

March 11, 2014



An Interview With:

COACH McCAFFERY

Q. So when you look at your team, is it a situation where you can point to one thing or another thing, and say, if we did this, we are going to be better off, or is it more complicated?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think it's way more complicated. I'm hopeful that since Saturday, we've had a little more time. We've had a lot of short preps, a lot of traveling. I don't think that's the only reason. But you know, we we're not as in sync as we were, and I'm hopeful that we've been able to go back to some of the basic things that we needed to fix.

I think when you look at everything in its entirety, you've got to say, well, all right, let's start with the defense, okay. It's transition; it's rebounding; it's on the ball; it's ball screen defense; it's help recovery; it's being in the gaps. I mean, all of those things, and drills and whether it's two-on-two, three-on-three, four-on-four, five-on-five; kind of like the beginning of practice back in September.

And then, okay, it's not just defense. It's offense. So we have to work on offense, whether it be our motion game, our transition game, our set plays. Then you shift to zone, both man or both defensively and offensively. And then what you're looking for is the correct energy level with which to attack all of those things we just mentioned.

Yesterday we had a terrific practice in that regard. So we'll try to turn around and do the same thing today, and then leave tomorrow and have one more until we play Thursday.

Q. On defense, when you look at the ball situations, in some cases, is it confusion, is it a lack of communication, or is it too broad to generalize?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think it's a lot of things. It could be confusion based on they are running a particular action that the guys didn't see it right away, okay, it was a switch situation. They recognized it was a switch situation, but if you recognized that a second or a second and a half late, the shot's gone.

Now, if the shot misses, you don't think anything of it. But if the shot goes in, and it's like, well, that's defense. And you know, technically, if we had been a little sharper for that second and a half, maybe they would have missed it.

So, sometimes it's that. Sometimes it's -- like I said the other night, a little more fatigue. I played a couple guys a little bit less than I normally do. Played a couple of guys a little bit more than I normally do. So it could be that.

So it's not like you're saying, okay -- there's one thing, no. No, there's not one thing. It's collective.

And I think the encouraging thing for us is this particular team has played excellent defense this year. And that's what our goal is, to go back and play that kind of defense again.

Q. After playing arguably your best game against Michigan, one game -- so you couldn't sustain the momentum and then you played five games in 16 days; is that a factor momentum-wise?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think that, coupled with there were a lot of road trips there, a lot of 2:00 A.M. arrivals, whether it be on the road or back here. So I think there's no question that that had something to do with it.

So that's why I thought, Sunday being an off day, a good day of rest, hard day of practice yesterday, hard day of practice today, tomorrow we

obviously won't go as hard, and we'll be ready to go Thursday.

Q. Do you get the sense that the players are excited to get a fresh start in terms of the situation?

COACH McCAFFERY: I would say this that any time you have an opportunity to play in an event of this calibre, I think that's going to make everybody pretty excited.

As it relates to what happened the previous game, the previous five games, the previous 15 games, I don't think that matters, no.

Q. What do you do to keep up morale and confidence of the team?

COACH McCAFFERY: I don't view myself as a guy who has to pick up morale or bring them down from a pedestal. We just coach. You know, we stay like this. I think folks who think that coaches have these unbelievable speeches to get everybody revved -- I think that's foolish. It doesn't happen. You know, it just doesn't.

You look at this season in terms of the length of it and the intensity of the journey, and you prepare. And that's how you get ready to play a team like Northwestern. We prepare. That's exactly what they are doing for us. We played them twice. We've seen each other play a million times, because you watch other teams; you're ready.

Q. You beat this team by over 20 points. What is the inherent challenge for you to not get a team to overlook a team when you play them a third time?

COACH McCAFFERY: I don't think that our guys have ever done that. I think we're mature enough to know and understand. I think we're respectful of that program. We've had some very difficult games with them. Everybody knows how good Drew Crawford is.

They are also intelligent enough to recognize when guys are making strides. Like you look at a guy like Olah you look at him last year, you look at him now; they are two different players. He is really a guy that you say, he can get 20 and ten if you don't play him right, if you don't work as hard or harder than he does.

A guy like Tre Demps, who a year ago was just kind of a microwave off the bench, this year established himself as one of the premiere players of our league. Great late-game shot-maker.

So now you start putting those pieces together with a guy like Lumpkin or Abrahamson; and they go on the road and they beat Purdue, they have won a ton of road games this year in our league, and we all know how hard that is. They have got a new coach, an excellent coach, in Chris Collins, and he's employed a system that's been successful. So we recognize what we're up against.

Q. When you get to this the season in the middle of March, is there only so much that you can say, where it's almost up to the kids to find it within themselves?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think there's a certain element of truth to that, but at the same time, it's up to us to put the game plan together.

In terms of energy level, attention to detail, they have got to be revved up and they have got to play through their mistakes and they have got to be up toward the ball; they have got to be up toward the ball; they have to be in their stance and stay in their stance.

If you stand up and you relax, this team is going to carve you up. The players and the system will carve us up. So hopefully we'll understand that. I think we're mature enough and we've been through it. I think we'll have the right attitude there.

Q. The same record overall, going into the tournament, granted this season's Big Ten schedule has been tougher hand than last season but how do the two seasons feel different?

COACH McCAFFERY: Dramatically different. I think any time you have a different team, and you play a different schedule, it just has a different feel to it. The fact that we ended up with identical records is just a coincidence in that sense.

But we clearly challenged ourselves with a much more difficult non-conference schedule. We were handed a substantially more competitive conference schedule, and I think we handled it well.

You can always look back and say, oh, boy, we obviously didn't want to lose five of our last six, and we lost some games that we could have won. But every coach in the country, every player in the country doesn't look back at this point and say, wow, if we could have just had that one and that one; that's just human nature I think.

Q. After the game, you mentioned your team might feel a little fragile, is that late game situations? How do you address that?

COACH McCAFFERY: I wasn't necessarily talking about late game situations. Our biggest problem in that game was the first eight minutes.

I think in many respects, things weren't coming as easy. We got a couple guys that are struggling based on what they were doing a month ago puts more pressure on other guys and they are trying to come through and if they miss, then there's more pressure on them.

It just was all culminating in a team that looked one way a month ago and looked differently a month later.

I think back to that particular game you're referring to, and like the two turnovers late, the one by Marble and the one by White, very uncharacteristic. I think those two in particular were feeling a lot of pressure to come through for our team under difficult circumstances, based on the fact that we were not making as many shots.

We did have a few more turnovers than we had been having, and those are areas, going back to the very first question of the day that we have to address, because I don't want to fall on two guys. We've got to cut back on our turnovers. We've got to do a better job rebounding the ball.

And we were a dominant rebounding team; now we are a pretty good rebounding team. We were not as dominant as we have been. Why is that? Well, could be a couple different reasons. No. 1, I downshifted and played a smaller lineup more recently. Why? Well, to matchup to the opposition perhaps, or to create more offense, depending upon the game, the circumstance, the time and score, etc.

Q. Does Thursday feel like a must-win to take away any doubts about selection?

COACH McCAFFERY: No. Not looking at anything like that, no.

Q. I know you talked to -- do you think Dev will be drafted --

COACH McCAFFERY: Oh, he's getting drafted. I think it's just a matter of if it's the first round or early second.

Q. Do you think his ability to shoot from the perimeter as much as anything has helped, or is it his ball handling?

COACH McCAFFERY: Well, I think his ability to consistently score is something that they are always going to want to see in a player at his position. Okay, I think that's safe to say.

After that, I think they love a number of things about him. No. 1, he can play more than one position. He clearly can play the one. You know, when you're 6-6 and you can play the one, that's going to be huge. He can guard at one, two, three; that's big, because they do a lot of switching.

They are able to ascertain that he's incredibly cerebral. You know, the playbooks in the NBA are very complex; you have to be able to remember it and know it inside and out. He's got great feel for how to play the game. He plays the game with no panic.

He's a guy that puts the in time the off-season and gets himself ready, and that's critical because they play 82 games. And so there's so much more that they are looking at in terms of making an investment in him, and as you analyze it, you know, he grades out really highly in all of those areas.

So when you're making a decision as to whether I take this guy or another guy, you might take another guy who, oh, he's a great rebounder or he's a great three point shooter but when you look at Devyn Marble, he's terrific at every aspect of the game and you can put him in and he'll pretty much do anything for you.

Those guys are really valuable, and ultimately, franchises want to win games, and that's what he is, is a winning player.

Q. The last three games at halftime, you've had other leads, and the other team has come with a big run -- Michigan State, 9-0, Purdue 12-2 --

COACH McCAFFERY: The 9-0 run was -- there was other factors involved there.

Q. And as far as the placement -- is there anything that you can -- is there any kind of conclusion, something that's common among the three?

COACH McCAFFERY: Well, throw the Michigan State one out. Start there.

So you've got Illinois and the Purdue situation was disappointing from where I sit because they scored six in the first seven possessions, as I recall. When you have a 13-point lead, you don't want that to happen.

But what's disappointing about that in particular was that as they were going six-for-seven, our offense was a little sideways. We had a couple three looks at it, they didn't go in. That magnified everything. Of course, they had plenty of time to still get the victory.

Our lead against Illinois was much smaller, and so obviously you don't want them to come out and hit two threes, but they hit two threes. I don't think you -- you can't overanalyze that. It would be different if you have five threes, but they have two threes, and they were somewhat contested.

Q. When you see the bracket and see who your second round opponent would be, does that make it even more of a challenge to get them to focus on Northwestern?

COACH McCAFFERY: I honestly don't think it matters at all.

Q. I know you can't get into specifics because you're not allowed to in recruiting but seems like a couple of big city commitments -- but do you like big city players? Do they bring a nuance and feel for the game?

COACH McCAFFERY: I would answer that question this way. I'm being completely honest with you. I don't -- it doesn't matter to me where they are from, okay. If they are from the city and I think they can really play and I think they can help us, then we'll recruit them.

If they are from the country, small city, big city, inner city, rural, farms; can they play. The thing you've got to be able to do is thoroughly evaluate them in a way that you hope to be right. Because no matter what, we're not always right. You know, sometimes you get a guy that wasn't quite what we thought he was.

But you know, I can start naming players that I've had over the years, guys from really competitive high school situations that never panned out; guys from situations that nobody ever heard of that became great. I think it's possible that in some circumstances, there might be a different level of competitiveness.

But I honestly believe that that's based on the individual and that can happen no matter where you're from. You can be that mentally tough regardless of where you're from.

Q. There's always a lot of rhetoric associated with going into a big conference tournament, chance to start over, but in some ways based on what you just finished up with,

is there more meaning and a possible reboot in some ways?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think it's a possibility. As I've said already, to me it's all the same season. It's a brand new season -- it's the same season.

But we are going to try to win a Big Ten championship, but we said that first August when we convened before we went overseas; we're here to win a Big Ten championship, let's go get ready for that. That's what we're going to try to do this week.

Q. You talked about Dev and Aaron maybe feeling some pressure the other night. Do you feel that you guys rose up to No. 10 and got a lot of national -- and all that --

COACH McCAFFERY: I think that's always possible. I don't know that. But so much of what you're referring to is readily available, whether it be -- used to be you watch TV, the newspaper, and that's how you would find information out. But there's constant information right on your phone which you have in your pocket at all times.

I think you can get caught up in what everybody's saying. That's why I don't look at that. You know, I just try to keep working and keep getting my guys ready, you can tell them, don't look at it. They are going to look at it. It's just how they live now.

And as to whether or not it directly affected anybody, I don't know, but I wouldn't dismiss the possibility.

Q. Peter Jok had a lot of big minutes the other night, played some at Michigan State. You talked about his growth in practice; has he elevated himself to where he can take on a larger role?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think absolutely, yeah.

He was a guy that coming out of the summer, he was right in the middle of everything, and he struggled in two areas; defensively, and sort of attention to detail. He just always -- he'll get you 25, and you know, his game is a little bit sloppy. If your game is sloppy at this level, you'll get exploited. There's two ways to go: You can stay sloppy and blame anybody else, or you can go to work and determine to complete that part of your game, because the other stuff was fine.

Always has been.

So now, as he completes the picture, now we've got a special player, because he can score, he can pass. His defense, while it's not where it will ultimately be, substantially better. Ball handling, while it's not where it will ultimately be, substantially better.

Because you can't -- you can't go get 15, but turn the ball over. Doesn't do us any good. Can't go get 15 and give up 25. Doesn't do us any good.

So that's all part of the growth process and sometimes we forget, he's our only freshman and that's what he's going through.

Q. Looking at what Adam Woodbury did offensively, is that a glimpse of what you foresee in the future with him?

COACH McCAFFERY: I do. But every time you watch film of our team, you watch the impact that he has on the game, and it's significant. Now, if it happens to be offensively, people tend to take more notice. And I think that's just the nature of how most people look at the game.

But for us, to be able to have a legitimate post presence defensively, and a guy who can do that, but also defend ball screens and also run the floor, and also understand how to pick-and-roll and pass and catch, he's incredibly valuable.

And we've been very fortunate obviously because we had both he and Gabe playing well together and they complement one another.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports