

1/6/2012: Iowa men's basketball notebook



Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game against No. 6 Ohio State with the local media during his press conference on Friday, Jan. 6, 2012, at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – After reeling off two straight road victories in the unlikeliest of places – Wisconsin's Kohl Center and Minnesota's Williams Arena – the Iowa Hawkeyes are back home this weekend to face their stiffest challenge yet.

Coming to town are the sixth-ranked Ohio State Buckeyes for the only meeting between the two teams this season. In fact, Saturday's contest is the first of three consecutive Iowa (2-1, 10-6) will face against top 25 opponents.

Ohio State (2-1, 14-2) won both contests against the Hawkeyes last season, one of which was a 73-68 final at Carver-Hawkeye

Arena that head coach Fran McCaffery hadn't forgotten about.

"Everybody talks about how we played well against Ohio State losing by five. They went on a 16-0 run. We turned it over seven times in that stretch," McCaffery said. "Now, we fought back. Got it to a one- or two-possession game, and that's great. But we lost the game nine minutes before that."

In that game, then-freshman forward Melsahn Basabe went toe-to-toe with Ohio State's Jared Sullinger and had a night that featured 22 points, 13 rebounds and six blocked shots. Sullinger had 24 points and 12 rebounds in that game, and followed it up two weeks later with 13 points and nine rebounds in the Buckeyes' win over Iowa at Value City Arena in Columbus.

"He'll do whatever he can to get inside and score," sophomore forward Zach McCabe said. "I think we just have to be more tough and mentally strong to not let him get that inside position."

While Sullinger will once again be the key player for the Hawkeyes to keep in check – Sullinger currently averages team-highs of 16.4 points and 9.7 rebounds per game – Iowa will also have its hands full with two other sophomores in forward Deshaun Thomas and guard Aaron Craft. Both Thomas and Craft came off the bench as freshmen, but were heavy contributors.

Now as starters, Thomas comes in as Ohio State's third-leading scorer and Craft currently leads the Buckeyes this season with 83 assists and 43 steals. Drawing the assignment of guarding the 6-2 point guard is sophomore guard Devyn Marble, who has four inches on Craft and unintentionally used a humorous cliché to describe his play.

"He's a real crafty guy ... no pun intended," Marble said. "He knows the game real well. He's one of those guys that likes to bother you on defense. I just got to protect the ball like I've been doing, and like I said, I'm up to the challenge for

anybody that steps in front of me.”

Dealing with success

Iowa’s most recent victory over Minnesota put the Hawkeyes in a position they haven’t been in for quite awhile. For starters, it marked the first time Iowa has had a winning record in Big Ten play since Steve Alford’s final season as head coach. That same year was also the last time until now the Hawkeyes have won consecutive conference games away from Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

Now with fan excitement beginning to increase, the Hawkeyes now have the challenge of dealing with success. McCaffery noted it might be a good thing right now that with the UI still on its winter break, there aren’t as many distractions for his team to currently deal with.

“Maybe they go to a restaurant, have a bite to eat, somebody says something to them,” McCaffery said. “It’s not like everywhere they go on campus, everybody is telling them how great they are.”

As of Friday, there were still 1,400 tickets available for Saturday’s game against Ohio State, and the UI is expecting its first sellout since last season’s home contest against Illinois, which was played back in December of 2010.

While the compliments from the outside appear minimal now, the players also realize what comes with having the type of atmosphere expected to be on hand inside Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

“If it’s a sellout crowd, then that must mean the fans are happy,” Basabe said. “That’s always good when you have the fans supporting you.”

Marble’s development away from ball

A point of emphasis McCaffery and his coaching staff made to Marble earlier this season was having him learning how to

impact a game when he's on the court, but without the ball in his hands.

In Iowa's last two games against Wisconsin and Minnesota, the Hawkeyes won without needing much scoring from Marble. After a string of seven consecutive games where he reached double-figures in points, Marble only had seven points against the Badgers and nine against the Golden Gophers. But in both those games, he was also able to hit shots in crunch time when Iowa needed the points from him.

"He has to make plays," McCaffery said. "He has to recognize at crunch time what are they in, what are we running, if the play breaks down what do we do from there, then make the play that presents itself, and not just look for zone

"I think that has been the development and maturity of Devyn Marble."

Marble said the biggest difference with his recent off-ball success has come playing defense. Against Wisconsin, he had the assignment of guarding Jordan Taylor and all four of his rebounds in that game came at the defensive end. More recently against Minnesota, Marble was credited with three steals.

"I'm a much better defender than when I was defending earlier," Marble said. "Defensively, Coach McCaffery wanted me to make that more of a priority. I think I've taken that challenge on."

Defensive communication improving

One aspect of Iowa's 64-62 win over Minnesota on Jan. 4 that has garnered plenty of attention was the Hawkeyes' play at the defensive end, particularly after Iowa permanently switched to playing 2-3 zone late in the first half. Following the game, Gatens made the comment that communication on defense, an area McCaffery was worried about during the early portion of the season, had begun to dramatically improve during this recent

stretch.

During Iowa's non-conference portion of the season, opponents shot 37.7 percent from 3-point range. In the past three games since Big Ten play opened up, the Hawkeyes have only surrendered 13 3-point field goals on 71 attempts. Also highlighting the defensive progress was what took place earlier in the week against Minnesota, when the Hawkeyes held the Golden Gophers without a point during the final 5:06 of the first half and clamped down on Minnesota using the 2-3 zone.

"In that 2-3, we had to talk the whole time," junior forward Eric May said. "We did a great job at it. We just got to keep learning from the times we didn't do good and fix it."

White facing home-state team

While he hasn't started any games this season, freshman forward Aaron White has played his sixth-man role to a T. He was the Hawkeyes' leading scorer with 18 points in their Dec. 31 win over Wisconsin, and followed that up with 10 points and six rebounds against Minnesota.

The Strongsville, Ohio native didn't grow up a Buckeye fan. White said Friday he has always been more of a pro sports fan, liking all three of the Cleveland teams – the Indians, Browns, and Cavaliers. But just because he didn't bleed Scarlet and Gray as a kid doesn't make Saturday's game against the Buckeyes any less meaningful to him.

"Everyone back home likes Ohio State. Everyone is looking forward to watching me play Ohio State," White said. "It's going to be exciting."