

March 8, 2013



An interview with:

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY

Q. A lot of milestones that could be met tomorrow. In your own milestone, have you had a chance to reflect on your own milestones (300 wins)?

COACH McCAFFERY: I don't think about that. I would think more about team accomplishments, one of my player's accomplishments. I think that would be awesome for Dev and for Roy.

It would be a great accomplishment for this team to say we won 20 games, but at the same time you really don't want to celebrate that too much because it's just the next step in the journey and we got a long way to go this year.

It's not something we really talk about very much.

Q. How about Eric making his last regular-season game here?

COACH McCAFFERY: For him, in light of how incredible he's been for us, it would be great for him to be on a team that accomplished things and know that he was a captain of that team, an integral part of that team's success. It's something he could remember for the rest of his life.

Q. Does the way he's played this year speak to how dinged up he was last year?

COACH McCAFFERY: I don't know that. I would say this: I think what you're seeing is a player who committed himself to the game of basketball and became a true student of the game.

Now, granted, he's physically healthy. That's a big part of anyone's success. But I would say when we got here, he was still trying to figure it out. Is he a 3, is he a 2, is a rebounder, a driver, a shooter, a scorer, a defender? He's just trying to

help our team win games. A lot more pressure on him. We didn't have a lot of weapons.

What he's done is he's watched a lot of tape and he's worked hard in practice and he's put extra time in. He's had the opportunity to play in games and excel or struggle. But in the process he's figured it out and has gotten better.

What you're seeing is a guy who used to be pretty good but would make mistakes. Now he doesn't make mistakes. Now he's really good. That's I think been the transformation for him. He's always given us effort. He's always been a winning, unselfish person.

But his effectiveness I think is a result of what he's been able to figure out over the last couple years and make himself a terrific player.

Q. Was there a specific moment that you can recall where you noticed that light coming on for him?

COACH McCAFFERY: I thought it was last year in the pre-season, he was spectacular. He and Gatens were head and shoulders ahead of everybody else. Maybe it was his inability to be healthy that precluded him from maybe being what he could have been last year. It took a little longer.

But after going through that, you could clearly see it this summer and fall. I mean, he was terrific. Everybody had kind of written him off. But every day his numbers were such that we might have to think about starting him, we were thinking about bringing him off the bench. He seemed to excel in that capacity. He welcomed that challenge, knowing he was going to play fairly substantial amounts. Might be starter's minutes, it might not be depending on what happened. As the season progressed, pretty much playing starter's minutes, whether he started or not.

I'm happy for him. I think it's a great example for the other guys to watch somebody continue to persevere through injury and some other obstacles to become what he's become.

Q. You've coached a lot of players. Is he one of the best athletes you've ever coached?

COACH McCAFFERY: He is. You have a lot of guys with athletic power, but they all can't guard small ones and big ones. They're usually one or the other. He has a sense of what's required to guard that particular individual. It gives me the opportunity to put him on the individual I need to put him on.

His understanding of when to give it up, how to give it up, his turnover numbers, I keep talking about them in regard to Eric, because he could always shoot. He was always a pretty good percentage shooter. But now he's feeding the post, giving it up on the break, driving and kicking. He's recognizing when there's nothing there and moving it on. He's impacting the game defensively. He's impacting the game in terms of energy level. He's also substantially more vocal because he recognizes that he has a lot more to say and a lot more knowledge to impart on the younger guys.

As a result of his improved play, he's got that much more credibility when it comes to when he opens his mouth.

Q. Is it the ultimate sign of respect that people will say next year this team could use Eric May?

COACH McCAFFERY: Yeah, there's no question that people are going to say, They have a lot back, but they lose a guy that was really, really special. That's why we want this to go on as long as possible for him.

Q. With a guy like that who had to make the tough transition, he's your last holdover, was it a tough sell to get him going here?

COACH McCAFFERY: No, it was never an issue. That side of it was never an issue. He just kept working. He's one of the easiest guys I've ever had to coach. Just comes every day ready to go.

I mean, I can't imagine a better person to have as an employee in your company, on your team, whatever that team is. You want Eric May on that team.

Q. Any update on Mike (Gesell)?

COACH McCAFFERY: Yeah. What he's doing is he's out of the boot. It's a process to get him ready. So he's walking without the boot. He's

riding the bike without the boot. Over the course of the weekend he'll start running and he'll start shooting. These are all steps.

If at any point in time he felt a lot of pain, that would be problematic, and that would mean that he probably wouldn't play. It's baby steps. If he's okay today, we'll do it tomorrow a little more, a little more, a little more, then he'll play next week.

There's really no way of knowing until we get to next week.

Q. Has he had the second MRI yet?

COACH McCAFFERY: No. Actually he's not going to. Apparently it doesn't provide enough information to warrant that.

Q. So you're still optimistic that, barring any setbacks, you'll have him for Thursday?

COACH McCAFFERY: I am guarded in that respect, yeah, 'cause there's no guarantee.

Q. You look at the way attendance has gone up during your time here, can you reflect on how much that has helped you win some games and how it's nice for your players to have home-court advantage?

COACH McCAFFERY: I thought the other night against Illinois was unbelievable. They were talking about snow for two days. We had 14,500. Everybody came.

They have been loud. They have been engaged. I think they have appreciated this team. They have stuck with these kids. I appreciate it. Our players appreciate it.

I said this from day one: they recognize good basketball. They know what this league is. They know it's arguably the best it's been in 30 years. That's saying a lot when you think about how great this league has been over the last 30 years.

The quality of players, the quality of coaching, the depth, the stars. I mean, it's really an incredible season. Our fans wanted to witness that. But they wanted us to be in a situation where we were competitive and enjoying some success.

I think clearly they feel as though they've had something to do with that, and they should, because our performance at home has been tremendous. You can think of so many games in particular. We couldn't make a shot against Indiana. We've got the ball in a one possession

game with 30 seconds to go, and didn't shoot it well. Normally if you're playing the No. 1 team in the country, you shot it well to be in that position.

Our effort level I think has improved. It's been a function in many ways of the energy in the building, and it's been consistent. It hasn't been we'll show up for the Ohio State game but not for your non-conference games.

I think back to the Gardner-Webb game where they struggled so mightily in the first half, the eruption in the building when we made that run and ultimately won that game.

This is a long season, as you guys know. You look back and everybody wants to say we won this game or that game. That's part of it. But we keep coming back and winning and playing better and learning from what we didn't do in some of those difficult losses. We're respectful of the teams that beat us in those situations and move on.

Our fans have done a great job of continuing to be there for us. To know that we're going to have a sell-out on Saturday is a great feeling, more so for Eric May than anybody else.

Q. 20 games not being something to celebrate at this point --

COACH McCAFFERY: I didn't say that. It's not something we're going to talk about because the tournament is next week and we've got a lot in front of us.

It's a tremendous accomplishment and I'll be very happy for Eric May to be able to say for the rest of his life that he was the captain of a 20-win team in the best conference in college basketball.

Q. Do you get wrapped up in bubble talk at all?

COACH McCAFFERY: No, because we never know what's going to happen in that room. You never know what people are going to say. Everybody tries to predict what they're going to say. More and more guys are getting closer to be able to predict what's going to come out of there.

The only thing we can do is take care of business with what's in front of us. What happens with the rest of the league this week? We just can control what happens when we play Nebraska, and that's it.

Q. Do you pay attention to games like Kentucky and Virginia?

COACH McCAFFERY: No.

Q. Would you send a packet of information or anything like that to the committee? Have you done that in the past?

COACH McCAFFERY: I've never done that before. I suspect people get information to people on the committee. You kind of feel like maybe if you don't, you're falling behind, because everybody else is. Is everybody else really doing it? Do they even pay attention to it?

I think at some level it always helps to make sure that people are aware. I think that group of people, whoever it is, they're sophisticated enough and they have enough information at their disposal. I don't know if it would necessarily be a positive. Maybe it would, but...

Q. When you look at your early non-conference schedule, some of the games may keep you down a little bit in the discussion. Do you look back and think maybe you should have revamped it a little bit?

COACH McCAFFERY: No. We did exactly what we wanted to do. We wanted to win games. We knew we had a tough road in Cancun. We knew we had the Iowa State/Northern Iowa week. A lot of people play rivalry games, they don't usually play them back to back. That's a little different.

We suspected we would have some other tough games, which obviously we did, with a young team. Gardner-Webb, Central Michigan, some games like that.

It's great to say you're going to play them all. But how much traveling are you doing? Are you getting your young guys ready? Number one component in RPI is wins, so we wanted to win.

Now you go back and say if we would have just played teams in the 150s instead of the 250s, would that really have made a difference? Maybe. But if you stumble against a 150, then you say why did we do that?

We got Ohio State coming up, Michigan State coming up, we got enough opportunities to ratchet up our RPI. We missed some opportunities to do that. We beat some pretty good teams, but we also lost to some of those teams in close games.

So moving forward, our team next year will be substantially more experienced. We'd be in more of a position to make some changes in that regard. A lot of times it's harder than you think to put the exact schedule that you want together. A lot of times you get better, they don't want to play you. So that's problematic. Then you say okay, we'll play the No. 1 team in a particular conference. That's scary because now all of a sudden, I mean, I remember when I was at Siena, we went out and played Bill Self at Kansas. It was a tied game with a minute to go. They're killing the guy after the game.

Don't you think I knew exactly what I was doing when I scheduled Siena? They won a home game and their RPI went up. So maybe we have to do something like that. It's a scary moment because they were one missed shot, and we're one made shot from it being a huge negative. Then you say that was really foolish, we should have never played them.

So it's a very difficult thing to plan. I would say that we would probably spend more time thinking that through. Last year we did what I said, and that is to put a schedule together that we thought we could handle with the young guys we had, get them winning as we moved into the Big Ten.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports