

3/11/2014: Iowa men's basketball notebook



Iowa head coach Fran McCaffery discusses the Hawkeyes' upcoming first round game in the Big Ten Tournament against Northwestern during a press conference held Tuesday, March 11, 2014, at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in Iowa City.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

IOWA CITY, Iowa – Before taking the dais to discuss the 2014 Big Ten Tournament, Fran McCaffery and his wife Margaret were hit with news no parent wants to hear.

The McCafferys revealed Tuesday afternoon their 13-year old son Patrick has a tumor on his thyroid. It is not known at this time whether or not the tumor is cancerous.

While Fran did not address Patrick's condition during his regularly scheduled press conference Tuesday, he did issue the following statement through the UI:

"Last week, it was discovered that our son, Patrick, has a

tumor on his thyroid. Patrick is currently undergoing tests and is scheduled to undergo surgery next Wednesday, March 19, at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics. Once the mass is removed, additional tests will determine a further course of action.

“I was made aware of Patrick’s condition prior to traveling to East Lansing, Mich., last Wednesday. Margaret and I notified our players and staff of Patrick’s health issue after a biopsy was done on Monday. We appreciate your concern and ask that you respect our family’s privacy as we address Patrick’s health.”

A sense of deja vu

As far as basketball matters go, Iowa finds itself in a familiar spot entering this week’s Big Ten Tournament at Bankers Life Fieldhouse in Indianapolis. Just like last season, the Hawkeyes are the No. 6 seed and will face 11th-seeded Northwestern in the first round on March 13. Should Iowa prevail against the Wildcats, the same quarterfinal opponent as last year – third-seeded Michigan State – awaits the Hawkeyes.

“Yeah, that’s interesting,” senior forward Zach McCabe said about the similarity. “I think we expected to finish higher and we struggled at the end of season. But I think we’re in a good position right now.”

Even more bizarre is that in addition to the same seed, same first-round opponent and same potential quarterfinal opponent, Iowa also possesses the same overall record (20-11) and same Big Ten record (9-9) as it had at this time one year ago.

Except that’s where McCaffery believes the similarities end. In fact, he even described this season as being “dramatically different” when broached about the topic Tuesday.

“I think any time you have a different team and play a

different schedule, it just has a different feel to it," McCaffery said. "The fact that we ended up with identical records is just a coincidence in that sense.

"But we clearly challenged ourselves with a much more difficult non-conference schedule. We were handed a substantially more competitive conference schedule and I think we handled it well."

McCaffery went on to mention how the Hawkeyes' schedule this season has proven tougher – both in Big Ten play and in general – than last year, which will ultimately be why come Selection Sunday, Iowa will hear its name called for the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2006.

The Hawkeyes find themselves in this position after dropping five of their last six regular season contests, including a pair of games last week at No. 22 Michigan State and at home against Illinois.

Among the areas most questioned during this skid have been at the defensive end of the floor. Prior to playing Wisconsin back on Feb. 22, Iowa was considered to have one of the better defenses in the Big Ten. Over the last six games however, the Hawkeyes have surrendered 79, 95, 93, 76, 86 and 66 points, respectively.

But junior forward Aaron White believes the issues Iowa has had of late defensively are more correctable than the issues that plagued the Hawkeyes during his freshman campaign in 2011-12.

"My freshman year, we never proved we could argue, whether it was the first game against Chicago State or the last game of the year when we played Oregon," White said. "Throughout those games, we didn't really prove we could get it done defensively. But this year has been totally different.

"We were top 10 nationally in some defensive statistics and

it's more about knowing your personnel, which we do a pretty good job of, but closing out, not letting them drive by you, rotations, staying in your stance, staying over, getting over the ball rather than hugging your guy. So it's more strategic things than not being able to do it."

Preparing for Northwestern

In terms of actual match-ups, Northwestern is as favorable a match-up as there is for the Hawkeyes. In two games against the Wildcats this season (both of which were played in January), Iowa won both of them by 26 points each – 93-67 on Jan. 9 at Carver-Hawkeye Arena, and 76-50 on Jan. 25 at Welsh-Ryan Arena in Evanston, Ill.

Following that game, Northwestern won two straight road games at Wisconsin and at Minnesota to reach 5-5, then proceeded to drop seven straight games before winning its regular season finale at Purdue on March 9 to finish 6-12. Over that time span, the Wildcats have dealt with injuries, with the killer being JerShon Cobb out with a foot injury. Cobb was one of Northwestern's leading scorers during the first meeting with Iowa.

One Wildcat player who has improved considerably over the last month however is center Alex Olah. In five of Northwestern's last six games, Olah has compiled double-figure points. He has also had six games with five or more rebounds since the last meeting between the Hawkeyes and Wildcats.

"He is really a guy that you say he can get 20 and 10 if you don't play him right, if you don't work hard or harder than he does," McCaffery said.

Should Iowa earn its sixth consecutive win over Northwestern on Thursday, the Hawkeyes then find themselves meeting Michigan State in the Big Ten Tournament for the fourth consecutive year. Add on to that the Spartans have knocked Iowa out each of the past three seasons and won an emotionally

heated affair between the two teams last week in East Lansing and the potential is there for more fireworks.

None of the Hawkeye players are overlooking Northwestern, but they're also not naive to knowing what's in front of them should they defeat the Wildcats.

"We've got a lot of unfinished business in that tournament to do," sophomore center Adam Woodbury said.