step.

"He has got the quickness that you need, and I think that's why he's going to be a good pro.

As for Nankivil, he has scored double figures in all but two Big Ten games for the Badgers this season. He also currently leads the Big Ten in 3-point field goal percentage, shooting 52.2 percent overall from beyond the arc and 57.8 percent in conference play.

"It's going to be a huge defensive test for us this week," Cole said. "These guys, they can both step out, shoot the 3-pointer, they can drive to the paint. They have decent ball-handling skills, they can shoot mid-range jumpers, they can finish in front of the basket.

"What we're going to have to do is stop them first and foremost, and then figure out what we can get accomplished on the offensive end."

Emergence of Cartwright

One Hawkeye player who has quickly emerged as a team leader is Cartwright, who has led the Big Ten in assists since conference play started.

Following Iowa's 87-73 loss to Michigan, a game where Cartwright finished with nine assists, he went on to post a double-double of 12 points and 10 assists in the Hawkeyes' 72-52 win over Michigan State, then made the game-winning shot

in Iowa's 64-63 win over Indiana last weekend. Against the Hoosiers, Cartwright had 15 points and eight assists.

Even more impressive though, has been his lack of turnovers. In the last three games, Cartwright has a total of just eight giveaways.

Cartwright said there wasn't a specific moment where the light suddenly turned on, but rather that it has simply been a progression for him with each game.

"Just seeing me get assists in some games and score, it lets you know that you can do that," Cartwright said. "It lets you gain more confidence with every play. I know I do.

"I can't pinpoint an exact time, but I know that it's happening."

The changes Cartwright has made to his game is something that McCaffery not only has noticed, but sees as a reason why other players are beginning to trust the point guard's decision-making. He also hinted that even when sophomore guard Cully Payne returns from injury, Cartwright would remain in the lineup.

"We've only got him for one more year," McCaffery said. "I think if he was a freshman, that would be a more difficult question to answer. But going into next year, I think he has established himself, clearly."

Assistants out recruiting

One intriguing dynamic from Iowa's win at Indiana last weekend was that it took place with half of the coaching staff absent. Assistant coaches Andrew Francis and Sherman Dillard were both out recruiting over the weekend and didn't make the trip to Bloomington, Ind., with the rest of the team.

McCaffery was asked about this Monday, and made mention of how it was planned in advance for them to be out recruiting.

“At the beginning of the year, you get out when you can, and you want to make sure everybody is on the bench,” McCaffery said. “But as you go further into the season, you have fewer opportunities, so you got to go.”

Despite Francis and Dillard not being with the team, neither McCaffery nor his players noticed any sort of dropoff in preparation without either presence on the bench, especially since the Hawkeyes had already played the Hoosiers prior to last weekend’s meeting.

“Playing a team for the second time, we knew a lot about them and we were ready for them,” Gatens said. “[The assistants] have to go out and do other things, too, while the season is going on. I know they’re keeping close tabs on us, and they’ll be back around.”

Brust situation resurfaces

Wisconsin freshman guard Ben Brust isn’t a starter for the Badgers, but his name is one that was a topic of conversation on Monday.

Prior to McCaffery being hired, Brust was a member of what turned out to be former head coach Todd Lickliter’s final recruiting class at Iowa. However, Brust was granted a release from his scholarship and following a final decision from the conference, went on to sign with the Badgers.

On Wednesday, Brust will be making his first appearance in Iowa City wearing Wisconsin red. When asked about the situation that unfolded last spring, McCaffery said he had no problem with letting the 6-1 guard go to Madison.

“When Ben left, he left with our blessing,” McCaffery said. “It wasn’t like we were fighting to keep him and there was some fierce recruiting battle. He didn’t want to be here, and we were more than comfortable with letting him go.”

"Then it was, well, would it be O.K. if he went to Wisconsin, and that was fine with us."

McCaffery also revealed Monday that even if Brust stayed on board at Iowa, bringing in Cartwright would have still been a priority.

"We would've brought Bryce in anyway because Ben is not a point guard," McCaffery said. "If you think about it, with Cully [Payne] getting hurt, had we not brought in Bryce, we'd be in big trouble right now, with all due respect to Devyn Marble, who is tremendous."

"But we needed another handler, so we were going to go get one. Ben, he's a shooter."

One of the players who chose to stay at Iowa from that recruiting class was freshman guard Devyn Marble, who was close with Brust during the process.

Having gone through the same situation with being re-recruited once McCaffery arrived, Marble said there was never any animosity with Brust's decision to attend Wisconsin instead.

"I think he really wanted to be a Hawkeye, but he had to do what was best for him and his family," Marble said. "I respect that decision, and he's still a good friend of mine today."

Iowa-Illinois game set

The Big Ten announced the scheduling for games the weekend of Feb. 26-27, with one of those contests being Iowa's visit to Illinois.

The Hawkeyes and Fighting Illini are slated to meet at Assembly Hall in Champaign, Ill., on Feb. 26, which is a Saturday. This match-up is scheduled to start at 6 p.m. Central that evening and will be televised by the Big Ten Network. Illinois won the previous meeting at Carver-Hawkeye Arena, 87-77, in what was the conference opener for both

squads.

No date or time has been set yet for Iowa's regular season finale the following weekend, a home game against Purdue.