

10/27/2011: One-on-One with Fran McCaffery

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ROSEMONT, Ill. – The following is a Q&A done by *HawkeyeDrive.com* with Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery during the 2011 Big Ten Basketball Media Day at the Crowne Plaza O'Hare. The premise of this Q&A was to get McCaffery's perspective on a variety of college basketball and Big Ten-related topics that aren't necessarily Iowa specific.

HawkeyeDrive.com (HD): From your perspective as a college basketball coach, what goes through your mind when you hear talk about conference realignment?

Fran McCaffery: I don't think about it very much because I have tremendous confidence in Jim Delany, and our relationships from one institution to another. We are solid. Might we add another team or two? Maybe down the road. But, nobody's leaving. Nobody's looking. We've created a model that's pretty successful, so I'm really excited. It's one of the reasons why I really wanted to be a part of it a couple of years ago.

HD: What about when you hear of other conferences and other schools talking about leaving?

McCaffery: I don't know enough about it. I think it's interesting to look at, it's interesting to think about, to talk about, but I don't know all that goes into that. I know that I wouldn't want to be one of those schools that was going through the worry of "Is our conference intact? Is everybody leaving? What are we going to do? Where are we going to end up?"

I remember when I was at Siena, being sort of a high mid-major, we were anticipating this. We were kind of thinking about, "Where would we end up?" Would we move to the Atlantic 10, for example, from the MAAC, as the Big East might invade the Atlantic 10. Would we end up in the Atlantic 10? We were positioning ourselves to move, if we had to, and had the conversation about that. But I would much prefer to be in a situation where I don't have to worry about it.

HD: You were at Notre Dame when it moved all its sports except football into the Big East in 1995. What went into the decision-making then?

McCaffery: Well back then, it was a very unique time because our football team was the best team in the country when I was there. Lou Holtz was coaching. We had just signed an NBC deal. Exclusive. Nobody had anything close to that. That wasn't going to change. We had to evaluate ourselves. We were an independent, but we never played on ESPN, and the climate changed.

Recruits are watching ESPN. They're watching television, and we're on NBC on Saturdays periodically, but we were never on "Big Monday" and things like that. So we were getting hurt in recruiting. We also didn't have the conference tournament, which hurt us in recruiting. So John MacLeod went to Dick Rosenthal and said, "We got to make a change." Dick Rosenthal, the AD at the time, was brilliant. He went about it the right way.

I remember I was called into a meeting, and we were told we had just joined the ACC. We said, "O.K., great. We're in the ACC now in basketball." Then a couple of days later, we got called in and they said, "No, no. Change of plans. We're going to the Big East," which I thought was a good fit for Notre Dame at that time because of the sense of the alumni we had, particularly along the East Coast. It helped that program immensely.

We were dying a slow death in men's basketball at Notre Dame in the late '80s, early '90s. Dying a slow death. Had to join a conference. The Big East has been great for them. Now, I still think it will be great for them. It's still a great basketball conference. The football component, I think, became much more of a concern for a lot of the schools. You look at the Big East with all the phenomenal basketball programs, traditional Catholic schools in the East without football. I mean, Villanova is still going to fill the building when they play basketball. But, O.K., how does football impact where they end up? UConn, they were an average mid-major football team 20 years ago. Now last year, they played in a BCS game. So that impacted it.

There has been a lot of change with regard to the topic you asked me about, primarily centered around football. That's why, for us, it's great that we have terrific basketball and terrific football. I think that's what eventually will endure over time.

HD: If the Big Ten ever does consider adding again like it did with Nebraska last year, what are the characteristics you would like to see in a school that were to get added? Would it be a school that as you said would have strong ties with both football and basketball?

McCaffery: I think there's no question. I wouldn't want to begin to speculate on who we should go after. I think Jim has got that pretty much figured out. He'll decide, and the presidents of this conference and ADs of this conference, they'll figure out who the best fit is. But it's going to be somebody that plays good football. It's going to be somebody that plays good basketball. And it's going to be somebody that does it the right way. We're not bringing bandits into this league.

HD: Penn State hired Patrick Chambers. He, like you, has ties to the Philadelphia area. What were your thoughts when you

heard they hired him to replace someone I know is a good friend of yours in Ed DeChellis?

McCaffery: Pat's a good friend. I was really happy for him. I think as professionals, we're excited for a friend who has an opportunity like he has. Five or six years ago, well it's probably more than that now, I talked to him. He was an assistant at Villanova, and I was the head coach at Siena. His brother had just wrote and directed the movie "The Mighty Macs," which just came out about the Immaculata women's basketball team. My sister-in-law is an actress and they were going to get my sister-in-law in the movie. Timmy, his brother, I went to Penn with. He was a football player, I was a basketball player. She's actually one of the players on the team in the movie.

Pat and I are good friends and we'll be fierce competitors. We might go after a couple of guys in Philly, periodically. But he'll do a great job there. There's no question in my mind. And you know what, I was happy for Ed. Ed's one of my best friends in the business. But it was time in his mind to make a move, and he's really excited about the challenge of being at one of the most prestigious institutions in our country, the U.S. Naval Academy. So good for him. I'm happy for him. He'll be great there.

HD: Thad Matta said Jared Sullinger's decision to return to Ohio State was something that was planned all along. But with the NBA lockout currently going on, how much do you think that impacted decisions made by college players to stay in school?

McCaffery: I think it was a factor. I mean, if you're sitting there and you're Jared Sullinger, you're looking at a variety of factors, and that was one of them. It's funny, at the time I'm thinking to myself, "He might be the first pick," and I didn't think he'd come back. But I respect the fact that he did, because I think he did it for all the right reasons, and he looks like a genius now because who wants to be sitting

around now? No signing bonuses, no minicamps. You don't even know if they're going to have a season. He's in great shape, and they'll have a terrific team, and he'll be the first pick this year.

HD: How does it impact college basketball going into this season, just in general with the entire landscape?

McCaffery: Well, there's just more good players. You know, I don't know how many of them didn't go strictly because of that reason. I just think it was one of the factors they thought about, and a couple of them have benefited from where the problems are now with the NBA.

HD: Twenty years ago, the "Fab Five" was at Michigan, and you had an opportunity to go against them when you were at Notre Dame. What do you remember about preparing to play them?

McCaffery: I actually coached in the first game when [Steve Fisher] started all five. I was on the bench. It was at Notre Dame they played the freshmen for the first time, they started them, and it kind of went from there. But Jimmy King almost went to Notre Dame, and we tried to recruit [Chris] Webber. Webber was a terrific student in high school. But I remember, I think the thing that sticks out is the swagger that they had. They didn't conduct themselves. They didn't act like freshmen. I think they changed the perception from that point forward on what freshmen think of themselves, and they sort of come in with the idea that you're going to have an impact, you're not going to contribute. You're going to have a major impact, and that's what has happened.

HD: Is this something that can still happen in this day and age in college basketball where a coach could start five true freshmen like that?

McCaffery: Yeah. Well, I mean [John] Calipari's kind of doing it. He's kind of doing it. You could. But it shouldn't happen that way. You should have enough players in your program that

it's going to be hard to beat out some juniors and seniors. If you bring in the right five guys, it's a possibility. But it hasn't happened since, and let's not forget how they all arrived there, because I don't think it's something to be proud of, quite frankly. I don't think Michigan's proud of it. I think you're talking about two different things here, but if you go to the arena right now, there's nothing up on the banner. There's no banner hanging for a reason, so we'll see.

HD: So you're saying it could happen in today's game?

McCaffery: It could happen, but I think there's a very small likelihood.

HD: Now if you were ever in a position where you had five freshmen coming in and you thought those five were your best at that point in time, would you start all five?

McCaffery: I would start them in a second. But I wouldn't start them to make a point, and I wouldn't promise them that they were going to start to get them to come. I'm never going to promise an incoming freshman somebody else's job, because he wouldn't want me to do that to him two years later. If I did it to give him a starting job, I could do it two years later and promise to get somebody else to come. That's not how you do it.