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An interview with:

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY

Q. When you look at Sullinger, not only can he beat you scoring, he seems to be able to pass out of the post. What challenge does he present for your defense?

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY: It's not just him. You're right, he's arguably the best passing big man in the game. He's fabulous. He's seen it a lot, so he's gotten really good at it. He's worked on it. They spread you. But they got shooters.

You can double-team anybody and get the ball out of his hands, but the question then becomes: What do you do from there?

For us, we've got to rotate and do two things: contain penetration and contest shooters, which is very difficult which you're spread out like that.

If you're committed to it, working hard at it, you can accomplish it.

Q. Does their offense give you concern more?

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY: You know, I think they both concern me. The offense is something, when you have that many weapons, because the guy that nobody seems to be talking about is Thomas. He's as good a scorer as there is. His efficiency, I mean, he goes two games without missing a two-point shot. He's always around the ball. He's a really good rebounder.

Then you have Buford who might be their all-time leading scorer when it's all over. And Craft is this year more aggressive offensively than he was last year. He's driving the ball more. He's scoring the ball more. Then they bring so many good athletes off the bench.

I think in terms of preparation, you really have to focus on a lot of different people, a lot of different things.

Q. Aaron White has shown the ability to hit the three and score in transition. When you were recruiting him, were those things that stood out?

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY: I think one of the things that really stood out for us, you watch him play, sort of his court demeanor. He doesn't seem to rattle in any way. Now, you know, you're recruiting him in AAU basketball, his high school team, it's not like he's been in the pressure situations he's going to be in here, but he's been in a lot of situations.

He doesn't fight the game. The game comes easy to him. When there's space, he drives it. When he's open, he shoots it. He gives it up if he's covered. He runs the floor when it presents itself. He sees the game one play ahead because he's played so much.

When you have a player who is 6'8" and 220, he's got a good frame, understands how to play in and out, that simplifies things a lot for us. It makes it harder to prepare for us.

Q. What is his upside?

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY: You know, I'd like to see him stronger. He's not a 245 guy. 230, 232 in that range. Because you want him to maintain his lift and his first step. Beyond that, I think the one area that he lacks now is stamina. He does tire. So a number of times where he's playing really well, we go get him and take him out when we'd really like to leave him in. But he just needs a rest and he has to recover.

He does recover quickly, so that means he's in really good shape, he's worked at that. Over time, as he matures, gets even stronger, he'll be that much more effective.

Q. Can you talk about the effort McCabe is giving you now.

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY: It's

interesting because he was playing so well, then he had a couple games where he got in foul trouble. Aaron played really well. He sort of was forgotten a little bit.

But, I mean, he was as good as he's been against Minnesota. What you're seeing now I think is a much more confident player. He's not turning the ball over like he did last year. He doesn't put as much pressure on himself to make threes like he did last year. We were desperate for him to do that, and he did that some. I think he felt that, put that on himself.

He'll make some threes. He drives the ball. He defends the post. He understands what we want him to do now. He knows the offense inside and out at all three forward positions.

I think what you're seeing is a guy that's a little bit stronger, a little bit tougher, who is a real gamer, who now after having been through it for a little while is playing, even though he's only a sophomore, he's playing like a veteran.

Q. Melsahn didn't play very much the other night. Was that due to Archie?

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, you know, Melsahn, he didn't play well. I think he had seven out of eight double-figure games prior to that. The one game he wasn't in doubles, he had eight. He had the four stinkers early, two points, two points, two points, two points, then he had eight really good games really coming into his own. He wasn't getting anything done on either end of the floor. At some point you got to go with other people. That's really all it was.

It was not a reflection on what he's done. It was: What do we have to do to win this game? McCabe and White needed to be on the floor.

Archie was fabulous when I put him in in the first half. Brommer was pretty good. I went with Archie. I thought he would give us a little bit more athleticism in that situation.

He makes an unbelievable play at the end of the first half. The second half, when we committed to the zone, I thought his ability to recover with his length, because they had us spread out like most teams will in a zone, he was fighting the post. You got to bluff and recover and you got to have a sense of, Okay, does our forward have to go out to the wing or is he in tight? Who is covering the high post?

You remember the second play in the first half, they had four guys up, he came up and contested Sampson. Sampson shoots an air ball.

That was his length but more so his recognition of where he's supposed to be.

When Archie's active, he's very effective. When he started the season in the starting lineup, he was playing great, all right? He reverted back to some of his old habits and he found himself on the bench.

At this point it's a decision he had to make: Do you want to stay on the bench or get back in the lineup? He revved it up in practice, earned it, and he was the most effective in that situation.

Q. Do you think you could have sat Mel last year for extended minutes without the team suffering?

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY: Hopefully it will be incentive for him to pick it up. He's typically a guy we have to have on the floor. We've had some tight games this year where if he wasn't on the floor, we wouldn't have won. He's been great. I love him.

But he was a step slow and he was not in the game like he should have been. At some point you got to watch.

Q. Sullinger, he played so well against him here last year.

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY: I guess. To me, I don't know why you would need any motivation. There were 15,000 people at that game the other night, national television audience. Isn't that enough?

Q. (Question regarding back-to-back road wins.)

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY: I think that's a very important point. You know, you go on the road, you play really well, you beat Wisconsin, a place where they don't lose much. To back it up with another road win is terrific.

Then again, okay, where do you go from here? We lose the next six in a row, it's like, Okay, they won a couple of games a while ago.

The reason we won those two games is we're playing better. It's pretty simple. Now we have to continue to play even better. And we've got more individuals I think that are doing that which, again, collectively makes us better and collectively makes us that much harder to prepare for.

When it's all said and done, you know, I think it was a simple preparation last year. We had

a couple guys scoring the ball, a couple guys playing hard, that was about it. The kids fought for us.

Now we've got more weapons. But more importantly, we've got a better understanding of what we want to do. We're not making those mistakes. You remember last year's game where everybody talks about how we played well against Ohio State losing by five. They went on a 16-0 run, we turned it over seven times in that stretch. It's hard to win. It's hard to win.

Now, we fought back. Got it to a one- or two-possession game, and that's great, but we lost the game nine minutes before that.

I think this team is better prepared to handle that certainly than last year's team was.

Q. How pleased are you with the transition game?

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, I think Bryce is a big part of that. Not only does Bryce add another dimension at that position, it enables Marble to be the guy on the wing finishing. Now you have Marble, Gatens and May running out attacking the rim. You have Bryce pushing it or Marble pushing it.

So I think earlier in the year when we were struggling with it, Bryce wasn't really effective in that period of time. He's more like himself now.

Q. How much more productive has Marble become, particularly these last two games? He doesn't have major scoring outputs but he's able to be effective on both ends.

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY: It was a little bit painful in that stretch where Bryce was out or even when he was playing some nights, he wasn't really himself. But the thing that we benefited from was Devyn getting all those minutes. You remember the Creighton game where he was just getting us into our stuff, and then other games where the Iowa State game, in particular I thought he was fabulous. In the Purdue game he was very good. There were a number of games where all of a sudden you saw a different Devyn Marble as a point guard, not just somebody who can get the ball before and not turn it over. He did that last year. I think it's really helped him making big baskets down the stretch, big plays.

For him, he's made big baskets his whole life. You know, he has to make plays. He has to recognize at crunch time what are they in, what are we running, if the play breaks down, what do we

do from there, then make the play that presents itself, and not just look for zone.

I think that's been the development and maturity of Devyn Marble.

Q. What makes Aaron Craft so special on defense?

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY: I don't think it's anything complicated. He just gets after you and stays after you. You know, he's physical. You can't play around with the ball with him. You got to go. When he comes up, you got to go.

I mean, to me it's very simple. I played that position. Guard comes up on you, you got to go by him. If you mess around and go side to side, he's going to drive you crazy. You got to go.

Q. Have you been able to get a sense of kind of the excitement coming out of the last two games from a fan perspective? May be a full house on Saturday.

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY: I said over and over how impressed I've been with the Hawk fans, how they've been so loyal to us. I would hope it would be a sellout. You never know.

I think Ohio State creates a certain amount of attention, and deservedly so, what they've done, where they are presently. I think anytime your team starts to play better, your fan base recognizes that, they typically respond in a positive way. We've always done that.

I said last year, we had two terrible games at home, and they kept coming. I appreciated that. Our players appreciated that. Well, now, you know, we're playing better, we've got a top-10 team coming in here. It will be a great atmosphere. It should be a great game.

Q. Is there a different approach when it's a home game when there's an excitement building? When you're on the road, you don't have to worry about the crowd.

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY: I don't think I would worry about that. We'll be revved up, that's for sure. Sometimes, you know, you quick shoot the ball a little bit. You put your head down and go. But, you know, I look more on, we talked about the defensive side, I think our defensive intensity and focus and concentration with the energy in the building will certainly be at its peak.

Offensively we may have to settle down here or there. But I think we have, as I mentioned

earlier, a little bit more maturity this year in terms of understanding that. Hopefully we'll execute that tomorrow.

Q. Have you seen more of a belief from your players? Past couple years hasn't really been a whole lot of confidence and belief around the program. After these two wins have you seen more?

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY: I think the best example of that - there's been a few - but if you remember the Wisconsin game, we had a great start. Anybody can do that. It was important that that happened there. It changes everything. But they made three runs where they took the lead three separate times, and we came back three separate times. That's a major step for us.

Minnesota jumped us 32-21, we cut it to 1, got the lead, kept the lead. We missed our free throws late but we kept the lead and made enough plays to win the game.

We had a few mistakes late in that game beyond the free throws. We didn't execute a couple play sets that we tried to run. But we were able to play through that. Again, last year that might have been the end of us right there. We know what we want to run. We try to run it and execute it. Put our head down. Make another mistake. Next thing you know, we're down 3.

I do think that there's a better focus and maturity about this team.

Q. Do you feel this group is focused?

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY: I think that's a very, very good observation. I think that will manifest itself overtime to see if what you're saying is actually what happens.

I mean, so far we've been okay, partly because there's not a lot of people around. Maybe they go to a restaurant, have a bite to eat, somebody says something to them. It's not like everywhere they go on campus everybody is telling them how great they are.

It's like when we had that stretch where we were struggling, lost four out of five, whatever it was, weren't playing well, you don't want to see anybody. But you just get up, you go about your business, you try to take care of what put us in that predicament. If we're playing better, people are telling you, Hey, this is great, let's not forget what we've done to get to that point.

You know what the rest of this league is, right? You win two games, feel good about yourself, then you have Ohio State coming, then

Michigan State, and then Michigan. Penn State beats Purdue by 20. It's not like you look and say, "Okay, if we can get by these next three, we have a couple easy ones." That's not the case at all.

Fortunately we've shown that we can play with these teams and hopefully we'll be able to continue to do that.

Q. Last year it seems there was a lot of building confidence, but they felt like, We could play with these guys. This year it seems to be the level of confidence is up a level, which is not just being happy to play with these teams but expecting to win.

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY: I think that's a good point, too. You can't be satisfied with playing with teams. What do we have to do to win? Okay, we're losing by 15 or 20. What do we have to do to get better? What do we have to do to shorten the gap?

Right now we've proven we can play with pretty much everybody, but can we win and can we win consistently? That's the hardest thing.

I remember the one team that sticks out in my career over the years, I had a 7-22 team. We were 20 baskets from 20 wins. You think about that for a second, the fine line between winning and losing. When you're going through a 22-loss season, it's not fun. But we were this close to going to the NCAA Tournament, but we didn't go. Okay, why didn't we go? Well, we didn't do the things we needed to do at crunch time to win those games to get those 20 baskets. That's sometimes the hardest thing to get our guys to know and understand.

Careless turnovers late, shooting extra free throws in practice. We almost lost that game because of missed free throws. You don't want to give one back. You won the game for 39 minutes, then you give it back to them.

Tomorrow, for example, you're going to have Sullinger posting up hard. We've got to give him some help. We'll mix our defenses, we'll trap, we won't trap, do a lot of different things, nothing they haven't seen, but understand how to carry out the assignment and how to consistently understand if they're on a run, what do we have to do to stop the run. That was a big problem we had last year. Much better at that this year now, not so much going back to the Creighton game.

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