

3/6/2012: Iowa men's basketball notebook



Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming first round game in the 2012 Big Ten Tournament against Illinois during a press conference held on Tuesday, March 6, 2012 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in Iowa City.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – Only once has a Big Ten team ever won four games in four days en route to a Big Ten tournament championship. Coincidentally, it was Iowa who accomplished this feat in 2001 as a No. 6 seed by beating Northwestern, Ohio State, Penn State and Indiana.

If the 2011-12 version of the Hawkeyes are going to duplicate the same feat this week at Bankers Life Fieldhouse, it will do so as the No. 8 seed and with some greater obstacles in their way.

Iowa's quest begins Thursday morning at 10:30 a.m. Central

with a tilt against Illinois that will determine who gets to play top-seeded Michigan State in the quarterfinal round.

While head coach Fran McCaffery emphasized the only thing he and the team are thinking about as they embark on a journey to Indianapolis is winning Thursday's game, he also made clear that making a long run through the tournament isn't impossible either.

"I don't look and say there is not a team in this league that we can't beat," McCaffery said. "There are some teams that we didn't beat. Let's be honest. But at the same time, I feel like we can play with everybody that has beaten us and have a chance.

"You've got to make shots and you've got to be the smarter, tougher team on that day."

The Fighting Illini won the only regular season meeting between the two teams, 65-54, back on Feb. 26 in Champaign, Ill. In that contest, Iowa shot just 18-of-49 from the floor while committing 17 turnovers.

Illinois also received a boost from 7-1 center Meyers Leonard, who finished with 22 points and 14 rebounds despite the fact he came off the bench for the Fighting Illini that evening. Sophomore forward Melsahn Basabe said he wasn't surprised by Leonard's output given what he saw from him last summer during tryouts for the US U-19 team, but also expressed confidence that things can be different on Thursday.

"He's really athletic and he's 7-1. He just had the size advantage," Basabe said. "But I think we can still be able to guard him and he's not guaranteed to have the game that he had by any means. I think that we can limit him and win the game, and I think that's what we intend to do."

Staying a little longer in Indy

Matt Gatens has played in the Big Ten Tournament thrice as a Hawkeye. All three trips to Indianapolis were brief as the Hawkeyes exited with first-round defeats.

In fact, Iowa's last victory in this event came in 2006, when it defeated Ohio State in the championship game and secured a No. 3 seed in what has been its most recent NCAA Tournament appearance.

The early exits have stuck with Gatens, who said last year's first-round 66-61 loss to Michigan State stuck with him through the offseason.

"I've always wanted to go there and have success," Gatens said. "We need to go over there with the mindset that it can be done, as this program has shown in the past."

Meanwhile, sophomore guard Devyn Marble said the memory of his first Big Ten tournament appearance last season was vague because there was only one game.

Freshman forward Aaron White will make his Big Ten tourney debut Thursday, and said knowing that none of his older teammates have ever won a game in Indianapolis caught his attention when the topic came up after last weekend's game against Northwestern.

"Talking to Matt the other day, I asked him when was the last time he got the home team in the Big Ten tournament and he said this is the first time," White said in reference to Iowa getting to wear its home white uniforms against Illinois since the Hawkeyes are the higher seed. "That just made me think, 'He has been here three years, he has had a great career, but he hasn't that success in the conference tournament or making the NCAAs like he has wanted.'"

As for what adjustments could be made, the players don't see much change being needed. Part of the reason is due to not being able to have a shoot-around Thursday as its the first of

four opening round contests being played. It will also be the earliest game Iowa has played all season. The Hawkeyes played two noon contests against IPFW and Wisconsin, both of which were victories.

"That's fine," Marble said. "We've had a game or two this year where we didn't have a shoot-around and played perfectly fine. It shouldn't throw us off or anything like that."

All-Big Ten reaction

Two Hawkeyes – Gatens and White – were both recipients of end-of-season conference honors Monday. Gatens was named second-team all-Big Ten by the media and third by the coaches, while White was named to the all-Freshman squad and listed as an all-Big Ten honorable mention.

White called it an honor and said he was blessed to have the opportunity given to him by McCaffery to start each of Iowa's last 10 games and be able to average 29.3 minutes per game as a true freshman.

McCaffery was pleased for both of his players, but also was a bit stunned the accolades given were all they received. One snub that particularly upset him was Gatens not making the Big Ten's all-Defensive team. Gatens ranked seventh in steals during league play and had recently held Northwestern forward John Shurna, who led the Big Ten in scoring this season, to just nine points in the Hawkeyes' loss to the Wildcats over the weekend.

"It would've been real easy there," McCaffery said about adding Gatens in place of some players who did make the team. "I'm not going to name names, but it would've been real easy there."

Will there be a postseason?

With a 16-15 overall record, it's obvious the Hawkeyes' only

possibility in playing at the NCAA Tournament is winning four games in four days this week in Indianapolis.

But while reaching the Field of 68 is a long shot, playing in a postseason altogether is possible.

Should Iowa find itself on the losing end Thursday or at any other point this week in the Big Ten tournament, both the NIT and CBI remain in the discussion as postseason destinations for the Hawkeyes. Following the NCAA Tournament Selection Show on March 11, the NIT will invite 32 teams who won't be dancing to its tourney, then the CBI will get to extend invitations to 16 teams that don't qualify for either the NCAA or NIT fields.

Since none of the three tournaments are a sure guarantee at the moment, the Hawkeyes know their postseason fates could very well come down to how they perform in Indianapolis this week.

"We'd like to go over there and help those chances out, whether it's winning it or just having an impact on the committees," Gatens said. "Hopefully, we'll be playing next week."