

1/24/2012: Iowa men's basketball notebook



Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game against Nebraska with the local media during his press conference on Tuesday, Jan. 24, 2012, at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – The past week for the Iowa Hawkeyes has been slightly unusual. But in the eyes of head coach Fran McCaffery, it has also been productive.

When Iowa plays Nebraska on Thursday inside Carver-Hawkeye Arena, it will be the Hawkeyes' first game in nine days following a 75-68 loss to Purdue back on Jan. 17 in West Lafayette, Ind. Although games weren't being played and positioning in the Big Ten standings wasn't really affected, McCaffery felt the need to keep his players sharp.

Iowa had practice for four straight days, then the players had two days off before re-grouping to prepare for Thursday's

contest. During that time in the gym, McCaffery said he wanted to keep them occupied by watching film, lifting, working on free-throw shooting (which cost the Hawkeyes dearly in their loss to Purdue last week after shooting 19-of-30 from the foul line).

He also was able to find what worked in terms of different lineups to throw on the court and what works in terms of situational stuff.

"While it's, I think, a fun time for them, it is a grind," McCaffery said. "And it's a long month. I think it was good. Will we be a little rusty? We'll find out."

For freshmen such as guard Josh Oglesby, who described himself as being "dead tired" when the layoff began, it was an opportunity to recover as well as digest some of the new material being thrown the players' direction.

"It was a good time to learn new plays, because everyone is scouting us," Oglesby said. "We put in a ton of plays at the beginning of the year. Now we're putting in 15-20 new plays. They call a different set, and you're just like, 'Oh, crap. What do I do now?' It's confusing, but I'm starting to get the hang of it."

Senior guard Matt Gatens said he believes the new situational plays drawn up by the coaching staff could pay dividends in the long run should the Hawkeyes find themselves in games down to the wire as they have through most of Big Ten play. He also thinks the underclassmen did well over the past week being able to absorb the amount of information thrown their way.

"It was a good time for us to get a few days off, but at the same time, get back in the gym and continue to work," Gatens said.

Facing "Nebrasketball"

Iowa's match-up with Nebraska Thursday will be the first between the two teams since 1976, as well as the inaugural meeting between the two since Nebraska joined the Big Ten.

For a player such as sophomore forward Zach McCabe, it means a little extra to play a school located right near his hometown of Sioux City.

"Obviously it's a school that people around Sioux City like," McCabe said. "I've been hearing a lot of crap from friends and stuff like that, but it will be good playing them. I'm excited."

While the Cornhuskers enter tied for last place in the conference with Penn State at 2-6, they also feature a 70-69 win over a ranked Indiana squad on their resume that just came last week. In addition, four of those six Big Ten losses have come to both Ohio State and Wisconsin, with the loss to the Badgers in Madison coming by only five points.

Leading the way for Nebraska is guard Bo Spencer, who currently averages 14.8 points per game. McCaffery said to expect a rotation between Gatens, Marble and May as for who will be assigned to keep Spencer in check.

"I think there's a lot of ways to go," McCaffery said. "Especially with a guy who is as talented offensively as him, I think different looks would be helpful."

His own harsh critic

Sophomore forward Melsahn Basabe knows he has struggled lately. When asked Tuesday to grade his overall performance this season, he placed himself in the "C-/D" range, and acknowledged being tempted to give himself an "F."

"I'm a hard grader on myself," Basabe said. "What I would say is coming out, I need to try and get every rebound, break the game down simply, and that's what I'm going to do from here on

out.”

Basabe is coming off a rather forgetful performance against Purdue last week where he only had one point and two rebounds while also committing four fouls. One thing the Glen Cove, N.Y., native said wasn't an issue however when asked about it Tuesday was his health.

“I can't say that there has been anything holding me back besides myself,” Basabe said. “Everybody feels sore, feels beat up here and there, so that's nothing else that no one else in the country isn't going through. I don't really call those injuries anything besides normal wear and tear, so I'm feeling great.”

McCaffery said he had no intentions of removing Basabe from the starting lineup, adding that he wants to continue working with him and making sure he plays the role he's best accustomed to playing.

“I'm just trying to get him to go back to doing what he does, and that's run the floor, rebound, and block shots,” McCaffery said. “Don't try to be what you're not.”

Not becoming satisfied

One of the most improved players through the course of this season has been McCabe, who has started the last 15 games for the Hawkeyes. Last week against Purdue, McCabe elevated his game to another level, scoring a career-high 20 points in the seven-point loss. It also marked the second straight contest where he scored Iowa's first six points, also doing so in a 75-59 win over Michigan back on Jan. 14.

But despite the individual performance, the fact Iowa was unable to win that game stuck with him more after reflecting back on it.

“I don't really think too much about it,” McCabe said. “We

lost. That's pretty much all that I think about."

An observation made by McCaffery regarding McCabe's recent play had to do with maturity. McCaffery said he has noticed the 6-7 forward make fewer mistakes as a sophomore and be able to immediately flush away the mistakes he does make at times.

There is one area the coach would like to see improvement though.

"I think the next phase for him is going to be improving his rebounding numbers. While they're good, I think they could be better," McCaffery said. "But again, that's asking a lot. We're asking him to be a scoring post player and also a rebounding post player. But I think he's capable of it."

Building a home-court advantage

Iowa begins a stretch this week where three of the next four games are at Carver-Hawkeye Arena (the lone road contest is Jan. 29 at No. 16 Indiana). With that in mind, the entire team is hopeful for good turnouts over the next couple of weeks, particularly from the student body.

Gatens made note of places such as Purdue and Michigan State – schools Iowa has faced on the road already this month – and how a ruckus student section could make an impact.

"You see all these other student sections rocking, and it probably would influence teams coming in here," Gatens said. "We appreciate the support from the fans and the students that have come and shown up. It's awesome, and the more we get, the better."

McCaffery echoed Gatens' comments and even took them a step further regarding how much a strong student showing could influence an opponent's play at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

"What I would like to do is make this an impossible place to win," McCaffery said.