

COMMENTARY: McCabe starts, remains effective (premium)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – Before the Iowa Hawkeyes held their practice Nov. 25, sophomore forward Zach McCabe was informed he would be starting in place of senior forward Devon Archie, who was dealing with a sprained wrist suffered two nights earlier in a loss to Campbell.

McCabe, who started a pair of games as a freshman for an injured Matt Gatens last season, made his first start of the 2011-12 campaign Saturday and continued to be an effective force for the Hawkeyes. In 27 minutes of play, he finished with 12 points on 4-of-6 shooting and was a major contributor both early and late in Iowa's 82-72 win over IPFW at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

Now while McCabe got the start because of an injury, it's worth noting that following that Campbell loss, head coach Fran McCaffery said in his postgame press conference he had contemplated lineup changes. This turned out to be the first one he made this season, and it paid dividends to the Hawkeyes on Saturday.

Iowa led 8-3 at the first official timeout, and McCabe had five of those eight points. He essentially did at the start of the game exactly what he was doing whenever he came off the bench – provide a spark. It wasn't just scoring that made him a factor though. He also had a team-high three steals Saturday. As a team, Iowa forced 24 IPFW turnovers and scored 33 points off of them.

McCabe's teammates know the strides he has made. They notice

the improvements in his game, and they respect him for it. McCaffery has also taken notice of his development and decided to reward him for it.

Receiving this start Saturday should only help McCabe's confidence assuming he remains in the lineup (no timetable was given for Archie's return). He has consistently been putting together double-figure scoring efforts this season and is one of the few Hawkeyes that can say that.

McCabe also has proven he can play multiple spots on the floor. The coaches want him to primarily play at the 4, which is where he started Saturday's game with sophomore forward Melsahn Basabe moving over to the 5. But McCabe can also play the 5 depending on the circumstance and who else is on the floor.

For most of this game, McCabe stayed at the 4 and looked solid in doing so. Aside from some foul trouble late in the contest, he continued to show he could hold his own.

But what I also believe could eventually separate McCabe from others (and this is where him being a starter could be a major impact) is his toughness. He's not the tallest player and no one should expect to constantly guard players that are 3-5 inches taller than him. But he has the toughness needed to battle with bigs inside, crash the boards, and provide a presence where he's basically telling opponents, "You'll have to earn it every time down the court."

What I took away from talking with him after Saturday's game is that he knows his role. It doesn't matter if he starts like he did here, or goes back to being one of the first guys off the Iowa bench. The question with McCabe, like it is with many others on this team, is consistency.

If he continues to consistently play his role to a T, McCaffery might have a difficult time taking McCabe out of the starting lineup, even if/when Archie returns from his injury.

It wouldn't be the biggest lineup Iowa has on the floor when he's at the 4 and Basabe the 5, but it can be effective.

Just like McCabe has been effective so far this season.