

1/8/2013: Iowa men's basketball notebook



Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming game against No. 22 Michigan State during a press conference held Tuesday, Jan. 8, 2013, at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa — One trait of Fran McCaffery's over three seasons coaching at Iowa has been poignancy when talking about the game of basketball. His press conference Tuesday at Carver-Hawkeye Arena illustrated this trait more than ever before.

Two days have passed since the Iowa Hawkeyes returned from Ann Arbor, Mich., where they were shellacked 95-67 by the second-ranked Michigan Wolverines. McCaffery questioned his team's mental toughness afterwards and the disappointment of that day still resides.

What typically is a 20-30 minute film session with the entire

team lasted close to an hour Monday when Iowa regrouped and began its preparation for Thursday's contest against No. 22 Michigan State. McCaffery said an emphasis is always made to mix plenty of good with the bad depending on how the most recent game went, so naturally, he had to address more of the negatives Monday, and more specifically the negatives defensively.

"I will never get on a guy for not doing something that he maybe isn't capable of doing. But you can run back on defense," McCaffery said. "If you're on a Division-I scholarship, you better run back on defense and we didn't do that. That's really disappointing."

What McCaffery said Tuesday surprised him the most about Sunday's outcome was how everything fell apart for Iowa right before halftime. The game was tied at 29-29 with 3:30 left in the first half before Michigan went on a 17-6 run to take a 46-35 lead with it into halftime. McCaffery later described the loss as "reminiscent" of games the Hawkeyes lost last season, performances he felt his team had moved beyond having.

"The toughest thing was we were playing with them for 15 minutes," sophomore forward Aaron White said. "We were playing with them, momentum was going back and forth, we were taking the lead and then it kind of just fell apart."

"We didn't fight back with the punch they gave us to end the first half."

Interestingly, White and junior guard Devyn Marble – currently the Hawkeyes' two leading scorers – were two of the names mentioned by McCaffery as he discussed his team's defensive woes against Michigan. With White specifically, McCaffery said he wasn't as physical or as engaged as he typically is. However, McCaffery also made clear that neither White nor Marble were alone in terms of their efforts leaving less than he desired.

"That's really disappointing. There's no other way to put it. Had a chance to watch it and digest it. Can't make excuses for it. It's right there," McCaffery said. "When it's all said and done, they have a responsibility to themselves above all else, but most importantly to each other."

A "must-win" situation?

The general feeling around Iowa since the Hawkeyes' non-conference slate concluded was that getting at least three marquee wins in Big Ten play would booster their résumé as March continues inching closer. Two such opportunities have come and gone with Iowa sitting empty-handed.

Whether or not the third time's a charm Thursday against Michigan State remains to be seen. But looking big-picture, the reasons to consider this a "must-win" for the Hawkeyes are there. For one, this is the only time Iowa plays Michigan State this season and more significantly, it dodges playing the Spartans in the Breslin Center, where Iowa hasn't won in 20 years.

Michigan State is also a team that has had Iowa's number recently. The Spartans have won the last four head-to-head meetings, including contests in each of the past two Big Ten Tournaments. Beating Michigan State would keep the Hawkeyes from starting 0-3 in league play, give them at least one marquee victory and possibly provide them confidence they'd need going forward.

However, the term "must-win" isn't a phrase being used around Carver-Hawkeye Arena this week.

"Once you get into this league, I don't know that it matters," McCaffery said. "Anything short of our best, we're not going to win."

Michigan State enters this game with a 1-1 mark in Big Ten play. Like Iowa, the Spartans lost their conference opener on

New Year's Eve to Minnesota, but bounced back last weekend with an 84-61 win at home against Purdue. Also like the Hawkeyes, Michigan State has a slightly different look this year starting a pair of freshmen in Denzel Valentine and Gary Harris.

The Spartans continue playing with the same M.O. they've always had under Tom Izzo though – being physical. Junior forward Melsahn Basabe called Michigan State one of the most physical teams he has ever played against.

"You're going to have to battle them to the death because that's just how Michigan State is," Basabe said. "You just have to respect that about them. No matter what, they're going to play extremely hard, they're going to crash the boards, they're going to pound the ball inside.

"No matter who they're playing, they're going to fit that identity 1-12."

Clemmons facing hometown team

Growing up in Lansing, Mich., freshman guard Anthony Clemmons bled green and white like the rest of his family did. One of his childhood friends was Denzel Valentine, who played alongside Clemmons at Sexton High School in Lansing and is currently a Michigan State freshman in Tom Izzo's starting lineup. In fact, Valentine's father, Carlton, was their high school coach.

Even though Thursday's game is being played at Carver-Hawkeye Arena, the emotions Clemmons displayed when asked about playing Valentine and the Spartans were high.

"It's going to be a fun game. It has been a long time since I've played against him," Clemmons said, adding that the only other time he can recall playing Valentine head-to-head was in sixth grade when they were on separate AAU teams.

Clemmons said Valentine's mother, along with both Clemmons' football coach and his wife, are all expected to be in attendance Thursday night. He also talked about how he communicates with Valentine on a near-daily basis and heard from his mother as recently as Tuesday morning.

"She was just saying how proud she was of me and of him," Clemmons said. "She said it's really emotional seeing us play against each other after so many years of playing together. She said she was proud of us and just wished the both of us luck."

Despite growing up a Spartan fan and even attending Michigan State games with Valentine and his family, Clemmons never received an offer from Izzo. However, when asked if that motivated him, Clemmons said he understood and doesn't hold any grudges.

"I knew at that time they had Keith Appling, they had Travis Trice, they had a bunch of guards there," Clemmons said. "So I mean, even if they did offer me, I would've took that into consideration."

"Tom Izzo's a good coach. I'm not surprised that he didn't."