

March 2, 2012



An Interview With:

FRAN MCCAFFERY

Q. You spent a little time on the 3-1 zone and beating out the half court?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: We have, among another things, but we've worked on it.

Q. Are you encouraged?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: Actually, yeah, that was the funny thing, we did real well against it in practice before. It's a little different when you get out there, and we're trying to simulate how they do it and the intensity level with which they do it and so forth.

Q. How is Aaron's thumb?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: I think it hurts, but he'll be fine.

Q. Northwestern shot, I think, 39 threes in the last three games against you. What can you do differently and what would you do differently?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: Well, we just have to do a better job. We've got to get up, and they run all the cuts and all the back door stuff, so you're concerned about that. And I think that they are driving the ball better than they ever have, so that makes them that much harder to guard. But when it's all said and done, if you're going to take away the three, you've got to get out there.

Q. You have a chance to finish the season .500 if you win this one. What does that say about this team?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: Well, I think it says a lot about a lot of things. I mean, number one, we certainly didn't look that way a while back, and it says a lot about their character and how they kept working at it and kept believing in each other, and we've had guys that just kept getting better.

You know, and I think what I'm trying to do is kind of just focus on this game and not look at, well, we haven't done this since then and all that kind of stuff. I don't care about that. I just want to try to win this game and get our guys ready for this game.

You know, that said, a .500 record in the league puts you in a completely different situation in terms of postseason opportunity. A lot of times coaches don't like to talk about things specifically like that, but everybody else is, so we might as well do it.

I mean, let's not pretend that it's not there. It's right there for them if they want it. I know that we'll play with great effort. What we have to do is play with better execution than we did when we played them last time.

Q. You also could secure a winning season with a victory. Talk about that.

FRAN MCCAFFERY: Well, I think ultimately that's got to be one of the steps along the way. You get a winning season and then you get to the NCAA tournament and then you win a championship. It's an important step, no question.

Q. Is Matt first-team all Big Ten in your mind?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: I think so, yeah.

Q. Do you think there's even much of a debate over it?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: I don't think so. We'll see what everybody else thinks, though. To me, it doesn't really matter what I say or what anybody says, it matters what he has done, and he has consistently performed at a level that I think makes him a first team all Big Ten player.

Q. Your résumé is pretty comparable to what Penn State's was last year outside of the RPI. Can you make a case if you win tomorrow

that you should be right there on the bubble?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: Oh, yeah, no question because of the quality of our league and how our league is ranked. I suspect we will have to do a little more work if we win tomorrow. What is that, I don't know, depends on who we play and so forth.

But I think everybody thought coming in that they would take seven at least, we would be seven.

Q. Is that almost a situation where you have to get to the championship game?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: I don't think so. No, I don't. But again, it's so hard to speculate because you've got -- it's kind of been a unique season in many ways with some leagues, and how do the mid majors figure in and how many upsets are there and all of those factors, and when you get in that room and you're trying to find X number of teams, some are going to be in and some are out to be out based on different factors.

You know, certainly if we make a little run here at the end, then we'll be one of the hotter teams, and playing at a point where I think we deserve to be in.

You know, they always say they look at RPI and then they say they don't look at RPI. So it's almost like a justification to go one way or the other on you sometimes. I think what you do is you look at, okay, what kind of league are you in. Well, we're in the best league. That's a fact. So now, how did you do in that league? Well, we did pretty well.

And then you go from there. That's why you look at Northwestern right now and that's why they keep saying they're still in, and that's exactly why they should be. They have done a great job. A couple overtime losses, one of those goes the other way for them, and they're in no matter what. But we're in a position where we at least have to be part of the conversation.

Q. Do you think too many times that people don't appreciate the journey of a season and rather just start looking ahead to March?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: I've said that many times, and I think that's a real good point. I remember it happened a couple years ago, I was watching a game, it was -- I want to say the first or second week of January, and they were already having Joe Lunardi's picks, and I'm thinking, this is ridiculous, it's too early. We're still in the middle of the conference race. You don't even know who's

going to finish one through eight and it's too early for that. I just think there's too much emphasis put on that.

Maybe it's fun for the fans to look and say, okay -- because he changes it every day, the last four in, the last four out, all that kind of stuff, and it captures people's attention, so it's not going to go away, but I think there's too much emphasis placed on it, and I think I even have a greater appreciation for the journey of a conference season in the Big Ten. Not to say that it wasn't difficult in the SoCon or in the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference. It's very difficult. You've got to go on the road and win, you've got to protect your own court, the same things, but when you go on the road in this league, it's a different experience everywhere you go.

I think when you get to the end and you see some of our teams that have been able to consistently win at home and out on the road, those are the teams that typically advance.

Q. The fact that you're even talking about playing postseason in your second season, the fact that your attendance has had a pretty good spike in the conference season, does that tell you that people are thinking you're making progress here and you're doing a lot of good things?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: I think so. That's what most people come up and say. I think that they have seen progress. I think that they have seen individuals get better, they have seen our team get better, and I think they're excited about our recruiting class. The building has been electric, which is what we wanted. Our fans have been just absolutely fabulous. That's greatly appreciated by me and our players. That's just the beginning. We're going to keep working hard in the spring, in the summer, in the fall, to make sure this team is even better next year.

Q. You talked about the electricity. The reception the last couple home games, you had good crowds, and it seems like the team has really responded to that?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: Well, they have, and rightfully so. When a crowd fills the building and gives you the kind of support that we've gotten, I think it's incumbent upon our players to recognize that. You don't have to play a perfect game, but you have to give perfect effort, and I think we've done that.

Q. If it's not the NCAA tournament but say the NIT or the CBI, is that something that you accept without any sort of hesitation?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: Yes.

Q. How confident are you that at worst case scenario you're going to be in one of those at season's end?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: I feel pretty good about it. I mean, we'll see what happens next week.

Q. Northwestern seems to be almost a Cinderella story especially for the Big Ten Network but then other networks, as well. Do you feel like you're there almost to be the ogre in their Cinderella story?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: No, I don't. We're just playing another league game that has significance for you. I don't really pay much attention to that at all. I'm sure Bill doesn't, either. He can't help hearing about it, but he's just trying to get his team to win a game, too. They've had a very good year. Shurna has had as good a year as anybody in college basketball.

Q. How invaluable has it been to have somebody like Matt be there, not only on the court --

FRAN MCCAFFERY: I've been lucky. I've said this before, but I've been lucky that every time I've gone into a rebuilding situation, I've inherited somebody like Matt. It makes the transition so much easier for me and my coaching staff when you have, number one, a really good player. You start with that, and you start with a player who has incredibly great character. And then you add to the fact that that player has tremendous work ethic and conducts himself off the floor the way you would expect. It just changes everything because what you're doing is you're surrounding him with young players that often times aren't ready and they don't have what it takes yet. They will, but without that leadership and someone to show them the way, they don't make the progress that you would like to see as quickly as we would all like to see it.

You're seeing it with some of our young guys, and I think a lot of the credit needs to be attributed to Matt Gatens.

Q. What are you going to miss most about Matt?



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FRAN MCCAFFERY: I think any coach wants somebody that they can count on every night, pretty much every possession. I want to get his best. If he's missing a shot, he's going to run back. He's going to guard his man. He's not going to turn it over. He's going to make his free throws at the end of the game, and then through the course of the game he's going to make some baskets for you. Some nights he's going to make more than others. But he's going to keep working regardless of how many double coverages he sees. He's just going to keep coming. He's going to be relentless.

And that attitude sort of permeates everything that everybody else does because it's a lot harder than people think to do that.

Q. How satisfying has the defensive effort been the last two games?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: It's been great, and we've worked on it, and the guys have bought in. Again, you try to improve individually and then collectively. And obviously we're going to need arguably our best effort tomorrow because of how they run their offense. Any letdown at all, you're going to have four guys working hard, one guy lets down, one guy lets down on one cut, and it's a lay-up or a three.

I think certainly when we played up there, we didn't have that mentality, and they got us. And they've done that to a lot of people. And then you watch some of the games that they've lost, their teams have really dug in and got after that, and they have been close games.

So this is a team with tremendous offensive power. I forget what game it was, but they got out rebounded 44 to 18. It was either the Michigan game or the Ohio State game. You think about that, one was overtime, one was by two. That doesn't happen much, 44-18 on the glass, and it's right down to the wire, that tells you what they're capable of doing on offense.

Q. Sometimes with senior day or senior night, the emotions are so high that six minutes into the game, everybody is spent emotionally. How do you guard against that, not Matt specifically but just everybody in general?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: Well, one of the things that I do is I don't change anything. I'm not going to change my starting lineup. I don't do

anything differently. To be honest with you, I try to downplay whatever ceremony we're going to have. It's going to be four or five minutes to properly recognize terrific individuals. But my focus is on the game. We will spend hours recognizing them at our senior banquet.

But I don't want it to be a distraction. I don't want the emotions. I can guarantee you Matt Gatens is going to say, hey, how are you and wave to people, and let's go. And that's the way it has to be. You don't need anything -- and you're right; I've been there. I remember one time we had a big game in, what was it, Siena, and everybody is crying and the players and their parents, and I'm like, what are we doing here? Get off the floor. Let's go. I mean, enough with the flowers.

It's just one of those things, and I don't want to be in any way ungrateful because we can talk about Matt Gatens, but Bryce Cartwright said yes to me and he didn't know me, and the first time he saw me was when he got off the plane for his visit. And Devon Archie and Andrew Brommer have endured injury and they just kept coming for me, and nobody talked about them because they haven't accomplished as much as Matt but they've been an integral part of what we're trying to do. We don't win that game the other night without Brommer. He was tremendous, and I love those guys, and I appreciate their families and want their families to be there.

It's just a unique atmosphere. It's an important game. It's an important game for both teams, and you don't want to lose track of that.

Q. Aaron White will probably be all-freshman team. Where does he rate for you in terms of freshmen that you've had overall?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: You know what, he's right -- I've been pretty lucky. We've had some -- we had Troy Murphy was the Big East Rookie of the Year, Pat Garrity -- we weren't in the Big East when he was a freshman, but he ended up being the Big East Player of the Year, and he probably would have been the Big East Rookie of the Year. I mean, I can think of -- I had Daren Queenan, he was the Rookie of the Year, I had Kyle Hines, he was the Rookie of the Year, I had Evan Ubiles, he was Rookie of the Year, I had Kenny Hasbrouck, he was Rookie of the Year. Ultimately some of them ended up being Player of the Year. Ironically Ubiles was Rookie of the Year and Franklin was Player of the Year and they were both freshmen. Franklin was the Player of the Year when he was a senior.

So I've had a number of guys, but there are certain qualities that Aaron has that are similar to those, which bode well for his future. You look at him and are sometimes amazed at all the things he accomplishes because he just has such great feel for the game and he's so much more athletic than you think he's going to be when you look at him. You go, okay, how about a little bit stronger, because he's going to get 40,000 shots up this summer, maybe more. So he's going to work on his game, and he's been through it now, and he's going to calculate in his mind what he's got to do to get better and what he's got to do next year, and he knows the offense now, he knows all the plays at all the different positions so we can move him around because he's got that kind of versatility.

He's got a chance to really have a great career here and then play for a long time.

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