

10/31/2013: Big Ten Media Day notebook

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

ROSEMONT, Ill. – Tom Izzo is used to high expectations. Throughout his tenure as Michigan State's head coach, he has guided the Spartans to numerous Final Four appearances and even a national title in 2000. Throughout his tenure, Michigan State has always been perceived as a national powerhouse.

As Izzo enters his 19th season at the helm, he once again leads a Spartan squad being held to lofty expectations. Michigan State was tabbed the unanimous preseason favorite to win the Big Ten on Thursday as all 12 conference programs commenced at the Hyatt Regency O'Hare for the league's Basketball Media Day.

There's plenty of reason for the expectations in East Lansing this season. For one, Michigan State only lost one player from last year's squad that reached the Sweet 16 – Derrick Nix. The Spartans also possess two of the Big Ten's marquee players this season in senior forward Adreian Payne and sophomore guard Gary Harris, who was selected as the Big Ten's Preseason Player of the Year.

"I do think we've got a good team," Izzo said. "I think we've got a veteran team. I think we've added some pieces. We've got some guys back healthy.

"You put all those things together, I think it gives you a shot, if guys handle the things that go with being ranked high and continue to get better each and every game."

Michigan State also came in as the nation's No. 2 team as the

preseason AP poll was also released Thursday. Michigan, who was the national runner-up last season, came in seventh nationally, while Ohio State comes in ranked 11th and Wisconsin 20th.

The Wolverines and Buckeyes were also tabbed second and third, respectively, in the Big Ten preseason top three. As for the league's preseason all-Big Ten team, it consisted of six players – Payne, Harris, Michigan's duo of Mitch McGary and Glenn Robinson III, Ohio State point guard Aaron Craft and Penn State point guard Tim Frazier, who returns this season after tearing his ACL last November.

Iowa unranked, but rising

The Iowa Hawkeyes just missed finding themselves ranked for the first time since 2006 on Thursday, but they're inching closer to national relevance once again. Iowa was among the teams grouped in the "others receiving votes" category, tying for 29th overall.

But even despite that omission from the polls, there's a growing sense among those in the conference the Hawkeyes are going to be a legitimate contender to reach the NCAA tournament for the first time in eight seasons. When Izzo was asked about the current landscape of the league, he described the Big Ten's depth becoming stronger this year and the first team he specifically mentioned with this thought in mind was Iowa.

The most noteworthy aspect of this season's edition of the Hawkeyes is the depth, as Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery has previously said he would go 11-deep with his rotation.

"I've not had a team in my entire career that is this deep," McCaffery said.

The fourth-year Hawkeye coach brought his three seniors – guard Devyn Marble and forwards Melsahn Basabe and Zach McCabe

– and junior forward Aaron White along with him to Thursday's event. All four players sensed the hype as reporters over the course of a two-hour period constantly came up to them to ask about this year's squad.

To a T, all four players stressed how reaching the NCAA Tournament would mean a ton to them. Marble took it a step further, expressing his belief in that the Hawkeyes are legitimate contenders for a Big Ten title.

"We have the team and the nuances to be able to do that," Marble said. "I think everybody is so consumed with the NCAA Tournament because that's what everybody wants. But at the same time, people aren't realizing that we have the opportunity to compete for a Big Ten championship this year and I think we have the team that's able to do that."

Heavy emphasis being placed on new rules

One of the heaviest topics of conversation Thursday morning centered around a pair of rule changes being implemented by the NCAA for this upcoming season. One rule change has to do with defending the player with the ball. What are now considered illegal tactics in 2013-14 are the following – placing and keeping a hand/forearm on the opponent, putting two hands on the opponent, continually jabbing by placing hand/forearm on the opponent and using an arm bar to impede the progress of the dribbler. The intent is to encourage defenders to use their feet and create a less physical game.

Ohio State head coach Thad Matta was asked specifically how this rule may effect his star point guard in Craft, who is widely regarded outside Matta's program as one of the game's biggest offenders when it comes to using his hands while playing defense. Matta said Craft hasn't seem phased by the rule change, mainly because of his footwork while playing defense.

"He has got the ability laterally to really move," Matta said.

“He has got great lower body strength. He’s not a guy that grabs and holds because he’s always there with his feet. So I think he should be in pretty good shape.”

Another has to do with block/charge calls. The change with this is that now defenders must be in legal guarding position whenever a player begins an upward motion to either pass or shoot the ball. The intent here is to give officials enough time to look at both the offense and defense, so the correct call can be made whenever contact occurs.

Most coaches appear to be in favor of it, but are also in wait-and-see mode with the hope that the emphasis being placed on these rule changes remains sustained throughout the entire season. McCaffery said referees have actually been given an ultimatum this offseason to make these calls when they need to be applied or not find themselves working the NCAA Tournament next March.

McCaffery is among those in favor of the rule changes taking place. He described himself as an offensive guy and believes in theory these changes will be beneficial to his team.

“I think in theory, it will work,” McCaffery said. “In practicality, it may make the games long and grueling and it may have an adverse effect with regard to we’re trying to open up the game.

“Teams may have to play more zone because you have to protect your guys who are in foul trouble.”

The most vocal critic of the new rule changes was Purdue head coach Matt Painter. His concern lies with the number of foul calls in a game and how that could drag games out longer than need be, as well as limit the amount of minutes some of the league’s better players will be able to play.

“If you’re telling me the way the games are going to be called in exhibition games are the way they’re going to call them in

the Big Ten, we're going to have a lot of good players watching basketball," Painter said. "I think there's a different way to increase scoring, if that's what they're trying to do."

New coaches strengthening conference

The Big Ten saw two coaching changes take place during the offseason and both new members of the league's coaching fraternity bring serious pedigree.

Chris Collins – the son of former NBA head coach Doug Collins – enters his first season as Northwestern's head coach, replacing Bill Carmody. Meanwhile at Minnesota, Richard Pitino – the son of Louisville head coach Rick Pitino – has taken the helm of the Golden Gophers after Tubby Smith was fired last spring.

For Collins, this is his first head coaching gig at the collegiate level after the former Duke guard served as an assistant at his alma mater for Mike Krzyzewski. Not only does he have the challenge of coaching at a program such as Northwestern, who has never reached the NCAA tournament, but also the challenge of coaching away from what current Wildcat players had become accustomed to under Carmody with running the Princeton Offense.

While he wants to have his system in place, Collins acknowledged there would be components of what Northwestern did before staying a part of its team for now.

"We're trying to implement some new things, but also stay true to some of the things maybe that have been good for some of these players," Collins said. "So I think it will be a little bit of a mixture of both here in this first year."

As for Pitino, he does have prior head coaching experience to build off, but not quite at this level. He spent last season as the head coach at FIU before filling the Minnesota vacancy.

Before that, he served as an assistant for his father at Louisville and also at Florida under its current head coach, Billy Donovan.

Pitino mentioned how he doesn't want his team to play slow, adding that conditioning has been critical this offseason. One such example he gave was with current Gopher player Maurice Walker, who has lost 50 pounds and now weighs at 260. He also has found himself being able to fit in despite the prior unfamiliarity he had with the conference.

"I'm the young guy in the league, one of the youngest guys out there," Pitino said. "[The other Big Ten coaches have] been very receptive to me. They've given me great advice and been guys I can lean on, which is nice to see."