

10/25/2012: Big Ten Media Day notebook

By Brendan Stiles

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ROSEMONT, Ill. – Two seasons ago, the Indiana Hoosiers finished dead last in the Big Ten and were promptly eliminated in the first round of the 2011 Big Ten Tournament by Penn State.

On Thursday, the Hoosiers found themselves being tabbed favorites to win the Big Ten in 2012-13. Indiana is coming off its first NCAA tournament trip under head coach Tom Crean last season, as it advanced to the Sweet 16 before losing to eventual national champion Kentucky. While the AP preseason poll won't be released until Friday, the Hoosiers have already been pegged preseason No. 1 in the USA Today/Coaches poll and will likely be the top team in the AP poll as well.

The recognition is well justified. Sophomore center Cody Zeller, who was named the Big Ten's Preseason Player of the Year on Thursday, returns, as does the rest of the Hoosiers' starting five from last year. Indiana also features a highly-touted freshman class led by point guard Yogi Ferrell.

But even amidst the hoopla surrounding the Hoosiers right now, Crean said Thursday it hasn't been too challenging to keep his team level-headed, mainly due to Indiana having always been a prominent name in college basketball.

"I think it's easy to look at the couple of years we started and say, 'Well, Indiana was down and Indiana wasn't doing this or that,' and that's all true," Crean said. "The target of being an Indiana Hoosier has never changed. Indiana is synonymous throughout the country for being a lot of things in

basketball and it was always a big deal when you were playing Indiana or Indiana was coming to town. That hasn't changed."

After the Hoosiers, Michigan was picked to finish second and Ohio State – who reached the Final Four last season – was selected to finish third. The Wolverines and Buckeyes shared the regular season crown last year with Michigan State, who also won last year's Big Ten Tournament in Indianapolis.

As for the preseason all-first team, Zeller highlights that group as the only one to be a unanimous choice. Joining him in those honors were Michigan sophomore guard Trey Burke, Ohio State juniors Aaron Craft and Deshaun Thomas and Penn State senior guard Tim Frazier, who is the conference's returning leading scorer from last season and also led the Big Ten in assists in 2011-12.

Hype building around the Big Ten

While Big Ten football has been frowned upon nationally as weak, the views surrounding Big Ten hoops is the complete opposite right now.

The USA Today/Coaches poll released last week featured five teams in the top 25, with the three preseason favorites pegged in the top 5. Michigan State and Wisconsin were also ranked and will also likely be ranked in the AP top 25 released Friday. Minnesota, who reached the final of the NIT last March, is among the first group of teams listed in the "others receiving votes" category.

In addition, there is also Purdue coming off a trip to the NCAA tournament last season and both Iowa and Northwestern reached the NIT one season ago.

"We have talent in our league from top to bottom and I think that's maybe what separates us," Purdue head coach Matt Painter said. "Obviously, those teams that have been voted in the top 25 are all worthy of those rankings. But I think the

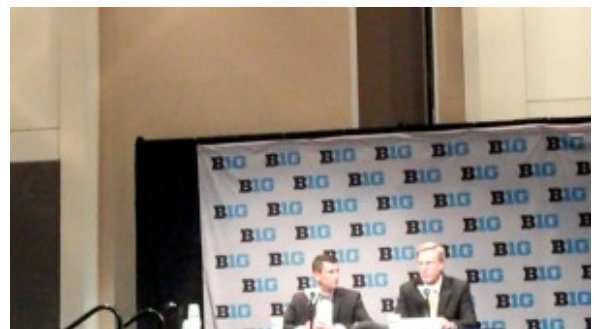
teams that are at the bottom in the rankings are teams that can push to the top and put themselves in a good position come March.

“There are no easy outs throughout the season.”

Penn State head coach Patrick Chambers is entering his second season in the conference and reiterated Painter’s remark about how daunting it’ll be for teams to win road games.

“Everywhere we went was sold out,” Chambers said. “It didn’t matter if we were 2-12 or 4-14, which is where we ended up. They were coming out and the enthusiasm for their teams is pretty amazing.

“To win on the road in the Big Ten is huge. We didn’t do it last year. We’re going to have to do it this year. It’s that difficult.”



Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery discusses his 2012-13 squad during his press conference at Big Ten Basketball Media Day on Thursday, Oct. 25, 2012, at the Hyatt Regency O’Hare in Rosemont, Ill. Joining McCaffery at the event were senior forward Eric May and junior guard Devyn Marble.

McCaffery “cautiously optimistic”

As Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery took to the podium Thursday morning, he used the phrase “cautiously optimistic” when discussing his 2012-13 squad.

On one hand, Iowa has the bulk of its starting lineup from last season returning with players such as junior guard Devyn Marble and sophomore forward Aaron White becoming even bigger focal points this season. On the other hand, freshmen Mike Gesell and Adam Woodbury are both projected to start when the Hawkeyes open their season Nov. 9 against Texas-Pan American, and freshman guard Anthony Clemmons is also likely to play a vital role this winter.

With all of that being said, McCaffery is aware of the “dark horse” label being placed on his squad and said Thursday he’d be “foolish” to not embrace the hype that’s building up in Iowa City.

“A lot of coaches try to temper any level of enthusiasm to take the pressure off themselves,” McCaffery said. “I prefer to challenge our team and our players.”

McCaffery wasn’t the only coach speaking highly of his team. Michigan State’s Tom Izzo, who is currently the dean of Big Ten coaches, was among those heaping praise on the Hawkeyes as well.

“I think Fran has done a great job at Iowa and that’s going to be a significant jump,” Izzo said.

Joining McCaffery at the Hyatt Regency O’Hare were junior guard Devyn Marble and senior forward Eric May, who was previously named the team’s captain for this season. With the Hawkeyes two weeks into team practices, May said the one observation that has stuck with him thus far has been everyone’s effort.

"As the practices go on and you get deeper into the season, we still got to keep pushing each other to concentrate more, be mentally focus every day," May said. "But we've been doing a great job. I've been excited to go to practice every day. I think everybody has and that's the way it has got to be."

Going back to the expectations, the players have them set high as well. Marble said "success" this season means the Hawkeyes reach the NCAA tournament for the first time since 2006, when Iowa won the Big Ten tournament and earned a No. 3 seed before being victim of a first-round upset at the hands of Northwestern State.

He also exuded his confidence in the Hawkeyes being more than just a "dark horse" in the Big Ten.

"I would like to win a Big Ten championship and I think we are in a position to do that," Marble said. "It's going to take a lot of work. This is a tough conference. But I do think we have the key components to be able to pull that off."

"I know a lot of people might think that's far-fetched, but it really isn't. That would definitely be another successful thing that I would love to accomplish."

Miles steals the show

If there was one coach who lived in the moment more than anyone else at Big Ten Media Day, it was first-year Nebraska head coach Tim Miles.

The expectations surrounding the Cornhuskers are low, but Miles provided the most entertainment Thursday morning during his time at the podium. Right as he took his seat, Miles spotted a lighter and jokingly asked if it belonged to Northwestern head coach Bill Carmody, who preceded him at the dais.

From there, the jokes kept coming. When asked about the Big

Ten as a whole, Miles sarcastically thanked the league's schedule-maker for giving Nebraska road games in early January against both Michigan and Michigan State. He also joked that his hair was becoming gray from being in the process of building his fifth program from scratch.

Miles was also upfront though about the current state of his team.

"We could play as little as eight scholarship guys this year," Miles said. "Two of those guys couldn't break into the rotation last year, so that's why we're picked where we are."

Miles ended his press conference by taking out his iPhone and taking a panoramic picture on it of the assembled media, then proceeded to [tweet the picture from his Twitter account, @CoachMiles](#). Later in the morning, Miles' name was trending on Twitter worldwide.

"That's a big benefit," Miles said about trending. "I don't know how. I don't know if there's a tangible benefit to that, but we can say, 'Hey, we trended. Woo hoo!'"

Known for actively using Twitter more than just about any other Division-I basketball coach, Miles said the phenomena began when the marketing department at his previous school, Colorado State, asked him to give in to creating an account.

It ultimately reached a point where Miles even sent out a tweet during halftime of Colorado State's second round game against Murray State in the NCAA tournament last March.

"Just watching it grow," Miles said about what made him become so active with Twitter. "People found out stuff about our program on Twitter.

"It's just a way to kind of get ourselves out there in a way that's not coach-speak. We all do it. We're all there. We don't want to talk about the evils of our team, what's going

bad, so we kind gloss over it. I didn't want it to be that."

Mbakwe's return

While Minnesota head coach Tubby Smith didn't explicitly say it, he hinted Thursday morning that senior forward Trevor Mbakwe wouldn't be suspended any games this season. Mbakwe served a suspension from the program in July after he was arrested on DUI charges. On Oct. 19, Mbakwe was sentenced to two years probation, but managed to avoid jail time.

"Trevor is a fine young man," Smith said. "Hell, I've never had a problem with him on the basketball court or in practice or in the classroom."

When Mbakwe does return to the court for the Golden Gophers, it'll be the first time in almost a full calendar year. Early last season, Mbakwe tore his ACL and following Minnesota's NIT run last March was granted a medical redshirt, allowing him to compete this season. In 2010-11, Mbakwe was the only Big Ten player to average a double-double in league play.

"Both mentally and physically, I think he's in the right place," Smith said. "At this juncture, he will be able to step in and contribute, but we're going to bring him along slowly to make sure that his knee is completely healthy."

Coaches praise "two-hour rule"

Among the major topics talked about at the Hyatt Regency O'Hare Thursday morning was the benefit of the "two-hour rule" implemented last summer, which allowed coaches to spend two hours a week with their players during the summer period.

Prior to this year, coaches weren't allowed to have any contact with current players whatsoever. Izzo called it "the greatest rule" the NCAA has come up with.

"You walk by them in the hallway and you can barely say 'Hi,' because you're afraid somebody is hiding out behind the

garbage can or something,” Izzo said in reference to what it was like before. “I think it made me coach better because you have to condense what you want to do in a shorter period of time. That’s how you learn to speed things up. Guys have to think at a faster rate.

“I’m not sure I’ve heard a coach that didn’t like [the new rule] and administrators should realize we want to work more and so do the players.”

Another coach singing the rule’s praises was Wisconsin’s Bo Ryan, who made mention of how it benefited his program in terms of his freshmen players being able to blend in at a much faster rate.

“They’re way ahead of the curve,” Ryan said. “The hours this summer just multiplied that.”