

2/3/2014: Iowa men's basketball notebook



Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery discusses the 17th-ranked Hawkeyes' upcoming game against Ohio State during a press conference held Monday, Feb. 3, 2014, at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in Iowa City.

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HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – Halfway through the Big Ten portion of their season, the Iowa Hawkeyes sit in good shape. Although Iowa dropped two to 17th in this week's AP top 25, it sits at 6-3 in league play, good for sole possession of third place with both No. 10 Michigan and No. 9 Michigan State sitting two games ahead at 8-1.

But the theme of Iowa's second half in Big Ten play will be rematches. After only playing one team twice – Northwestern – during their first nine Big Ten games, six of the Hawkeyes' last nine games come against teams they have already seen, including two at home this week in Ohio State and No. 10 Michigan.

In the case of Tuesday's contest against the Buckeyes, Iowa will be looking for the sweep after beating then-No. 3 Ohio State 84-74 back on Jan. 12 in Columbus. At the time, it was considered the Hawkeyes' "signature" win, but the Buckeyes have since lost three of their last five games to fall out of the AP top 25 altogether and enter Tuesday's contest with a 4-5 conference mark.

"They know everything we're going to do and we were able to get them last time," sophomore guard Mike Gesell said. "They're going to come out with a lot of intensity. They're going to have that fire."

"They're an aggressive team and they can really get after you defensively, so I think we're definitely going to see that and they're going to really ratchet up the intensity."

During his press conference Monday, Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery said he didn't expect much to be different in terms of the game plan he and his staff put together since the Buckeyes will likely present the same starting five they had against Iowa three weeks ago.

"We have to have a good, solid game plan. We have to execute the game plan," McCaffery said. "We've got to make adjustments as the game goes on. We have to rebound and make sure that their best players don't get away from us."

"Against them, you can't turn the ball over. If you turn the ball over, it's a light on for them. You can't take crazy shots. You can't get caught up in the moment."

Keeping Ohio State guessing

Analytically speaking, the Hawkeyes did something unique in that win over the Buckeyes that they hadn't done at any other point this season before or since. Of the 18 different lineups Iowa used in that game, only one group of five players saw the court together more than once and that was the starting five

to open both halves.

In other words, every time McCaffery went to his bench against Ohio State, there was always a different group of five players on the floor for Iowa during throughout both halves.

The number of lineups itself isn't entirely unusual. Through 22 games this season, Iowa has averaged using around 16 different lineups per contest. But the different looks helped provide Iowa an indication of what could work, while also keeping Ohio State guessing who would be subbing in and out.

As far as Tuesday's rematch is concerned, the challenge for Iowa could very well be attempting to exploit Ohio State again with such different looks over the course of 40 minutes, especially since minor changes (if any) will be implemented to the Hawkeyes' game plan.

"We're going to do what we do and at the same time, if we execute, they're not going to be able to guard everything that we do," Gesell said. "We run a lot of motion anyway, so it's not necessarily structured stuff where you're kind of reading, making plays and just reading the defense."

In terms of individual play, sophomore forward Jarrod Uthoff – someone Ohio State couldn't have had prior tape of playing against since he redshirted last season – was a key contributor for Iowa in that win last month. Not so much because of what he did statistically, but because of the aggressiveness he played with that afternoon.

Uthoff acknowledged that game, along with last week's overtime loss to Michigan State, were his two most aggressive performances during Big Ten play. His head coach is also anticipating him to have continued success against the Buckeyes.

"This is a good game for him," McCaffery said. "I thought he did a lot of good things on Saturday [against Illinois] and I

think he'll play well tomorrow."

The rise of Olaseni

Junior center Gabe Olaseni didn't need to know what his final stats were to know he played his best game as a Hawkeye during Iowa's 81-74 win over Illinois last weekend. In what was a much-needed win for his team, Olaseni posted career highs of 15 points and 12 rebounds, including an offensive board in the final minute that McCaffery called "the biggest play of the game."

When asked Monday about the development Olaseni has made from his freshman season to now, McCaffery presented his 6-11 center with some lofty praise.

"The thing that is so gratifying to me is you look at a guy who has incredible work ethic, desire, desire to be coached," McCaffery said. "He just wants to get better, appreciates everything you do for him.

"Arguably, the most humble player I've ever coached."

Perhaps even more amazing is how Olaseni ended up at Iowa, a story both he and McCaffery elaborated on Monday. McCaffery saw him work out and said he was as good in any individual workout as anyone he had seen. Because of that, he was willing to reconcile with Olaseni taking a little longer to develop because he had only played four years of organized basketball prior to arriving on campus.

Upon hearing what McCaffery said, Olaseni revealed he almost didn't even show up for that workout. That is until his high school coach called him.

"I didn't really want to practice that day. I didn't want to work out or do anything. I just wanted to lay in bed," Olaseni said. "Basically, he told me Iowa was a good situation that could be very beneficial to me. So I just decided to come out

and play.

“I just went out there and did what I did. Rebound, block shots, run the floor. They saw something in me that I didn’t see in myself, so I’m just thankful they gave me the opportunity to play.”

His 15-point, 12-rebound showing against Illinois was his second double-double over the last three games. While Olaseni may not necessarily go for a third double-double in four games on Tuesday, McCaffery said there’s still plenty of potential between now and his senior season.

“He’s still not where he’s going to end up,” McCaffery said. “He’s going to be better next year.”