

2/14/2012: Iowa men's basketball notebook



Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game at Penn State with the local media during his press conference on Tuesday, Feb. 14, 2012, at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in Iowa City.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa — As the Iowa Hawkeyes find themselves entering the home stretch of their 2011-12 season, familiarity will begin to become more of a theme as five of the remaining six regular season games feature opponents the Hawkeyes have already faced.

The final third of Iowa's Big Ten slate begins with the Hawkeyes traveling to State College, Pa., to face a Penn State squad on Feb. 16 it has already played this month. Iowa won the first meeting between the two teams back on Feb. 4 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena, 77-64.

While there isn't an overwhelming concern of playing the same

opponent twice over a span of 12 days as the Hawkeyes will be doing with the Nittany Lions, there may be some benefit in terms of the players' memory banks when it comes to scouting and preparation.

"The players are fresh in our minds, and the game plan, I think it does help in that sense," sophomore guard Devyn Marble said. "It should be easier."

Penn State currently sits in a tie for last place with Nebraska at 3-10, but all three of the Nittany Lions' Big Ten wins have come in the confines of the Bryce Jordan Center, and two of those victories came against Purdue and Illinois.

"I think the thing about Penn State that has been impressive to me is how hard they have continued to compete night-in and night-out and how well they play at home," Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery said. "They shoot it better. They defend well. I think [Patrick Chambers] has got them playing really hard."

Keying on Frazier

If Iowa is to beat Penn State for the second time this month, the key will once again be keeping point guard Tim Frazier in check.

Frazier, who is currently the Big Ten's second-leading scorer averaging 18.5 points per game, is coming off perhaps his best performance of the season against Nebraska last weekend. The Nittany Lions won 67-51 thanks in large part to Frazier finishing one assist shy of a triple-double with 23 points on 7-of-9 shooting, 10 rebounds and nine assists.

The floater Frazier is known for being effective with among the many things that catches McCaffery's attention, and perhaps the one aspect of his game that receives the biggest praise.

"How many guys make the floater consistently? I mean, come up

with five. I can't," McCaffery said. "I've got Tony Parker and Ben Gordon and Tim Frazier and that's about it.

"Who makes the floater consistently? He does."

Although Frazier also finished with 23 points in Penn State's first meeting with Iowa, he also had seven turnovers to only five assists and shot just 50 percent from the floor. Conversely, Iowa senior guard Bryce Cartwright had perhaps his best game of the season that afternoon with 17 points, seven rebounds and five assists.

"We were corralling him, getting him out of the lane, making him shoot 15-20 tough shots instead of 15 lay-ups," Gatens said. "Bryce did a quality job on him last time, along with Marble and the whole team."

Intense practices

Coming off an 83-64 loss to Northwestern that McCaffery described as a disappointment on all fronts, the Hawkeyes used its second of two byes handed out by the Big Ten going through a four-day rotation consisting of rest and practice.

McCaffery gave his players two days off – Friday and Sunday – but followed each of these days off with what both he and his players called "intense" practices.

"We were just really focusing on getting better defensively, working hard as a unit," said freshman forward Aaron White, who finished with a double-double of 17 points and 12 rebounds in that defeat to Northwestern. "It was good to have those days off I think to recharge and refocus for the next practice, which was good."

Sophomore forward Melsahn Basabe provided specifics of how the two practices featured full scrimmages. He said having a couple of scrimmages at this point in the season could prove of benefit considering how much the Hawkeyes struggled last

week in Evanston.

“That’s when you get the most competitive, when you compete with each other,” Basabe said. “Scrimmaging, everything’s on the line like a game, so I think that’s the best way to learn. That’s what Coach really emphasizes – that we need to take the scrimmages serious because that’s the closest we can get to game situations.”

Non-conference scheduling

The topic of non-conference scheduling came up during McCaffery’s press conference on Tuesday, and one noteworthy item emerged.

When discussing the future of non-conference scheduling, McCaffery made clear he’d look to make it tougher as Iowa continues to improve under his watch, saying there have been talks with schools from each of the power conferences. Iowa is already set to play in the [Cancun Challenge](#) next November, which will include DePaul (Big East), Western Kentucky (Sun Belt) and Wichita State (Missouri Valley).

The Hawkeyes are also slated to play an ACC opponent yet to be determined in the Big Ten/ACC Challenge, as well as a home game against Iowa State. Then came the line of intrigue from McCaffery.

“We’re going to play the other game in Des Moines, either against Drake or Northern Iowa,” McCaffery said.

Iowa has played home-and-homes against both Northern Iowa and Drake since the 1990-91 season. The Hawkeyes lost to UNI 80-60 at the McLeod Center last December, while their last appearance at the Knapp Center resulted in a 59-52 win over Drake back in December 2010.

Nothing has been officially announced as to whether the home-and-homes with both schools would be discontinued. If nothing

changes with either intrastate series, UNI would visit Carver-Hawkeye Arena while Drake would draw Iowa at home next season.

Reaching some sort of postseason

Barring a repeat of what transpired at the 2001 Big Ten Tournament, Iowa's odds of reaching the NCAA tournament are virtually non-existent.

But with 13 wins out of the way and the Hawkeyes entering Tuesday in a four-way tie for seventh place – one it held the tiebreaker on over the likes of Illinois, Northwestern and Minnesota – there's still a chance at some sort of postseason.

One player hopeful for that opportunity is Gatens, an Iowa City native who has yet to sense playing in any sort of postseason as a Hawkeye player.

"It would be huge," Gatens said. "It'd kind of bring it all together, and go off on the right note. This team is capable of it."

In addition to the NCAA tournament, there's the NIT and the CBI. Both feature 32 teams. For the NIT to be a legitimate discussion, the Hawkeyes will need to end the season strong and possibly make a small run in the Big Ten tourney next month in Indianapolis. While the CBI at this moment appears to be the more likely of the two should Iowa play in any postseason, it has yet to feature a Big Ten team as it enters its third year of existence.

Whether it's the NIT or CBI, or even possibly still the NCAA tournament, McCaffery wasn't hesitant saying how much he wants any postseason opportunity that could be out there for the sake of his team captain.

"He's phenomenally focused on making that happen," McCaffery said. "I've seen very few players over the years that have worked that hard to finish the way he's finishing. He's having

a spectacular year.

"I think as much as he wants it, I want it that much for him as well."