

3/4/2014: Iowa men's basketball notebook



Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery discusses the 24th-ranked Hawkeyes' upcoming game at No. 22 Michigan State during a press conference held Tuesday, March 4, 2014, at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in Iowa City.

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IOWA CITY, Iowa – Things such as seeding in both the Big Ten and NCAA Tournaments may be of small concern to Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery and his 24th-ranked Hawkeyes. But as Iowa prepares for its second bout this season with No. 22 Michigan State, seeding for both tourneys does remain at stake.

As far as next week's Big Ten Tournament is concerned, Iowa is no longer in contention for a conference title sitting at 9-7 in league play. However, the Hawkeyes can potentially lay claim to the No. 3 seed in next week's tourney if they were to win both their remaining contests against the Spartans on March 6 and then at home against Illinois on March 8. A top

four seed in the Big Ten Tournament would give Iowa a first-round bye, meaning it would only need to win three games over three days in order to win the title.

Then there's the NCAA Tournament. Most bracketologists currently have the Hawkeyes as a 6, 7 or 8 seed. How this shapes out will ultimately be determined by these next two weeks and how Iowa fares. The more the Hawkeyes win, the better their chances are.

But after beating Purdue 83-76 over the weekend to snap a three-game losing streak, Iowa now turns its sights to Michigan State, a team it hasn't beaten since McCaffery's first season in Iowa City.

Unlike the first meeting between these teams this season – a 71-69 overtime win for the Spartans back on Jan. 28 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena – Michigan State will be playing just its second consecutive game with every one of its players ready to go. Adreian Payne and Branden Dawson were both absent from a Spartan lineup on a night where Michigan State picked up arguably its best Big Ten win to date of the season.

"I think when you get those guys back initially, there's a little bit of an adjustment period and I think you've seen that with them. But ultimately, they are better," McCaffery said. "You're talking about, you know, a couple of the premiere players in our league. So they are going to impact the game in a very positive way."

In that defeat, Iowa had a stretch of nearly 15 minutes it went without scoring a single field goal. Senior guard Devyn Marble had a chance to win it in regulation, but came up short. Sophomore guard Mike Gesell also missed a lay-up in the final seconds of overtime that would've tied the game and extended it five more minutes.

"We'll be ready to go for them," Gesell said. "We made some dumb plays down the stretch the first time we played them and

I think we're more experienced from the last time we played them."

Slaying Breslin Center demons

The subplot is well documented. Iowa's last win at the Breslin Center came all the way back in 1993, a 96-90 overtime win that was the first Hawkeye game following Chris Street's death. Since that evening, Iowa has lost each of its last

Iowa's last visit to the Breslin Center during the 2011-12 season was one to forget for anyone associated with the Black and Gold. Not only did the Hawkeyes lose 95-61, but this game is perhaps best known for McCaffery slamming a chair in front of his players during a second half timeout.

Aaron White was a freshman that season who scored 15 points and tallied six rebounds in that 34-point defeat. With McCaffery's chair slam in the back of his mind, he attempted to keep a straight face as he was asked about his experience playing inside what has been a Hawkeye house of horrors.

"I'm a totally different player than I was obviously when I went there my freshman year," White said. "That wasn't a great trip for us. But now that I'm older and more experienced, it's not anything different than anything else we've played at.

"They've got a great crowd, I'll give them that. A great student section and great support. But like Coach McCaffery said, the guy yelling at you in the third row isn't going to be guarding your jump shot or affect your shot at all. You just got to be focused on what you've got to do and tune everything else out."

For Gesell, this will be his first trip to East Lansing as a Hawkeye since Iowa and Michigan State's lone regular season meeting versus one another last season came at Carver-Hawkeye Arena. While he won't be experiencing fully what "The Izzone" is like (Michigan State students are on spring break this

week), the environment is something he looks forward to competing in.

“It’s going to be an awesome atmosphere,” Gesell said. “I’ve heard the crowd’s right on top of you and the student section is kind of down right by the floor. It will be an exciting atmosphere and I’m excited to play.”

Oddly enough, the Spartans enter Thursday’s contest having lost four home games already this season – including their last two home games against Nebraska and Illinois, respectively. The more recent 53-46 loss to the Fighting Illini came this past weekend in what was the first game Michigan State played completely at full strength.

“They got off to a good start,” McCaffery said when asked about what Illinois did effectively against the Spartans. “I think that was critical. Their offensive patience was critical.

“They shared the ball. They made big shots. They got some transition opportunities. They defended and they rebounded. They didn’t make a ton of mistakes.”

McCabe tuning out critics

The past week has provided a mixture of emotions for senior forward Zach McCabe. Following Iowa’s 79-74 loss to Wisconsin back on Feb. 22, he was a target of criticism from Hawkeye fans on Twitter. McCabe tweeted a reply back to his critics that would prove regretful and as a result, McCaffery asked all of his players to stop tweeting until the season was over.

But for all the scorn McCabe received and hateful things he heard and saw said about him, the people he has shifted his attention towards are the ones who have given him and the Hawkeyes support. Hand-written notes and emails alike he has received have struck a chord with the Sioux City native, who said he heard from fans all across the country over the past

week-and-a-half.

Speaking about the incident and ensuing response from fans for the first time publicly on Tuesday, McCabe mentioned the outpouring of support he has received since that afternoon, highlighted by the ovation he received during Iowa's most recent home game against Purdue on March 2.

"I got letters from people in like New York and Washington, just different states," McCabe said. "You know, any time I think you get a letter from alumni, it's a nice thing."

"I just think it's cool to see how many Hawk fans there are out there from different places, different states and it means a lot to me."

McCabe said he has every letter and email of encouragement he received stored away in his locker and joked he's starting to run out of space as more of them continue to flow in. He also declared Tuesday that he was through with Twitter, even after the season ends and he'd have the freedom to go back on.

"I just knew what I did was probably a stupid thing and when it blew up ... it was just something that I needed to learn from," McCabe said. "It was nice getting support from people and knowing that there's so much more support than there are idiots out there."