

University of Iowa Basketball Media Conference

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Fran McCaffery Men's Basketball



Q. Fran, when you look across the board at Woodbury, career highs basically every statistic, but the last couple weeks the way he's been playing, is it fair to say that he's playing maybe the best he's ever played for you?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I think so. I think what's really helped him is obviously all the experience that he's gained over the years, but also I think -- certainly I felt like he would have a spectacular senior year with Gabe not being here. I think a lot of people thought our team would suffer because we lost such a good player in graduation to Gabe Olaneni, but I think it's really helped Woodbury with his confidence. He's playing a lot more minutes. His role is obviously much more critical than it's ever been. He's been a starter since he got here, but the way he anchors the defense and the communication that he provides and the rebounding, he doesn't make mistakes, he's scoring the ball, and he's -- he provides an element of toughness that I think every team needs.

Q. Why has he been rebounding the ball so well lately?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I think he's just going after it pretty good. I think he's always been a good rebounder. You look at his numbers, considering he played half the game, pretty good numbers. You prorate that, he could lead the league in rebounding. I've said that every year, so I don't think it's a surprise when you look at it.

Q. When you look at Indiana, their top five scorers shoot 47 percent or better. What makes them so efficient?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, they move the ball. They run. They attack. They get lay-ups. If you're shooting those kinds of numbers, you're getting lay-ups. But they're also a good three-point shooting team for the most part. So they've got your defense stretched out. Bryant is a handful. He's shooting way up there. You've got to worry about him. But there's a lot of weapons that they have, so they're a hard team to guard.

Q. Your team has been referenced, your program has been referenced as one that other teams would

like to emulate based on the way you've built it. What are you most proud of from the second you came in here and where the program was left before you to where you are now? What are you most proud of on this journey?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I'm just thankful for the opportunity personally, and what I appreciate is when our players make a decision to come here, maybe when it wasn't as fashionable, believing in themselves that they're going to make something happen when they get here, and it will be great. I think you love that about any competitor that you recruit, so I think we've done a good job as a staff identifying character, most importantly. I think we've gotten great kids in this program since I've gotten here, and had some when I got here that were recruited by the previous staff. So I don't want to forget those guys because I always say once you take over, those are your guys. It would be nice to say, well, those are his guys and then you get your guys in there. I think that is a fallacy and I think it's unfair. When you become the coach at Iowa, whoever is there is your player and you coach them up, and we had good kids when I got here. If you have good people who will work hard, you'll get better. We added some more. I think we've done a good job of fitting the pieces together in terms of position, what we needed, and they've continued to execute the game plan night in and night out.

I don't know that there's anything magical to it other than if you recruit good kids that work hard and believe in each other that you can win, even against the teams in this league, which is not easy.

Q. When you did come in as you mentioned, you had Gatens, you had Cole, you had May, all hard-working guys --

FRAN McCAFFERY: Even guys like Andrew Brommer. He wasn't as good, but he was a terrific person, did everything that he could do to help us win. So I had at least a core group of guys that -- don't forget Bryce Cartwright. He was terrific.

Q. Along those lines, what did you identify first that you had to do just to be able to take the steps forward and not just go recruit a couple of JuCo guys?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, what you do is you identify, okay, what do you have and what do you need.

Typically you're not going to -- I got this job in April, and you're not going to sign a lot of guys in April and May that are going to help you contend for the Big Ten Championship. Now, we were fortunate with Bryce Cartwright because he led the Big Ten in assists. But again, it goes back to the kind of person that he is. And we looked down the road a little bit. We looked to Mike's and Woody's class, in particular we got after Jarrod and Josh, and then you've got to find some other people like Olaseni, and we're lucky we had Melsahn. He was a terrific player.

You have to be patient -- it's easy to look and say -- I've said this before, but the first workout I went to to work the team out, there were four guys there, so you know you need bodies. But bodies aren't going to get the job done for you. You need quality. You need pieces. They don't have to be superstars, but they've got to be able to help you in a lot of different ways, and I think everybody that we've brought in has been able to do that.

Q. You mentioned patience. Along those same lines, how important has it been that you've had not only support from the University administration, but they've given you the patience -- they've had the patience to let you build this thing the way you wanted to build it.

FRAN McCAFFERY: I don't think anybody thought it would be any different. I don't think that's any big deal. That's how we do business here. That's what was promised me when I got here. And we're going to graduate our kids, we're going to follow the NCAA rules, and we're going to try to win a national championship. So if you're going to do that, then you've got to have support. Gary Barta has been as good an athletic director as anybody could ever ask for, and Sally Mason was equally spectacular. Bruce has been, as well. Can't do it yourself. You need a great staff around you, but you need administration above you that understands how hard it is to build a program and to do it the right way.

Q. When you look at Indiana, right before you got here, no team has probably dealt with a scorched-earth situation quite like he did.

FRAN McCAFFERY: That was about as bad as it's ever been, I think.

Q. And the history that they have and traditions and resources that they have is one thing, but for Tom to be able to -- he had to weather through a three-year period unlike any other, and to build it up, is that as impressive of a job as maybe some can see?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Oh, it is, and I've told him that. It's hard when you have a rabid fan base like they do,

and it's wonderful. You've been there. It's a phenomenal atmosphere to play college basketball. I've been going down there for years. I think it's a sophisticated fan base, like I've said about ours. They know basketball, and they've seen great basketball, and they appreciate it. But he had a steep road, and he really has done a phenomenal job, and I think -- a couple years ago when they were ranked No. 1, I think they finally got appreciated for that, and I think this year, as well, because nobody was sure, everybody thought they'd be really good and then they lost a couple in Maui, and you know how that goes, and they just stayed the course, and I think that's what he's done a really good job of. You've got to stay the course. You've got to stay true to your values, and I think he's done that, and that's why they're sitting where they are.

Q. It seems like they've really improved defensively over the course of the season. How have they gotten better?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Oh, I think defense is one area, they're playing good defense, they're sharing the ball, they're rebounding the ball. They're getting really good play from a lot of different people. Their young guys are really stepping up. When Blackmon got hurt, I think everybody wondered what would happen then, but the young guys, OG and Morgan are playing really well, giving them another lift. Bielfeldt I think was a really good acquisition for them and I think has been a really good fit there, and if you're going to take a fifth-year guy, you want to make sure you get a good fit, and he's been a really good player and has provided a lot of stability with a young front line. That's why they're so good.

Q. Was recruiting better shooters for you a priority at some point?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I think it always is. We didn't have the greatest shooting teams in the beginning. Luckily we had Matt Gatens, who could kind of carry us almost by himself for the first two years. But ultimately you need multiple three-point shooters. You've got to be able to stretch the floor.

Q. Defense has been great this year; you look at guys like Woodbury and Jarrod Uthoff, but how much of that has started with Anthony Clemmons?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, he's been terrific, as well, but I think Mike gets underestimated in terms of his ability to defend the point of attack. I think when you look at Mike and Anthony, they're able to do that. Pete has taken his game to a whole 'nother level at the defensive end of the floor. We always thought he was an offensive guy and he's very good, but he's a much more complete player, and then Woodbury and Uthoff are terrific. So the starting five is very good. Ahmad Wagner who comes in, Baer, those guys are smart,

they're tough. Dom Uhl is a completely different player physically than he was last year, and Ellingson has been rock solid, too. We don't really have a hole, a real weakness. If Woody is out we're a little bit smaller than maybe we'd like to be sometimes. You saw that in the Maryland game a little bit. But even still, we were right there.

Q. Your defense is going to be important this week. You're facing a senior point guard --

FRAN McCAFFERY: Yeah, Yogi is as tough a cover as there is out there, because he comes at you 100 miles an hour and he pulls up, shoots the three right in your face or he goes by you, and equally gifted at scoring the ball or finding other people. So he really puts pressure on all five guys every possession. And I think his decision making this year has been really good. He views himself as an NBA player. He contemplated coming out last year and came back and wanted to make the most of it, and he's done that.

Q. They have some of the best athletes at their position in the country. Troy Williams is almost a freak --

FRAN McCAFFERY: He's got one of the best motors I've ever seen. It never seems to stop, and he's constantly in attack mode. That's one of the things I like about him. He just keeps coming. So you'd better be ready to play him.

Q. They always seem to have a talent in the middle, whether it was Vonleh a couple years now and now Bryant --

FRAN McCAFFERY: Yeah, and again, Bielfeldt, being a fifth-year senior coming in behind Bryant, has really given them stability there and enables Anunoby to play the 4 position, not have to play center. Same with Morgan, so it gives them a depth that they need.

Q. You guys are in great position to win the Big Ten regular season title. Where does that fall in your list of goals?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I'm not even thinking about that right now. I'm just thinking about trying to win Thursday night.

Q. Gesell is only two points away from that 1,000 career milestone. We all know that he doesn't care about statistics and things like that, but how special has he been these last four years to you in this program?

FRAN McCAFFERY: He's a guy that when we signed him, we looked at him as a guy who was going to be a four-year starter, is going to be a 1,000-point scorer, is going to get 500 assists and he's going to steal the ball and he's going to engineer victory and be right in the middle of a successful run. Whereas it's great to look

back and say, okay, he's done a lot of those things, mostly what we thought he would do, it's a lot harder than you think, and I'm thrilled for him, but I don't mean to look anything other than favorably at it, but it's kind of what I expected from him. He was that great in high school. He has the character, the athletic ability, the toughness, the cerebral approach to the game that you need in that position, and that's why he's been able to engineer victory like he has consistently.

Q. Last year you won your final six in the Big Ten, and it almost appeared to be like the exclamation point was the win at Indiana, being a double-digit win and in that arena against that level of talent and also a fellow NCAA Tournament team. How much of that, just that experience alone, will help your team preparing for it again?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, I think it'll help. I think you always kind of tend to do that. You do it, we do it, okay, what happened last year. But this is a completely different team that they have in a lot of different ways. And we have a different team. So it was great to have the experience to go down there in that environment and be successful like we were last year. I think that's a good thing. But this game will be a lot different.

Q. Seems like at home they can really score in bunches. They've blown a few teams out. What do you have to do to stop that?

FRAN McCAFFERY: You have to get back. Yeah, that's pretty much what you have to do. You've got to get back. If you score the ball, that helps, because it's harder to run on makes, but they run on makes, but you've got to get your defense back. If you don't get your defense back, they're going to score 100.

Q. On the flipside, you guys have been outstanding at getting the ball out after a make and scoring --

FRAN McCAFFERY: Yeah, so it has that, I think, element of a quick pace to it. You know, again, going back, a couple years ago I remember we lost down there I think 102-89 or something like that, so it was kind of an up-and-down game, and we were not nearly as efficient as we needed to be at the defensive end. So I think we learned from that game, so we don't stop how we're going to play. We're still going to play fast and we know they're going to play fast, but you've got to be smart when you're playing fast.

Q. Is there a specific phase or element to your team's game that you'd like to see improve?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I don't know if there's one. I think you always look at all aspects, you know, can we consistently win the rebounding battle every night, can we always have a really positive assist-turnover ratio, can we consistently share the ball so that you look at our number of field goals and our number of assists,

and there's a lot of assists to the number of field goals we have. I mean, those are things that we look at as coaches to try to be consistent, because if you are in those areas, you're probably going to win.

Q. The Big Ten schedule is filled with oddities these days when you've blown up to 14 teams, but I think this is your fifth straight trip to Bloomington, fourth straight game in Bloomington. I know you play them later in the year, but it just seems to be an oddity. Last time you played them was 2012 in Iowa City.

FRAN McCAFFERY: I don't think about it. I don't dwell on it. I don't complain about it. Whatever schedule they put in front of me, that's what we're going to play. Ultimately you're going to have to play 18 games against really good teams.

Q. On a related matter, the Ohio State game was announced this Sunday, and you follow up two days later so you only get one day of prep. I know that's one of the main scheduling principles, to avoid that. Is that a concern?

FRAN McCAFFERY: It doesn't concern me. It will be the second time we're playing them, so it's not like you have to watch a ton more tape. You kind of have a feel for them. If you want to play on CBS, you've got to work within the confines of the system, so it's no big deal.