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An interview with:

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY

Q. How is Illinois different now that Rayvonte Rice is back in the lineup?

COACH McCAFFERY: He gives them a big-time scorer, experienced guy. It improves their depth. They got a lot of weapons anyway. So now you add another one; it makes them that much tougher to guard.

Q. Three guys who are all shooting 40% from three, but can get to the basket, too. Tough combination to guard.

COACH McCAFFERY: It is. It puts a lot of pressure on your defense; how you plan to guard them.

They're also willing to give it up, which is good. It's not like one guy gets it, he puts his head down. They'll give it up, move on.

Q. How has Hill developed for them this year?

COACH McCAFFERY: I thought you could see it last year as the season went on. He clearly became one of their best players as a freshman. It would only stand to reason he'd be that much better now.

I think he's established himself as a premiere, elite player.

Q. Jarrod continues to take big shots and make them. Do you think his teammates now have almost a great deal of confidence in him; when the ball is in his hands he can do good things?

COACH McCAFFERY: Yeah, I think he makes good decisions when to shoot it, when to give it up. There's no selfishness in him at all. He guards his man. He rebounds. He's clearly committed to winning.

Anytime you have a guy like that, your teammates are going to respect you.

Q. (Question about Uthoff hard to guard on his mid-range jumpers)

COACH McCAFFERY: Especially because he doesn't have to be on balance to make it. That's really hard to do. You're right, it's hard to get to him and try to block it.

A lot of times guys think they can contest and he makes it anyway. That's what makes him special.

Q. Peter seems to get off to a fast start in a lot of games. When he does, everybody follows. Is there a conscious effort to get him going?

COACH McCAFFERY: When we have him out there, we're trying to get him the ball, trying to get him going no matter what. I think he's that talented. He's in a good place right now from a confidence standpoint.

But again, for him, he's passing it well, he's defending. It's important to him that he kind of be a complete player. I think it's clearly important to us.

Q. How far has he come defensively this season?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think a lot of his problems defensively were fatigue. He's in great shape now. He's able to sustain effort. It wasn't that he couldn't guard last year; he couldn't sustain effort long enough to go after the guys he's going to be matched up against.

He figured that out and he corrected that.

Q. Jarrod looks much more like a complete player than maybe we've seen before. Is that because he's playing a lot more now or because he's understanding what you want?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think his minutes are much more consistent. He's getting a lot of

minutes. At the end of the game you look at his stat line, he's going to have numbers. Blocked shots, he's going to get rebounds, going to shoot the ball in the hole for you.

Last year, he was playing a lot less. I think that impacted his ability to be a dominant player, although he was at times. I think you're seeing a more consistent guy now.

Q. Did you figure he was going to be a complete player?

COACH McCAFFERY: I always thought he was. When I watched him in high school, I thought he was a complete player.

Q. How important is it to have a guy that you feel is a go-to guy?

COACH McCAFFERY: You'd like to have more than one, and I think we do. But at some point you need a guy who can make jump shots, can make threes, can post up, and most importantly can make a play for someone else if he gets shut down and is willing to do that. He is.

Q. How important is guard defense in a game like this where they have so much quickness, ability to hit threes?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think it's important. Clearly it's important in a game where there's perimeter quickness.

Whoever you play, you can't let the ball get in the lane regularly. If you can keep it out of the lane, limit your help recovery situations, you're going to be better off.

Q. Is this the type of game where if Clemmons isn't playing well lately, he could see more time?

COACH McCAFFERY: He could. But Josh is very good in that area, too.

Q. How do you look at this for your team? Just focus on Illinois?

COACH McCAFFERY: That's all we've ever done. I think from that standpoint, it's easy. It's not like we're making a change. That's how we handle every game, every non-conference game, every conference game. I don't even think about it, the next one, just this one.

Q. Do you think that helps you bounce back from the disappointing weeks, where you don't get too down?

COACH McCAFFERY: Yeah, I guess. To me, when you're in this league and you lose a game, everybody wants to jump to, 'everything was disappointing.'

We lost a road game to a team that's playing well. We lost a home game to a team that's playing well. Could we have played better? Yeah. It would have been nice to win. All you do is worry about, 'boy, if that shot didn't go in at Purdue...' That's where this league is.

Jarrold is going to hit one against Minnesota, Davis (Purdue) is going to hit one and we lost. You would like to be in a situation where that's not the case, but typically that's where it ends up.

You have to make sure you're engaged in every possession to hopefully limit the times that you're on the losing end of that.

Q. When you play a team just once, does that magnify the importance of the scouting report?

COACH McCAFFERY: I suppose. I never really thought of it that way. We're going to scout the exact same way. If we play them again, we'll rescout them essentially. Not like we're going to go off of what we did before. Sometimes there's an exception. We played Wisconsin, what, 5-7 days later. That's different. But we played Nebraska 11 games later. It's a completely different team, completely different scout than it was 11 games before.

Q. How challenging is that for your players, if they play almost all the teams twice, they can remember what they did against them, whereas Illinois, it's been almost a year ago?

COACH McCAFFERY: I don't think it's that hard. They have watched some games on television. They're familiar with personnel. We're going to reacquaint them with video, with the scouting report.

It's no different than any other game. They lock in pretty good to the scout. Sometimes the team beats you. But we got guys that are really trying to stay with the game plan.

Sometimes the game plan doesn't work and you have to adjust to the game plan on the fly, make game adjustments. They're typically pretty good at that.

Q. Do you think they've improved during the year quite a bit? They didn't have the ability to get back on track earlier in the year.

COACH McCAFFERY: No, I think they've been pretty good in that area. I haven't noticed them having any difficulty with that.

Q. You mentioned Sunday, you called that timeout at 21-14. You reminded them of the game plan again. You just felt they were getting away from that or you just reinforce that?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think you reinforce certain concepts that you think are going to be important for that team. There's always a fine line between running and playing intelligently.

I thought in the Nebraska game, we were pretty good in that area. Maybe we quick shotted a little bit in that stretch. But when you're a running team, you're a coach that preaches running, that's going to happen sometimes. You can't freak out every time we quick shoot, they score, we quick shoot, they score. You can't start yelling at everybody because we preached keep running, keep attacking, don't be afraid to shoot the ball, make a play.

At some point you rely on either your point guard or some of your experienced guys to say, 'okay, let's pull it out, work the ball, keep them on defense,' without me having to do it.

I think Aaron White and Mike (Gesell), (Anthony) Clemmons are pretty good in that respect.

Q. Trey deciding to leave the program, how does that change your recruiting coming up?

COACH McCAFFERY: It gives us two scholarships, obviously, instead of one. We can look at a guard which we probably wouldn't have because I think we need a big guy certainly with the one. The question is do we use it this year or save it.

Q. I don't know how to ask this. With the era of free agency in college basketball, two scholarships, would you look harder at somebody from another school?

COACH McCAFFERY: That's a hard call because you can't sit here today and predict who is going to be available and are they going to be a fit. If somebody is available and they are a fit, would they come.

A lot of times those things happen at the last second. You get a call, So-and-so is available, what do you think? You're looking at film, trying to do background checks on character to make sure you don't make a mistake there.

Ultimately, what's important to me is our team chemistry. You start adding a guy who is a fifth-year guy, a transfer that's eligible right away, you want to make sure that they fit not only in terms of what you see on the floor, but they fit in the locker room, they fit with what we're trying to do as a program.

So I guess the answer is we wouldn't sit around and wait and predict. We would more so react to when that happened. But we wouldn't pass a guy up that we thought maybe could help us that might be a high school guy.

Q. Is there more flexibility to save one of those two?

COACH McCAFFERY: We could. But again, if you're sitting there with a guy who wants to come, you think he can help your program, do you pass on him because you think you can get somebody better or not. Those are the kinds of decisions that happen quickly.

Q. Are you surprised by the timing of this?

COACH McCAFFERY: No.

Q. (Question about Gabe being a candidate for "Sixth Man of the Year" in the Big Ten.

COACH McCAFFERY: His effort and productivity speaks for itself. I'm sure there are other qualified candidates for that award.

I think his impact on the game, when he comes in as a post player with energy, both as a scorer and as a rebounder, rim protector, certainly has great impact on our success. I think he's a guy certainly that I think he should win it, but we'll see.

Q. A transfer player, does that help you relate to a guy like Jarrod who has been in that situation, is trying to deal with a new school?

COACH McCAFFERY: Yeah, and with Trey. With anybody who is thinking about transferring. Having been through that, kind of what goes through your mind.

Jarrod was an easy one, to be honest with you. His was real easy. I think the hardest thing for

him was usually you played where you're transferring from. He didn't play there. He has to sit out again. I think that was probably the only difficulty he had, he sat for two years.

But adjusting to a new system or new coach, as easy a guy to coach as I've ever been around. That's been no problem at all.

Others struggle because they're in a situation where it's not exactly what they hoped it would be, then they have to weigh whether or not they're willing to accept that or not.

Trey wants more. I respect that. I mean that sincerely. I'm not angry at him. I'm not blaming him in any way, shape or form. He wants more. We'll try to help him find more somewhere else. It wasn't going to happen for him here. He figured that out. He's got two years left. He'll be a good player for somebody.

Q. You said Jarrod was easy. What do you mean by that?

COACH McCAFFERY: You ask him to do something, he says, 'okay.' It's really that simple. He doesn't fight you on stuff. He doesn't go off on his own. He wants to win. He's a smart kid. Great teammate. Very rarely raises his voice.

You can get on him, and he's great. I don't really get on him that much. If you get on him about something, he usually agrees with you. 'Yeah, I should have done that, coach, sorry.'

Q. Do you feel like what you have coming in with Moss and Fleming next year, that that will impact what you look for in terms of a guard?

COACH McCAFFERY: Sure.

Q. Do you think they could maybe help?

COACH McCAFFERY: No question. They both can handle the ball. Fleming has played the point. Isaiah handles the ball really well. Hutton is more of a wing guy, but he's a guard. He can defend a point.

Q. You said you weren't surprised that Trey left. Was there a point or something you sensed awhile back?

COACH McCAFFERY: No. Like I said, he wants more. He wasn't getting the playing time he hoped to get. He wouldn't have the role that he envisioned for himself when he came here.

I think you have to be realistic. He has to be realistic. I have to be realistic. I'm not doing

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anything other than trying to help the kid make sure he finishes here strong academically and put him in a position where he can transfer anywhere he wants.

He's got to bear down there. We'll help him. Going to get a ton of phone calls about him. We'll talk to people, impress upon them that he has great character.

A lot of times when there's transfers, the first thing is are there character issues, is he a knucklehead, did he flunk a drug test, anything like that. There's no issues at all with regard to those issues.

Q. Over the last few days the issue of fans storming the court in college basketball has been raised. Do you think that is something that has a place in college basketball or needs to be eliminated?

COACH McCAFFERY: To be honest with you, I never really thought about it. We all want atmosphere. We all want our fans to be engaged and excited. You want your student body to run on the floor if they feel compelled to do so.

There was a stretch where I thought they were getting carried away. There should be a reason you run on the floor. It should be rare that that happens. When it does, it should be somewhat spontaneous. It shouldn't be planned.

I did watch the game last night. It was a scary sight. All I could think about was those guys up on the table and that table going, they all fall down, there's no room.

Luckily nobody got hurt. It wasn't anybody's intention to be hurt. I don't know that we need to wall everybody off either with an incredible show of security. But I think we have to make sure that nobody does get hurt.

Q. (Question about freshmen eligibility.)

COACH McCAFFERY: Yeah, it's one of those things where it's going to be all across the board or not. In and of itself I think it's a great idea. It's not fair to certain people that are ready maybe. You look at a guy like Mike Gesell. He doesn't need a year. Off and running, 4.0. Coach, I got the offense, I got the play, ready to go. He would still get the same number of years of eligibility, maybe it would help him.

You can't do it conference by conference, we're going to try it. No, that can't happen. That would be a disaster.

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Q. Have you heard anything on the recruiting trail?

COACH McCAFFERY: No. I can't see our league doing something that everybody else doesn't do and put us in a recruiting disadvantage.

Our commissioner is too smart. Our league is too smart. This idea has merit for all the right reasons. That's how we think. But it would have to be, I think, something that we would all agree to.

The reality is, basketball players want to play right away. A lot of them are not ready, but they all think they're ready. They don't want to sit a year. That's my feeling. I guess I shouldn't be speaking for everybody, but that's my feeling. That's what you're asking me.

Hopefully we'll look at it and see if it makes sense, either do it or not do it. But, I think if you look at why you're considering it, it would clearly help your graduation rates, the academic progress. Let's remember, these kids are all in academic institutions, and that's important.

Some guys struggle right away. Maybe it would curb transfers. I think that's probably another reason for the transfer epidemic. Over 600 last year. Would that get that number to go down? They would settle in and they would learn the system and they would feel comfortable at the institution. Every transfer is not because of playing time. It's a bad fit geographically, socially.

There's a lot of advantages to it. I think there's merit to really look at it. I hope we do look at it for all the right reasons.

Q. Would you look at it as a head coach and a father? Maybe different perceptions.

COACH McCAFFERY: I don't look at it differently for Connor McCaffery than I would for Mike Gesell. Just because Mike is not my son doesn't mean I don't want and think the same things for him that I would for Connor.

I try to pride myself in conveying that to the parents of the players that I recruit. To sit here and argue against that rule, I think it would be foolish because there are so many good things about it.

Sometimes you got to figure out a way to make it all work because it's not going to be real appealing to the guys who are talented enough to go right to the league or were planning on being one-and-done. They're not going to want to sit a year. That's another component that might be impacted.

Those guys now go overseas and play a year so they can go right to the NBA. There's so many moving parts to that kind of thing. I think the fact they're talking about it makes a lot of sense.

Q. (Question about 13 scholarships.)

COACH McCAFFERY: That's another part. My thought was that we would have more than 13 scholarships. We may not. They're probably looking at that component. Do we keep it at 13 or go back to 15? So I don't know.

Q. Freshmen teams, travel for freshmen teams, more cost?

COACH McCAFFERY: A lot more cost. Then you factor in, would we be able to afford it? Better than the mid-major schools. Some of the places where I've worked, that would be very difficult to do. You just play local schedules, local community colleges. I guess you'd play each other.

But if you're trying to play a freshmen Big Ten schedule, how do you do that? I think it would almost have to be geographical, so that's another component. There's a lot of things that would have to be worked out before we ever got to that point.

Anytime it gets to this point, obviously they're looking at it hard. I still remember when that's how it was. Freshmen didn't play. I like the idea of getting the fourth year, getting the extra year back only playing three.

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