

1/7/2014: Iowa men's basketball notebook



Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery speaks during his press conference held Tuesday, Jan. 7, 2014, at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in Iowa City. McCaffery will not coach No. 20 Iowa's game against Northwestern on Jan. 9 after being suspended by the Big Ten on Tuesday for violating the conference's Sportsmanship Policy.

By Brendan Stiles

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – A typical press conference involving Fran McCaffery cuts right to the chase. Aside from settings where a third party such as the Big Ten Conference or the NCAA is wholly involved, McCaffery doesn't give opening remarks. The first words out of his mouth are his answer to the first question asked of him.

His press conference Tuesday had a completely different tune to it though. Earlier in the day, [the Big Ten announced it had](#)

[handed McCaffery a one-game suspension](#) due to violating its Sportsmanship Policy and he will not be on the bench with the 20th-ranked Hawkeyes when they face Northwestern on Jan. 9. Additionally, the UI was fined \$10,000 by the conference for McCaffery's actions.

The incident leading to this suspension came on Jan. 5 when Iowa lost to No. 4 Wisconsin. During the second half, McCaffery argued with officials during a TV timeout and his behavior led to a pair of technical fouls and an ejection from the game.

There sat McCaffery at the same podium inside Carver-Hawkeye Arena he always speaks in front of and in the same room he always speaks to the press in. But before any questions got asked, an emotional McCaffery spoke. He made it known he would always fight on his players' behalf, while also acknowledging he went too far up in Madison over the weekend.

"I'm going to fight for my guys. That's what I'm going to do. That will not stop," McCaffery said during these opening remarks. "But I think in that instance, without question, I lost my cool and you can't do that. We don't want them to do that, so I can't do that."

Tuesday's press conference was actually planned well in advance with the idea that the center topic of conversation would be the Hawkeyes' upcoming contest against Northwestern. But in light of McCaffery's suspension, Iowa athletics director Gary Barta also spoke Tuesday from that same seat. He reiterated that Iowa would not appeal the punishment handed down by the Big Ten.

"Clearly in the heat of competition, he made a mistake," Barta said. "When you're a high-profile coach, you make a mistake and it's there for all the world to see. He's remorseful. He clearly wishes he hadn't made that mistake, but he did."

"He's accepting and we're accepting the penalty."

Barta wouldn't disclose what was shared in conversations he had with the Big Ten, including whether or not instances such as McCaffery's chair slam during a 2012 game at Michigan State factored into the conference's decision to hand down a suspension. When that occurred, [Big Ten commissioner Jim Delany told USA Today that "the conference is primarily focused on future conduct, not statements of apology."](#)

Because he wasn't in Madison with the team last weekend, Barta said his first conversations with McCaffery took place Monday morning. When asked whether this punishment will "humble" him, McCaffery said he didn't think it would.

"I'm a pretty humble guy as it is," McCaffery said. "You know, I have tried to be the same guy who was the JV Coach at the University of Pennsylvania in 1982.

"I'm not perfect. Nobody is. So I'm not going to beat myself up over it. I'm not happy about it. I'm not proud of it and we're all, every one of us, is never too old to learn, especially from your mistakes."

Players react to McCaffery's suspension

Barta said he received a call from the Big Ten late Monday afternoon about its decision to suspend McCaffery for Thursday's game and McCaffery informed the entire team Tuesday morning before news of the suspension became public. McCaffery said the players' response was as "business-like" as he figured it would be.

There was a sense of discomfort expressed by players discussing the matter. Junior forward Aaron White blurted out "Thank you!" to a TV reporter who asked him the first question related to playing Northwestern.

What didn't exist anywhere inside Carver-Hawkeye Arena on Tuesday though was shock. From the players' perspective, they braced themselves for the possibility of playing without their

head coach this week.

"I don't think any of us were taken off guard," senior forward Zach McCabe said. "I think we knew what was going to happen."

Conversely, their showing of support toward McCaffery was also far from surprising.

"He just cares so much about us and about this program," White said. "I think a lot of the fans around here support him and like the way he coaches and I know all the players do."

"We love him for his passion and his fire and we'll ride with him no matter what."

What McCaffery can and can't do Thursday

There's the game itself, and then there's everything behind the scenes leading up to that game. McCaffery's suspension only applies specifically to Thursday night. Barta said McCaffery isn't allowed anywhere near Carver-Hawkeye Arena from the moment both teams arrive that evening for their pre-game warm-ups to the moment both teams fulfill all their post-game obligations.

Everything else between now and say 6 p.m. Thursday night (the game tips off at 8 p.m. CT) is fair game for McCaffery. He's still allowed to be involved in any sort of game preparation for Thursday such as coaching the team in practices and conducting team meetings. McCaffery also said he intended to be with his players and staff Thursday afternoon for both their team shoot-around and their pregame meal.

McCaffery's first game back from his suspension will be Jan. 12 when Iowa plays at No. 3 Ohio State. As far as Thursday's game against Northwestern is concerned however, McCaffery said he would be "as involved as he could possibly be" with the team's preparation and that he would probably watch the game on TV once the time period he is barred from being around the

team goes into effect.

"It will be extremely difficult, but I have confidence in them that they'll handle the game very well," McCaffery said.

Senior forward Melsahn Basabe said not having McCaffery for the game shouldn't alter everything behind the scenes leading up to tip-off.

"Your team is built how you prepare with them every day," Basabe said. "One 2-hour space when he's not there shouldn't determine that his whole team is out of whack.

"I think we just need to play hard, defend, rebound and execute the things we know we're capable of."

Speraw to fill temporary void

With McCaffery suspended, Iowa assistant coach Kirk Speraw will handle the head-coaching duties when the Hawkeyes face Northwestern on Thursday.

Before joining McCaffery's staff in 2010 when it was first assembled, Speraw (who played at Iowa under Lute Olson) served 17 seasons as the head coach at UCF. Both times McCaffery has been ejected from games during his Iowa tenure (last weekend and in 2011 during a loss to Northern Iowa), Speraw took over coaching the finishes of both games.

Speraw was the lead scout for all Northwestern-related preparations the last three seasons when Bill Carmody coached the Wildcats. On Tuesday, McCaffery said assistant Andrew Francis was the lead scout in preparation for Thursday's tilt with Northwestern, now coached by former Duke assistant Chris Collins.

"Kirk and I started watching tape and started locking in on these guys [Monday]," McCaffery said. "So we'll collectively put it together and get our team ready to play."

Speraw was briefly on hand for McCaffery's press conference Tuesday, but wasn't made available afterwards for interviews.

"I don't think he's going to try and change too much of what he does," McCabe said. "Him stepping in at the Wisconsin game, we felt comfortable with what he was doing, what he was saying and what he wanted us to do.

"We're ready for whatever he does, whatever he says and just keep playing hard."

VIDEOS:

Gary Barta, Iowa athletics director:

Fran McCaffery, Iowa head coach: