

March 5, 2015



An Interview With:

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY

Q. When you think of where this program was when you brought Aaron here, where it is now and what the contributions he's made, just how important has he been to everything you've tried to do here?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, you know, I think with him, he affects everything in so many different ways. Okay, when he was a freshman, it was with his savvy, his professional approach, his hard work. You see a freshman working that hard, it makes you want to work that much harder.

When you put him into the game -- you can evaluate a young guy and think he's going to be pretty good. Until you put him in a Big Ten game on the road, you really don't know what you have, and he was great against Wisconsin on the road. We beat them that day and he was right in the middle of it, and I think that's the thing about him, and as time went by, you got to see his leadership ability and his demeanor. He's the kind of guy that he can have a bad game and come right back and have a good game. He can have a bad stretch in the game and come back and win the game for you. Those are things that you can't coach.

And then people want to come play with him. So he's helped us in recruiting, and he's sold our staff, our institution, his teammates, the league, everything that you want him to do. From that standpoint, I can't thank him enough for his contributions. I'm thrilled that his career went the way it did for him because he came in here and he didn't know what it was going to be like, either. He just wanted a chance to play in the Big Ten and we gave it to him, and he took full advantage of it.

Q. All-Big Ten ballots are due Sunday night. I know you've got one game left, but there's a lot of discussion. If he's on the fence with being first team, where would you put him?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I'd put him on the first team, and that says a lot because there's a lot of good players in our league.

Q. Talking about Gabe, I know you were looking first at Eric Katenda at Sunrise when Andrew went down there and when you got a chance to meet him --

FRAN McCAFFERY: Actually Andrew and I went down there together the first time when we saw him, and we offered him on the spot. He had just gotten there essentially, hadn't been there that long. We didn't even know who he was. But we watched him work out and said, this guy, he's got something special. So we were one of the first ones that were all in on him. A lot of others got involved and he took some visits, and he was fairly thorough in terms of the process which you would expect, especially because it had to be a little bit unique for him. He just got here to go to high school, and now he's got to figure out where he's going to go to college.

But he came here and he fell in love with the place, and you can't help but love him, so it was a great marriage.

Q. He's such an intelligent person, engaging personality. Beyond basketball, what has he -- how did you gauge his interests and learn about him the person?

FRAN McCAFFERY: We talked on the phone, and we went back to see him, and Andrew talked to him a lot and talked to his high school coach, Kyle Linstead, who's a really good guy, honest guy, and you could tell that he loved Gabe, that his family loved Gabe, and they were thankful to have him in their program. He didn't have to sell

him, but when he would talk about him, I mean, it was a great thing for me to hear because you just knew if you had that kid in your program you were going to be a better program for it. He eventually became a really good player.

But again, it goes back to those two guys are maybe the hardest workers we've had since I've been here, and we've had some other ones, too. Marble was in there a lot. We had some really hard workers, Gatens, those guys worked, and these two are right there.

Q. He had to catch up quite a bit just in basketball IQ if nothing else because he wasn't around the game like other players were. Is it a testament to the fact that he's one of the best if not the best bench player in the Big Ten? Does that make his work ethic just kind of show?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Yeah, because he can come in a game and affect a game in a number of different ways, with his shot blocking, with his scoring, with his defense, with his athleticism, his energy level. He's not a big mistake guy by any means. He wants to win. He wants to be a great teammate. He wants to make the right play. It's great to see him playing with the kind of emotion he's been playing with this year. It's been fun for him.

Q. What's it going to mean to Gabe to have his family here with him?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Oh, he's thrilled, as you can imagine, especially in light of what happened this year with the passing of his dad. But again, we spoke to them on the phone in the recruiting process. We didn't get a chance to meet them until we went overseas over the summer when we took him back to London, and his family is absolutely delightful and they watch every game. Even though they haven't been here physically, they know everything that's going on, and that's the beauty of it. So to have them here physically and kind of see everything that they've been watching on television is going to be -- it's going to be a great day for all of us, I think.

Q. When we talk to Aaron after a game, there are very few players who are better at breaking down Xs and Os and analyzing. It's almost like talking to a coach. Do you see once he's done playing, do you see him going into that?

FRAN McCAFFERY: He'd be great if he wants to. Yeah, he sees the game at a whole

'nother level, and I think he would relate well to the young guys. He's got the right personality for it, I think.

He hasn't expressed an interest in it because I think he's pretty focused on his playing career, but should he make that choice, he would be terrific.

Q. You guys might be the hottest team in the league, but Northwestern is equally as hot. What have they done the last couple weeks to improve their --

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, they went to the zone. That was the biggest thing. The zone has been good to them. You know, I think some of his young guys are starting to come around. He likes them. They're good players, and as you know, they've been around a while, as the season goes on, they're no longer freshmen. They've been through it, and you're seeing those guys make plays. They've had a chance to play. He's got a deeper team because he's got some returning guys, he's got some young guys, he's playing all of them, so he's got more pieces than he's had, certainly than he had last year.

Other than that, you know, once you -- you think back to the scores in those 10 losses, they weren't getting drilled by very many people. They easily could have had five wins then. I'm a firm believer in over the course of the long haul those things kind of even out. They had some close losses and they've now had some close wins, so it's a credit to them that they maintained their composure and their competitive instincts to keep battling, and they've done that. So you've really got to give them credit for that.

Q. You always preach the one game at a time. How important was that after the Northwestern game?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, I don't know that it was any more critical than it was at any other time, and I mean that sincerely. I think everybody tends to overreact at times to a particular loss, and sometimes after a particular win, and had we won that game in overtime, it didn't mean that we were a lock for the NCAA Tournament, that we were going to advance, that we were going to be one of the best teams in our league. We had to keep playing well. We had to keep getting better. You learn from a loss. Okay, what did we do wrong, what did we do well. We

didn't do everything horribly. We lost that game, but we did some good things in that game. So we learn from that, we learn from the mistakes and get ready for the next one. Maybe it's attitude, maybe it's technique, maybe it's defense, maybe it's offense. Who knows? But every game you're trying to improve in every component, and that's every individual and then us as a group.

Did we learn something from that game? I'm sure we did, and just like we learned from beating Ohio State at Ohio State, there were a lot of things we learned that day. I think you look back and say, well, we lost two in a row and then we won five in a row. There was something about that day that changed everything. That's what this league is. We started 4-1, then we're 6-6, and now we're 11-6. You don't understand what it takes on a day-to-day basis, and this is a long season, and we've got a lot of playing left, but I keep going back and you've heard me say, this team has been working out since June. That's a long time. You just cannot obsess about a big win or a tough loss. You can't.

Q. What kind of challenges does a guy like Tre Demps present in knocking shots down from pretty much anywhere?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, he can do them in bunches, too. That's the thing that you have to really respect about him. Once he gets going, it's like the microwave, he just gets hot and he just pulls from anywhere, hits runners, hits step-back jumpers, floaters. He drives the ball to the basket. He's got really good fakes, and Chris will go to him when he's cooking like that, and then you put him in the backcourt with McIntosh who's playing really well who can score, now you've got two three-point shooters and two drivers in the backcourt, which makes anybody hard to guard, and then they've got other pieces, as well.

They've got the most talent that he's had there, and he's got more coming. He's doing a real good job, no question.

Q. What's maybe one trait that has taken Aaron from a guy who most people thought might be a mid-major kid to where he is now, one of the greatest players the school has ever seen?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, I think his own self-confidence, his own belief that he could be great, and his desire to do what it takes to be great. Not everybody has that, and he's got it.

I will say this, and we talked about it a minute ago: His cerebral approach to this game is on another level, and that's really helpful in any sport, that you have that kind of feel for what can I do right now, what does my team need me to do. He's got tremendous confidence in himself, so if he does make a mistake, it rarely leads to more.

Q. This will be the 14th Big Ten Tournament and obviously a lot to play for on Saturday. How important is it for you as a coach to shoot for that double bye or is that not as big a factor as the fans want it to be?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I think every coach in this league would want to get the double bye. There's no question about that. I think you're right about that. But it's not like we started talking about it two and a half weeks ago, if we win -- because you just don't know. I never look and see where we're going to be playing, who we're going to be playing until Sunday night. Everybody is like, well, they start two games before, it's ridiculous in this league.

We have to take care of our business or it won't matter. I mean, if those other teams win, we're not going to be fourth anyway. Only thing we can do is take care of our business on Saturday and then hope it all works out.

Q. We were talking the other day about Josh and his recruitment. You said you know exactly where you were. Where were you?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, it's kind of a long story. If you remember, he didn't announce it right away, so I knew a lot earlier than you guys did. I was actually in New Jersey when he called me.

Q. How important was that for you?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, he was a high-profile Iowa kid; he wanted to be a Hawk. He didn't have a lot of time to get to know me, and then we recruited him. We had him in, invited him down for the spring football game. I had been on the job for a very short period of time. I forget how long, maybe less than a week, maybe a week. So we invited him down and spent some time with him, his folks and his high school coach and then watched him on the AAU circuit. We went up to watch him at school, and so we developed somewhat of a relationship.

But other schools had been recruiting him

for quite some time.

Q. Do you ever use as motivation what teams have done in the past. Like is revenge a motivation? The fact that last year you lost the senior night game?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I don't really get into that stuff. I don't think it's an unfair question. I think some coaches do. I try to take a much more businesslike approach. We want to beat this team, this is what we have to do. This is what our mindset has to be.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports