

3/29/2013: Iowa men's basketball notebook



Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming NIT semifinal game against Maryland during his press conference held Friday, March 29, 2013, at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – A piece of the Big Ten's future will be on display April 2 when the Iowa Hawkeyes take to the hardwood floor of Madison Square Garden for the NIT Semifinals.

As if playing in New York City isn't enough, Iowa's upcoming opponent is Maryland, a school that along with nearby Rutgers will join the Big Ten next year and start competing athletically in the conference starting with the 2014-15 season.

Much like the Hawkeyes' path to New York, the Terrapins reached this point by winning a pair of home games against Niagara and Denver before winning 58-57 at Alabama on March

26. Also like Iowa, Maryland features a highly-touted 7-1 center in Alex Len, a sophomore averaging 11.8 points and 7.8 rebounds per game for the Terrapins.

Naturally, freshman center Adam Woodbury – who is also listed at 7-1 – will draw the assignment of guarding Len after putting together a 10-point, 8-rebound performance in the Hawkeyes' 75-64 win over Virginia on March 27.

"To see how Adam Woodbury played the other night, that was huge for him," Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery said. "Now he gets an opportunity to go against Alex Len and he's a lottery pick.

"From that standpoint, it's a great challenge for [Woodbury]. He has gone against other lottery picks this year."

Meanwhile, Iowa found itself on Friday preparing to play a basketball game during the month of April. The significance here is Friday also happened to be the three-year anniversary of McCaffery's introductory press conference as the Hawkeyes' head coach.

When McCaffery first took over, Iowa had completed a 10-win campaign and the Hawkeyes won just 11 games in his first year at the helm. On Tuesday, Iowa will be gunning for its 25th win of this season.

"It's crazy to think that my freshman year, we had a hard time filling the seats, getting people into it and stuff like that," said junior forward Zach McCabe, who originally signed with Iowa prior to McCaffery's arrival and was one of two 2010 recruits to stick around. "Now, everyone's excited about it. Everyone's talking about us. It was what I wanted when I came here."

Homecoming for Basabe

During Big Ten play this season, five of Iowa's out-of-state

players – Devyn Marble, Anthony Clemmons, Aaron White, Mike Gesell and Pat Ingram – got the opportunity to play in their home states.

Although he wasn't born in the Empire State, Melsahn Basabe is a New Yorker at heart, having spent the bulk of his childhood growing up just outside the Big Apple. So as the clock struck 0:00 on March 27 and the Hawkeyes had defeated Virginia for the right to play in New York City next week, no one was happier than the junior forward.

"I was just so happy, so blessed to be able to go home," Basabe said. "We rarely play where I'm from, so just to be going home is such a special feeling."

When Basabe was young, his family moved from Virginia to New York, where he lived in two different parts growing up – Queens (which is one of the seven New York City boroughs) and Glen Cove, a town located in nearby Nassau County he moved to when he was 12 years old.

According to Google Maps, Glen Cove – which is listed as Basabe's hometown in the Iowa media guide – is approximately 25-30 miles to the Northeast of Midtown Manhattan.

"It's actually not that bad because I can just get on the LIR (Long Island Railroad) and take it to a stop called Mineola, and then that would transfer me to Penn Station," Basabe said.

It was in the New York metropolitan area where Basabe made his name as a basketball player, playing for the New York Gauchos AAU squad located in the South Bronx. He first joined the Gauchos when he was 14 and has since remained close with many associated with the program.

"Everybody's from New York City, so it's tough and gritty. They teach us discipline and they push us really hard," Basabe said. "They just teach us to compete and be fearless, not be scared of anybody."

“They really try to develop players and it’s just so highly competitive.”

Basabe originally planned to take his talents upstate to play for McCaffery at Siena, but then made the decision to follow McCaffery and assistant coach Andrew Francis out to Iowa.

“He’s a player and he’s not afraid,” McCaffery said. “I think he’ll thrive in that environment.”

The MSG experience

If there’s any perk that comes with advancing into the NIT’s Final Four, it’s the opportunity to play at Madison Square Garden, a place nicknamed by locals as “The World’s Most Famous Arena.”

Located right in the heart of Manhattan, the Garden is mainly occupied by the NBA’s New York Knicks and the NHL’s New York Rangers. But it’s also the host of numerous college basketball games year-round, including the most recently played Big East Championship earlier this month.

Having lived in New York, Basabe said he had one MSG experience – attending the Big East Championship when he was 17. Never in his wildest dreams though did he imagine one day actually getting a chance to play there.

“It’s definitely going to be an amazing feeling, just to be in that building,” Basabe said.

While Basabe has the experience of being there once before, McCaffery played there once during his days at Penn in a Christmas tournament. His first season as an assistant at Notre Dame resulted in an appearance in the 1992 NIT championship, but McCaffery said Tuesday will be his first MSG experience as a head coach.

“It’s one of those places ... when you walk into the building, you feel this is sort of the mecca of college basketball in so

many ways," McCaffery said. "I'm thrilled that our guys are going to have that kind of experience."

Then there are players on the team like McCabe, Marble, White and senior forward Eric May – all of whom said they had never been to New York City, let alone been to MSG.

"I'm jacked about this," May said. "To go in, for these circumstances, it's awesome."

Gesell update

Freshman guard Mike Gesell said he will likely be able to play against Maryland barring any setbacks between now and then with his ongoing foot injury.

Gesell said tweaked his injured foot during the first half of Iowa's game against Virginia and sat out the entire second half. He left the game having scored seven points for the Hawkeyes. The stress reaction was discovered last month and forced Gesell out of four games before he returned in time for the Big Ten Tournament. He started Iowa's NIT opener against Indiana State, but has come off the bench during each of the last two Hawkeye contests.

"I didn't hurt it worse or anything. It was just sore," Gesell said. "I can just go on it as long as it doesn't hurt me too bad. I tried it out at halftime the other night at the game. I felt like I couldn't be out there going 100 percent."

"I didn't want to be dogging it out on the court, so I just thought it'd be best to let the other guys step up in the second half."