

February 21, 2012



An interview with:

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY

THE MODERATOR: Questions for coach.

Q. Were you surprised yesterday when Matt Gatens didn't at least get a co-mention for Big Ten Player of the Week after what he did the last couple games?

COACH McCAFFERY: I really didn't pay much attention to it.

Now that you mention it, I would have been very surprised, yeah. I think he deserved it.

Q. There have been Hawkeye players that have more three-pointers in a game. After thinking about the game against Indiana, what makes Matt so different?

COACH McCAFFERY: The things he's been able to do, in particular this year, is make the timely baskets when we need them. We have a young team. So a lot of it falls on him. We gave away half of our lead, and he made the biggest three of the game, then he made four more after that. He's kind of been doing that consistently all year, and at the same time guarding the other team's best perimeter offensive player. That's pretty hard to do.

He's also gotten himself into the best shape of his life. From a stamina standpoint he's been able to do it effectively. He's been able to have a really good game. Even on nights when he doesn't shoot it as well, he still affects the game in a very positive way for us.

I remember when we beat Wisconsin last time, he only had six points, but had 12 rebounds. Did a phenomenal job on the glass and defensively. That's just a winning attitude that permeates the rest of everything we do.

Q. How satisfying was it to be able to beat a top-25 team starting four underclassmen?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think all year long we have talked about our youth and how effective they've been. And they've been pretty consistent. You sometimes tend to look and say, Wow, if only we had won this game or that game, where would we be? A lot of times that's what happens when you have young players.

For the most part I think they have been consistent. They've carried us. I think Matt has been a great example for those guys, without question, not only in terms of what happens in the games but what led up to that, the off-season, the summer, the pre-season. I think it says a lot. I think it says a lot of what we're capable of doing. Now the next step is to do it more consistently.

Q. Bryce Cartwright did a good job at Wisconsin controlling the tempo of the game. How important is it that he's able to play?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think he would make a big impact in the game, but I'm not sure he's going to be able to play. That's where we are.

Q. Talk about the challenges Jordan Taylor presents. He's a senior and has been through this a lot.

COACH McCAFFERY: He has consistently been a really good player at the end of the game, and at the end of the shot clock. You look at their wins, he's making buckets late, free throws, baskets. He did it to us last year in an overtime loss. Obviously he's a focal point of what we're preparing for.

At the same time I think Evans has taken his game to another level, even from when we played him the last time. I think Berggren, same thing. They've got five guys that are really playing well. They've got a quality bench. Only goes eight

deep, but the five starters have been intact and really playing well.

Q. Is there anything glaringly different you noticed about Wisconsin from the last time you played them?

COACH McCAFFERY: No. And I don't think there's going to be a lot of glaring changes. I mean, to me it sticks out to me that Evans has really raised his game, the level of his game. Really been impressive to me as I watch recent film of their team.

The rest of the guys are still doing what they've been doing. That's why they're always where they are. They're phenomenally consistent in everything they do.

Q. Cody is at the height of his up-and-down season. What do you want to see the rest of the year to get him to play at that high level again?

COACH McCAFFERY: With him it's an energy level. It's amazing, when he gets five blocks, the energy that he plays with, the energy that we play with. All of a sudden his buckets are going in, his free throws are going in, his defense is better. I mean, on Sunday his focus defensively was the best it's been since he got here. It just goes to show you what he's capable of doing.

He did it more consistently last year, which is odd that he would do it less consistently as a sophomore. He's been trying to figure that out, as I have. We've been staying after it and hopefully he'll play well on Sunday.

Q. Do you think he minds coming off the bench?

COACH McCAFFERY: I don't think he minds at all. I think he would prefer to start, like everybody else. He accepted that role pretty well from day one.

Q. Do you consider him somewhat of a finesse player in a banging league or that is a misconception?

COACH McCAFFERY: Well, he can go either way. He's an athlete. He wants to be able to lead the floor. Sometimes when guys are leaning on you, it's not as easy to do that. He did a pretty good job of moving his feet and getting to where he needed to get to to affect the play. When he's doing that, he can run, we can run, get some good things happening.

Q. Are teams playing him different this year than last year?

COACH McCAFFERY: They're bugging him a little bit more.

Q. Is it a matter of him adjusting to that?

COACH McCAFFERY: The one thing we talked about at length, I would think, would be that the added weight early in the season didn't help him. I think that got him a little bit sideways. He was 235. That's too big for him. He was tiring. He was lumbering. He's not a lumbering guy. So once he trimmed down, he's been better. But now he had to adjust again. He's been able to do that for a while. I think that's helped him.

Q. Students are in free again. Is that something you were instrumental in bringing in?

COACH McCAFFERY: I was not. I think it made a big difference in that game. When you look down that one side, see that whole section filled, it's something that I think we all get excited about, the coaches, the players. I think it's good for the rest of the crowd, as well, although our crowd on Sunday was spectacular, I thought.

Q. Some schools let their students in for free. What would you think of that?

COACH McCAFFERY: Well, it's just not going to happen so I don't think it's even worth discussing.

Q. Aaron White's rebounds are up in Big Ten play. Does that surprise you when you look at him?

COACH McCAFFERY: A lot of times you see guys put numbers up early, then when they hit the Big Ten, they drop dramatically. I think that's what you're looking at. A lot of times with a big freshman who is a little bit on the thinner side, you expect that.

With him I'm not surprised because of his basketball instincts and IQ. He takes the information and experience and uses it to his advantage. He has the incredible ability not to rattle or get nervous or be affected by the trappings of the game.

The importance of the game, TV, and the crowd, people yelling at him, it just doesn't affect him at all.

Q. Does he need to put weight and strength on?

COACH McCAFFERY: He needs to put muscle on and add weight, because muscle weighs more than fat. Not that we're trying to get him to 245 or anything like that. 230, with a little more muscle, so he can maintain his ability to run, because he can run. He gets his feet apart on defense, he can jump, he can affect the game in so many ways.

You see as he tires, he takes those little steps when he's running, he doesn't open up his stride length. That will come with maturity.

Q. Do you think it will be fair to say that Mel won't record 234 next week?

COACH McCAFFERY: No. We try to keep him around 220. I think 210 is too little. But 220 is where he needs to be, lean and fit.

Q. Last week you went on the road, had a tough loss to Penn State. Do you feel like you're a different team at home than on the road?

COACH McCAFFERY: We haven't been a bad road team. We had a couple good road wins. We played decently on the road. I thought we played okay down at Purdue. Offensively we played well at Indiana.

I think any team is going to play better at home, especially with our crowd being as great as it's been. You're going to be able to absorb the run a little bit more. Typically every team that I've been associated with, every team I study, shoots the ball better at home. Occasionally you have a bad day. But we have two more home games, so hopefully we'll play well in both of them.

Q. Talk about Darius Stokes' and Branden Stubbs' contributions to the team the last two years.

COACH McCAFFERY: They've been on the scout team. They're excellent. They're bright. They can learn an offense in 12 minutes and run it effectively.

When you're thinking about making a move against a ranked team, Okay, when am I going to put these two guys in the game? Number one, can they handle it physically? Stokes, a lot bigger than Branden. Branden is bigger than last year. Physically he can handle it. Mentally it was never an issue. They know exactly what we want done.

Both of them are real team-oriented individuals. They want to do what it takes to help our team win. They're not thinking about themselves. When they come in and contribute, they become part of the story. That's the beauty of it.

Q. Any players on other teams that portrayed particularly well in terms of preparation?

COACH McCAFFERY: You know, to be honest with you, it's every game. Branden will be the point guard. Darius, the more athletic of the wings, you go team by team, that's who they portray.

Q. Do you get a sense this team has more confidence now over these wins over top-25 teams than maybe they did at the beginning of the year?

COACH McCAFFERY: I don't think there's any question about that. I think that's just natural. I think the thing that we have to figure out is, okay, if we're capable of playing like this, why can't we do it a little bit more often. It may be nothing more than the other teams we're playing are also pretty good.

You say, Okay, we beat Penn State here, why didn't we beat them there? They played pretty well at home. When we blew an 11-point lead with 10 minutes to go against Nebraska, that would have been great one to get. Brandon Richardson hit six threes. Give their team and their coaching staff credit for how they played.

You see a lot of teams in this league right now that are right around .500. A couple have sort of moved to the top. It sort of was expected with Ohio State and Michigan State, in particular. Wisconsin has moved up there along with Michigan. But we beat Michigan, we beat Wisconsin. We're capable of doing that.

That's what we're striving to accomplish. Okay, what little things can we do to prepare to make sure that we can play that consistently? Sometimes it's a matter of, okay, we shoot 7 for 26 the other night at Penn State. Were they good shots? They were pretty good shots. They were good shooters making good shots. We got down 14, made a good comeback. You win the game, you're on top of the world. You lose the game, you're talking about all the things you didn't do. That's part of the growth process.

Q. Any indication you get before the game if they're going to be able to play at that level?

COACH McCAFFERY: No, I don't think so. We have a pretty level-headed group. A lot of times you tend to follow the lead of your captain. Matt, I mean, is just as serious and concentrated as they come. He's not a big rah-rah guy. Our guys focus, they prepare. They know the scouting report. If they didn't know the scouting report, I'd be concerned. That hasn't happened in any game in two years.

They know what the game plan is. Sometimes they don't execute it as well as other times. Sometimes the game plan doesn't work. That's not their fault.

It's a matter of understanding the importance of preparation, then some of the other things. For example, as you get to this part of the season, are they getting rest, are they eating right, sleeping right, are they staying up too late. With a break, it's not as big of a deal. Now you have papers due, you've got exams, things of that nature. Being mature enough and knowing how to stay fit is critical when you're down to four games plus the tournament.

Q. In what ways has Matt improved?

COACH McCAFFERY: Well, I think his improvement was mostly within his desire to improve. I mean, the one thing that we did, the previous staff wanted to move him around positionally. That was a decision they had made. In order to do that, they needed to put weight on him.

I felt that his future was going to be as a two. You're going to be the two, a scoring two. You got to be leaner, you got to be 210. So he did that and committed to that. That was step one.

Step two was I think we prepare differently in terms of what we require them to remember. Some guys, that's harder for them. For him, it wasn't. He's got basketball IQ. He's got intellect. He's a bright person. He would take that information and really utilize it to his advantage.

Then I think over time you've seen him grow and develop at both ends of the floor. He became a lock-down defender. Nobody ever thought of him that way. He has the strength, the stamina, the length and the ability to do that. You couple that with the knowledge, he's locking people up.

But he's going to fight through a screen, he's going to run back on defense, he's going to remember, Am I guarding a driver? Is he a driver that goes right or left? A shot fake guy at the start of his move or the end of his move? You tell guys that, they go for the shot fake. You tell him that, he doesn't do that, he stays right there. He does it over and over and over again. Those are the kind of guys that are special.

You can coach them up, but you have to have somebody that has all of the ability to absorb everything and then carry it out on the floor every time out. That's what makes him special.

Q. (Question regarding Matt and the postseason tournaments.)

COACH McCAFFERY: I would say this. Obviously we want it for Matt, but I want it for every senior that I've ever coached. He's no different than anybody else. I've said this before. I hope that every senior would have a chance to at one time play in the NCAA tournament, at least play in the postseason, whether it's the NIT, CBI, anything. Hopefully he'll have that opportunity.

Q. Eric May's status?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think he's going to try to do some things today. He was feeling better, not to the point where I could put him in the game the other day, but he was feeling a little bit better. I haven't been told.

Basically concluded, okay, he's over here, and you just do whatever you have to do to rehabilitate him. Don't sort of get him ready for practice. Don't sort of get him ready for games. You get him ready to play and then give him back to us.

It's not fair to him. He was really trying. He knows we need him. He knows we need him for some of the time. But he was not nearly what he's capable of being. It wasn't helping us, wasn't helping his confidence level, wasn't helping him at all.

He was all for it. I think Thursday is a possibility.

Q. When you have a player like Bryce, does he attend all of the game planning sessions, act like he's going to play?

COACH McCAFFERY: Yes, absolutely.

Q. Would you say he's questionable

now, Bryce?

COACH McCAFFERY: Questionable, yeah. I wouldn't go probable with him. I think he really wants to play. He's doing everything he can. It's the explosion and the pounding. He's not there yet. So we'll see.

Q. How has Josh done in his two starts?

COACH McCAFFERY: Great. He's really been impressive. You look at him in the first game, he's 1-7. He didn't play well? He played great. You watch the film. Defensively he was phenomenal, had three assists, no turns, played a ton of minutes. His shots were in and out. If he goes 3-7, we win the game, we're talking about Josh.

I thought Sunday he played a ton of minutes, made some free throws late, defended well. He's not a mistake guy. That's what you want. When you have freshmen that are scorers, a lot of times they're mistake guys, and he's not.

Q. How much do you empathize with a situation like Bruce Weber is dealing with now in terms of the off-court chatter?

COACH McCAFFERY: I've known Bruce a long time. I think the world of him as a person. I think he's done a terrific job there. I feel for him. I wish nobody in our business would have to go through it. It's always been a very public profession, even more so today I think. I think it's unfortunate because he's a terrific man, a great family man, a great coach. He's had phenomenal success.

He's had a number of years where he's been phenomenally successful. Just do what you do, get 'em ready. If you lose, you go to the next one and try to figure out what went wrong, what can we fix, let's win the next one. There's no other way to approach it.

I never, ever worry about what anybody is saying about me at all. You guys, chat rooms, whatever, I could care less. I know that I know what I'm doing. I got a great group of kids. We've got phenomenal character in that locker room. We're going to stumble and we're going to make mistakes, we're going to show our inexperience. But what I'm going to do is keep teaching and keep helping this team grow and we'll get some W's, hopefully more than L's.

But sometimes you go through bumps in the road. I think when you look at Bruce, he's going to have a number of opportunities to keep

coaching if he wants to if he's not to coach there anymore. I think they'd be wise to let him coach this team and lay off a little bit.

Q. Do you read a lot of papers, pay much attention to what is going on?

COACH McCAFFERY: I tend to read the papers. I think that's probably a result of how I kind of grew up. My brother is a sportswriter, a columnist. We always had the paper, always read the paper. Let's be honest, everything that's ever been said or written about me has not always been positive. That's okay. I think, to be honest with you, I don't really remember a case where anybody sort of went after me with any kind of vendetta.

If we stunk, you wrote that we stunk. What can I really say about it? I don't think it's ever been personal. I think most of you guys are pros, just like I'm a pro. We have a job to do. So I don't take it personal. I don't worry about it.

I just keep plugging away. Come to the office, work on recruiting, work on teaching our guys to become better, improve our staff, whatever we have to do to move this program forward. There's so many things that impact our ability to ultimately end up in the NCAA tournament.

Q. Going back to Bryce, did you ever have to go into Compton to recruit him?

COACH McCAFFERY: I did not. By the time we started recruiting him, the recruiting period, the time we were allowed out, was over. We got tape on him, watched it. I fell in love with him on tape. I think we hit it off pretty well on the telephone.

It was a unique scenario because what I was doing, in his mind he was this level, but he wasn't being recruited at this level. Once we called, he was interested. It was going to be a relatively easy pitch in terms of getting him here. Once we got him here, we had to convince him to come. But getting the visit wasn't going to be a problem.

I think once somebody comes, sees what we're all about, they become impressed with the campus, the history, certainly the facility, the new facility that was coming at the time. So he was sold pretty quickly.

Q. Compton is a pretty rough area. You've gone into some pretty tough areas, haven't you?

COACH McCaffery: Yeah.

Q. Are gangs something you worry about when you recruit?

COACH McCaffery: No. We had gangs in my neighborhood when I was growing up. I don't really think much about it. You go to the school. You go to the gymnasium. It's an AAU tournament, a high school game. I've gone to a number of places where there's metal detectors to get into the gym. I've been to places where if you weren't on the list, you couldn't go to the game at all. "Who are you? What are you doing?" I've come to watch the game. "Where are you from?"

Q. Are recruits ever gang members? Is that something you check out?

COACH McCaffery: We would know if they were a gang member and they wouldn't be under consideration. So I've never recruited somebody who was, no.

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