

# 3/12/2013: Iowa men's basketball notebook



Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming first-round game at the Big Ten Tournament against Northwestern during his press conference held Tuesday, March 12, 2013, at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in Iowa City.

By Brendan Stiles

*HawkeyeDrive.com*

IOWA CITY, Iowa – With Selection Sunday looming, Fran McCaffery has one message for his team this week: Win.

The third-year Iowa head coach is aware, as are his players, of what's being talked about. Going into this week's Big Ten Tournament in Chicago, the Hawkeyes are the conference's one team sitting squarely on the bubble. Iowa enters its Thursday night first-round match-up with Northwestern possessing a 20-11 overall mark after finishing with a 9-9 record in Big Ten play.

As far as what has to happen for the Hawkeyes this week in order to become one of the 68 teams in the NCAA tournament, two options are in store. One is doing what Iowa did back in 2001 – win four games in four days and leave the United Center with the Big Ten tournament trophy and an automatic berth. The other is doing just enough to stay in the discussion and place itself at the hands of the tournament's selection committee.

The former is what McCaffery is stressing to his team.

"It's not like you go into that tournament not wanting to win games anyway," sophomore forward Aaron White said. "That's kind of our mindset. We want to win four games in four days and we're just getting prepared to do that."

One major reason many bracketologists view Iowa on the outside looking in is the Hawkeyes' RPI, which was [ranked 77th as of Tuesday](#). During his press conference Tuesday, McCaffery acknowledged the value RPI holds, but also made clear that other components out there merit the same consideration such as [Ken Pomeroy's rankings](#), [Sagarin](#), and ESPN's [BPI](#), all three of which ranked the Hawkeyes in the top 50 nationally as of Tuesday.

"We don't have any bad losses, really. We have some really good wins and we've been consistent," McCaffery said. "So I think from that standpoint, I'm really happy with what we've done and very comfortable knowing that we're under serious consideration for one of those bids."

Should Iowa win its first round game over Northwestern, the Hawkeyes' next opponent would be No. 8 Michigan State, who is seeded third at this week's Big Ten tourney. Iowa's lone contest against the Spartans was a 62-59 loss that took place Jan. 10 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena, one of four Big Ten defeats where the Hawkeyes had a lead inside of two minutes slip away. It's also worth noting Iowa's loss to Michigan State occurred without the services of junior guard Devyn Marble, who missed action that evening due to an injured ankle.

If this match-up (and possible others) were to materialize, depth could potentially become big for the Hawkeyes, who have gone 10 (sometimes even 11) players deep into the rotation when everyone has been healthy.

"Four games in four days is tough at this level," White said. "Since we go 9-10 deep, hopefully our depth will help us in the first couple of rounds."

### **Gesell returning to the fray**

Good news, and possibly very significant news, has come Iowa's way this week. Freshman guard Mike Gesell, who has sat out the Hawkeyes' last four contests due to a foot injury, has returned to practice.

McCaffery said Gesell practiced at about 30 percent on Monday would determine if he plays and how much based on how he did in practice Tuesday before the team travels to Chicago.

Gesell spoke publicly for the first time Tuesday afternoon about his foot injury, which he confirmed was a stress reaction. He said the pain, which he described as a "stabbing feeling" all in one spot on his foot, first began in the days leading up to the Hawkeyes' game at Nebraska on Feb. 23, the last contest Gesell played in for Iowa.

"After the game, it just started hurting really bad and I didn't know what happened," Gesell said. "It just kind of came on quick."

From there, Gesell went into detail about the rehabilitation process once it was determined he didn't have a fracture. For the time he had to wear a boot, the 6-1 guard focused strictly on ball-handling and shooting. His workouts were mostly done on a stationary bike and in the pool, with one such pool exercise being use of an underwater treadmill.

"It was different," Gesell said about the underwater

treadmill. "You know, I wouldn't say it's as hard as running. It's just the resistance on your legs.

"The weirdest part about it was when I finally got out of the pool, when I just felt extremely heavy because the water brings the pressure off your legs."

Since returning to on-the-court activities, Gesell said most of the pain he feels comes from running back and forth and that it hasn't had any effect on his shooting. He targeted the Big Ten Tournament as his return date and unless the pain says otherwise over the next 48 hours, Gesell is driven to play against Northwestern.

"I'm a competitor and I really want to play in it," Gesell said. "You know, I just want what's best for our team and I want to help this team out any way that I can."

## **The rise of Olaseni**

One of the most encouraging stories to emerge over the course of the season for Iowa has been the development of sophomore center Gabe Olaseni.

Over the last two weeks, Olaseni has played an average of 18 minutes per contest. During this four-game stretch, the London native has become more involved at both the ends of the floor. Offensively, he's active in the paint. Defensively, he has been a force with 12 blocked shots, 10 of which have come in the Hawkeyes' last two contests against Illinois and Nebraska.

Following Iowa's win over Purdue on Feb. 27 – the first game in this stretch – Olaseni said the coaching staff worked with him on simplifying the game, [giving him four aspects to primarily focus on](#). Those four aspects were defense, rebounding, running the floor and finishing around the rim.

McCaffery credits Olaseni's development to following those guidelines, as well as showing concentration during practice

and being able to decipher scouting reports more easily now than when he first arrived on campus.

“He’s just so comfortable right now,” McCaffery said. “The effort was always there. He was always the guy that beats everybody down the floor. He’s the guy that runs back.

“A lot of guys beat you down the floor on offense, but they don’t run back on defense. He does both.”

Not only is the coaching staff taking notice, but teammates as well. White, who is one of Olaseni’s closest friends on the team as both came together along with sophomore guard Josh Oglesby, said what has stood out most to him is the confidence Olaseni is playing with right now.

“He knows where he can make a big impact on the game, which is with his blocking shots and running,” White said. “He’s altering the game when he gets in there.

“That all comes from his confidence. We’ve seen him do that in practice, but it was kind of that next step he had to take, which was doing it in front of everyone else. He’s starting to do that and I’m really proud of him.”

Olaseni was quick to credit one teammate – junior forward Melsahn Basabe – for “showing him the fire” he said he never had prior to playing at the collegiate level.

“He continues to push me and he’s one of the main guys that’s in my ear,” Olaseni said. “Earlier in my career, I was like, ‘Get off my back. Leave me alone. I’m new to this. Give me a chance to settle in.’ But he’s constantly on my back.

“He wants more out of me every day, so I continue to push myself and I’m starting to give it back to him a little bit, telling him I need more out of him.”

Looking ahead, McCaffery said it’s now just a matter of the consistency Olaseni’s starting to show carrying over into the

offseason and next season.

“He’s going to be a shot blocker and he can score,” McCaffery said. “But he’s not a guy who’s going to try to do more than he’s capable of doing.”