

3/8/2011: Iowa men's basketball notebook



Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming first round game in the 2011 Big Ten Tournament against Michigan State during a press conference held on Tuesday, March 8, 2011 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – For the first time since 2007, the Iowa Hawkeyes are heading to the Big Ten Tournament to play an opponent not named Michigan.

In fact, Iowa's first-round contest comes against the Wolverines' in-state foe from East Lansing, Michigan State.

When the Hawkeyes and Spartans meet in the 7-10 game at 4 p.m. Central on Thursday inside Conseco Fieldhouse in Indianapolis, Ind., a meeting with second-seeded Purdue in the quarterfinals will be on the line.

Senior center Jarryd Cole called it “refreshing” to face a different team in the Big Ten Tournament after each of his first three seasons at Iowa have ended in Indianapolis with losses to the Wolverines. His teammates echoed those sentiments.

“I think it’s a good draw,” junior guard Matt Gatens said about getting Michigan State this time. “They’re obviously a great opponent, but we know we can beat them.”

Although the Hawkeyes find themselves in a position where they need to win four games in four days in order to reach the NCAA Tournament (let alone any sort of postseason), the message conveyed by head coach Fran McCaffery has been the cliched “one game at a time.”

“You’ve got to win one. That’s it,” McCaffery said. “You’ve got to win one, so all we’re worried about right now is Michigan State. That’s it. Then we’ll go from there.”

Familiarity may prove beneficial

One of the interesting components with Thursday’s contest is that the Hawkeyes and Spartans just faced each other last week at the Breslin Center in East Lansing, a game won by Michigan State, 85-66.

What makes the match-up all the more intriguing is that one of Iowa’s four Big Ten victories came against the Spartans back on Feb. 2, a game the Hawkeyes won 72-52 and Michigan State head coach Tom Izzo described as the worst performance he had seen since succeeding Jud Heathcote in 1995.

Freshman guard Devyn Marble said that unlike both of the regular season bouts between the two squads, he expects Round 3 to be “a dogfight.” Other players are also anticipating a similar game.

“Both teams want to have postseason aspirations,” junior guard

Bryce Cartwright said, adding that this was a winnable game for Iowa. "That's what's expected. We know we have a long road ahead of us, but if we want to make it, that's what we're going to have to do."

Sparty's downfall

For Michigan State fans, this season was not what many of them were expecting, especially after coming off consecutive trips to the Final Four.

The Spartans did finish in the 4-way tie for fourth place at 9-9 in the Big Ten, but lost tiebreakers to all three of the teams they were tied with, giving Michigan State the 7 seed for only the second time in the history of the Big Ten Tournament.

This comes after being tabbed No. 2 in the country in the first AP poll released back in October, as well as being the preseason favorite to win the Big Ten this season.

College basketball experts have said Thursday's game is a must-win for the Spartans in order to keep hopes alive of making yet another NCAA Tournament. But McCaffery struggled with the thought of Michigan State not making the field of 68 given its current state, and even made a crack about bracketology in general.

"I don't think it's that surprising when you look at the league. There are a lot of good teams," McCaffery said. "They haven't lost to anybody that's not good."

"Joe Lunardi still has them in, so I think he knows everything there is to know about that stuff, apparently."

Cartwright, Basabe being honored by Big Ten

On Monday, Cartwright and freshman forward Melsahn Basabe were both recognized by the Big Ten, being named Honorable Mention as the conference handed out postseason accolades. Basabe was

also named to the Big Ten's all-Freshman team, joining the likes of of players such as Ohio State's Jared Sullinger and Michigan's Tim Hardaway, Jr.

What makes their accolades interesting is that neither player was on Iowa's radar until McCaffery arrived last spring. Basabe originally committed to McCaffery at Siena before opting to follow him to Iowa, while Cartwright was discovered by the coaching staff later on in the process.

McCaffery reiterated how he felt Basabe was someone "scratching the surface" in terms of what he can become on the court.

"I think what we'll see next year is a bigger, stronger, more consistent version of what we saw this year, so his numbers will be improved," McCaffery said about Basabe.

As for Cartwright, he attributed his honors to managing success and being able to have the right mindset to be a point guard in the Big Ten.

"I think handling [success] and the way I've handled it has made me become a better player," Cartwright said.

Looking ahead

Two sets of questions looking beyond this week were brought up to McCaffery during his press conference Tuesday. One set was questions regarded what he'll look into as far as spring recruiting is concerned. The other set had to do with the types of end-of-season meetings he will have with current players.

On the recruiting front, McCaffery made clear that in terms of filling his final two available scholarships for this spring, the most important aspects would be shooting and athleticism. He added that while Iowa would need to land a post player, it's not a necessity if they find two guards that are simply

better players and fits for what McCaffery and his coaching staff want to do.

“If I had a chance to get a 6-3 guy or a 6-5 guy that was better than the 6-9 guy I could get, I would take the better player pretty much no matter what,” McCaffery said.

He also addressed whether there was a possibility of any current players leaving. McCaffery said he doesn’t anticipate any attrition, but also acknowledged that any player who were to leave for whatever reason wouldn’t be catching him off guard.

McCaffery also said he intends to sit down and meet with each member of the team now at season’s end and make clear with them where they currently stand.

“I want feedback,” McCaffery said about communicating with his players. “I want my players to have a personality and to be able to tell me if there’s something they don’t agree with or they don’t like. They might not like the answer they get back, but we have to be able to have that conversation.”