

March 6, 2012



An interview with:

COACH McCAFFERY

Q. Are you disappointed Matt Gatens didn't make the All-Big Ten first team?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think the thing that you have to look at is, obviously, I thought he was a first team guy. I voted him there. I think that's where he belongs. He's one of the best five players in this league. That said, you look at the first team and say, okay, you take him out and you've still got a pretty good player, whoever that is. There are a lot of good players in this league. There is just no way around it.

Q. What about defensive team, did that surprise you more?

COACH McCAFFERY: Well, he should have been on the all-defensive team. Yeah, no question about that, yeah.

Q. You mentioned Aaron White not being a unanimous choice for all-freshman team; do you think it's because your team hasn't done --

COACH McCAFFERY: Who else would you vote for? Who is better than the five guys that were on it? I mean, to me that was the easiest five. If you just look at the league, they're the best five freshmen. Without question. There is no debate. There is not a sixth guy who you could look at and say yeah, I could see him. I don't see it.

Q. You said Aaron was a lock for the all-freshman team, but do you think he had a little more pride that he was named honorable mention because that shows that the coaches are reorganizing him?

COACH McCAFFERY: Yeah, I think he certainly deserved to be mentioned as one of the better players on our league. There is no question about it. I think his consistency all year long was pretty special for a freshman.

Q. Playing Illinois, what kind of challenges does Brandon Paul bring?

COACH McCAFFERY: He's as talented a player as there is in college basketball when it comes right down to it. He's got the ability to go by you, and he's got the ability to finish at the rim. He has tremendous range. He takes advantage of his length defensively. He's constantly stripping guys, and he blocks shots and he rebounds. I mean, he just helps you in a lot of ways.

If he's really on, like he was -- I mean, he played well against us, but there are other games where he was spectacular like Ohio State. He's virtually unstoppable.

Q. How important is the rebounding and offensive rebounds? A couple times they had four shots; Meyers Leonard played a big role --

COACH McCAFFERY: It obviously starts with him, but they've got some other big guys. But they've got long arm athletic wings that come in there and get rebounds as well, so we have to do a better job. You can lose the rebounding edge in a game and survive, but not when you're giving up multiple offensive rebounds and multiple possessions because those lead to baskets directly.

Q. Is there a benefit to just having played them recently?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think it's a little bit fresh. But I don't know if it's a benefit because they're in the same boat.

Q. What about just being the first game that day? Is there any advantage or disadvantage to that?

COACH McCAFFERY: I don't think so, no.

Q. The headlines out of Champaign have been predominantly negative over the last month. Is Illinois dangerous to you because you know about their talent?

COACH McCAFFERY: They don't have -- it's been an interesting year because they were 15-3 and ranked, and lost some close games. There were some games where they lost to really good teams but played very well. They certainly beat us. They lost a bunch of games in a row, and that's what started everything.

It's not like you look and say -- obviously they can beat anybody in our league. They beat Michigan State and Ohio State and played fairly well against Michigan. You look at Meyers Leonard, Brandon Paul have gotten recognition among some of the better players in our league. I've always been a big fan of Richardson. I think he's a terrific player and another dangerous scorer. I think Bertrand is a really talented sophomore who is capable of a big game.

I think one of the things that really affected their team at the time -- I think Maniscalco is a pretty good player, and he's been spending time. But Maniscalco is a fifth-year senior, and he gives you another three-point shooter. He had a bad foot and he struggled for most of that stretch of time. He's been pretty good since he's been back, so that gives them another guy. We've got our hands full and so does everybody else.

Q. Do you have more players on your team that have played multiple positions this year?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think so. You look at certain positions, I think we'll be set. My hope is that Devyn doesn't have to play as much point or any for that matter. I mean, Josh is pretty much locked into where he is. I think you look at Basabe and White and Zach McCabe, they're pretty much post players.

I think we could see Zach or Aaron play some three. Woodbury and Olaseni are probably straight posts. Then you look at the other guards that we have. I mean, they might play multiple positions with Ingram and Clemmons for sure. It will be a little bit of that, but maybe not as much as you think.

Q. What about Kyle Meyer?

COACH McCAFFERY: He's got three-man skills. He's a big strong kid. He's every bit of 6'9" plus, and he's 225 pounds now. But his skill set is so good. He's got three-man skills. He's more of a pick-and-pop four.

He's a ball handling four, ball handling five. He can break the press. You think about Saturday's game and you think about the 1-3-1, and you need guys that can see over it and make plays. You could put him on the baseline; you could put him up top. He can split the gap and try -- he's really a good passer.

So that gives us probably going back to the original question, we just have a little more versatility with regard to moving guys around and absorbing injury and having the kind of depth to get through a long and grueling season in this league.

Q. What are your summer plans with the players?

COACH McCAFFERY: Get them here, get them acclimated academically, with the strength program and playing in a primetime league. Some of the guys might have some opportunities to play overseas at some point on the traveling teams.

I think there is some interest in Gabe playing for the British Under-20 team. That's a possibility.

Q. Seems like when Bryce is playing well, you guys play well --

COACH McCAFFERY: He's playing well. There is no question. He's had a very unique season in light of his injury situation. I'm proud of how he persevered. Because he certainly had high expectation for himself, and we had higher expectation for him, but it was all out of his control.

I do think at one point his confidence was not what it needed to be. We tried to challenge him and then to back off from it to kind of help him through it. But our running game is so much better when he's out there. He's a good late-game player so he's feeling the best he's felt in a long time.

Q. What do you think of his confidence?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think he's doing pretty good. I thought he played pretty well Saturday. He had that one turnover that he would like to get back, but he made a ton of really good

plays.

When we struggled at the first half, he was on the bench in foul trouble. He scored four of the first five possessions against the 1-3-1 when he was out there. It was unfortunate for us and for him.

Q. How's Marble's hand?

COACH McCAFFERY: It's fine. Actually, it's his elbow. He couldn't feel his hand because he got hit in the elbow.

Q. How's Eric May doing?

COACH McCAFFERY: I don't think he's doing great. He's really trying. He's better than he was, but he has no explosion which is what his game is. He can get after you defensively and fly down the court in transition, and he can get them into traffic and make a play for a rebound. He's just not able to do that right now.

So he's given us what he can give us, and I appreciate that. He's a terrific competitor.

Q. Is Marble's play this season what you expected?

COACH McCAFFERY: I sort of expected him to make a jump, and I think he did. I think the key for him is where does it go from here? Offensively, he's pretty good. He's got to get a little more consistent with his shots. He's got to consistently play with that reckless abandon. The last two games he's been tentative the first half of both games. I was a little curious about that, because it's just not who he is.

I talked to him about it on Sunday at length, because I just want him to be Devon Marble. Just attack, put your head down sometimes and shoot the ball without thinking is Coach going to yell at me if this doesn't go in? I never say anything to him if he shoots the ball. I want him to go shoot the ball, attack the rim. At the same time make the play for somebody else. It's not about you, and he's never been that kind of guy either.

So defensively is where he he's got to make the jump. Part of that will come with strength and stamina. When you're playing the minutes we asked him to play this year with Bryce's injuries, and by the way the pressure of Jordan Taylor and they'll pressure Soboleski and go on down the league, and Craft, and by the way go get us 15 and play 38, 39 minutes, that's hard to do. But he wasn't able to do that last year. So next year he's got to be a little bit better.

Q. Talk about Marble, he takes those huge shots and turns around like in the game at Wisconsin... so many good plays. Does that show you something?

COACH McCAFFERY: It tells me that he has the ability to be a premier player in this league and nationally for that matter. He grew and he's gotten stronger. I think his confidence level is pretty good.

He's usually pretty confident in himself, but that's what was surprising to me. It was a little concerning to be honest with you because I never had to deal with that with him. He said he was trying to be too perfect. As we all know, this is not a game of perfect, so you've just got to go make plays. If you turn it over, run back and guard your man. If you miss a shot, run back, make sure they don't score.

I think he could be a really good defender. The reality is ultimately he wants to get paid one day to play this game, and they're not going to pay him if he doesn't guard people. That's what I've told him.

Get down, get your feet apart and guard somebody. A great example of that is what Matt Gatens has done for us the last two years. He plays both ends. And Marble relies on his length and his instincts which are really good. So it might be a game that he had a good game defensively with four steals and five steals. But if you look at film, he doesn't lock in defensively like we need him to.

Q. May hasn't been himself?

COACH McCAFFERY: He's just not. If you remember the play in the Illinois game on the break, he should have gone right up and right up through Meyers Leonard, and now he's a little bit imposing at times. But Eric May would have normally have gone up there, and he just kicked it back out.

Like I said, he's lacing them up and giving us some quality minutes, but he's not himself.

Q. What do you say to him going into this off-season?

COACH McCAFFERY: Well, he's got to work. He's got to go to work, and he's got to go to work in a lot of ways. He's got to be in the best shape of his life coming back.

He's got to work a little bit on his perimeter skill and his ability to put it on the deck. His

assist-turnover numbers have to change, and he knows that.

So it sounds a little contradictory because we're saying he needs to work on his perimeter skills, but his assist turnover numbers have to improve. At the same time, he needs to be a runner, a jumper, a shot blocker and a traffic rebounder. You know, you're not a pick-and-pop three-point shooter. You know, you're not a guy who is going to dribble extensively. But you've got to make a play, throw a bounce pass, make a play and throw a driving kick, which I do think he's worked on and gotten better at. He's got to be even better next year.

I think what we need to see from him is a more consistent player. He was much more consistent last year than he was this year, but this year he was spectacular at times, especially when he's blocking shots. I've said that before.

So he comes back in great shape physically and with the mindset necessary, he'll be a big factor of what we do next year.

Q. At this point in time, what are the chances of you signing a player here in the late period?

COACH McCAFFERY: Decent. Yeah, we're still looking at some guys. We haven't gone out on the road much. Certainly I haven't been in recent weeks. My assistants have been out. We only have a handful of days left of the 130, so there are some guys we're looking at.

Q. Perimeter guys?

COACH McCAFFERY: Pretty much on the wing.

Q. Looking at high school seniors and JUCO's?

COACH McCAFFERY: Both.

Q. Coach, Meyers Leonard is a pretty distinct player. Are you trying to play him straight up?

COACH McCAFFERY: Well, you know, you have to decide, okay, we're going to play him straight up, are we going to go get him? Are we going to double from the opposite post or double from the top, double on the catch, double on the bounce? I mean just change defenses on them and play up? I mean, there are so many different ways. You work on that more than you work on who the guy is.

You can put Archie there, you can put Stokes there, you can put Brommer there, doesn't really matter. It's okay, this is what we're going to do, and typically we won't do any one of those things for the entire game. Just try to keep them guessing of what we're doing.

Q. Do you do anything much differently this week in preparing to play potentially so many games?

COACH McCAFFERY: No. Look, since we know, sort of, you figure it this way. We'll go pretty hard today but not long. Tomorrow we have to wait until 2:30 to practice when classes are over. So that's obviously less than 24 hours before game time with an early wake-up. So we won't do a lot in terms of strenuous activity, but we'll do a lot in terms of meetings and walk throughs and making sure we scheme what we want to scheme correctly.

Q. Do you worry about being four games in four days?

COACH McCAFFERY: No, I suspect it will be brought up at some point. But we're just going to try to beat Illinois.

Q. How is it from a physical standpoint to be able to just go move on and on in a tournament like that?

COACH McCAFFERY: Well, it's really hard. It doesn't happen a lot, but it does happen. I've had kids that I thought were capable of doing it. We've made some noise but never accomplished it completely. We've gone three in three days a number of times, and that's hard to do.

But it's one of those things where if you're playing well and you're playing intelligently and you're defending and staying with the game plan, and your key guys are doing what they're supposed to do and you're getting contributions from the bench, then it can happen. It's possible.

I don't look and say there is not a team in this league that we can't beat. There are some that we didn't beat. Let's be honest. But at the same time, I feel like we can play with everybody that's beaten us and have a chance. You've got to make shots, and you've got to be the smarter, tougher team on that day.

Typically it comes down to mistakes. Who is making the most mistakes? We have gotten

better in that area as the season has progressed. We've taken better care of the ball and gotten better shot opportunities with a few exceptions.

Q. Josh played pretty solidly in the Illinois game. Have you figured out what to do with that starting spot?

COACH McCAFFERY: I've kind of gone back and forth on it. I look at it this way, Bryce was starting until he got hurt. We inserted Josh in the lineup and went on a little roll, and he's played well. I thought he was terrific, as you said, against Illinois, and that was a loss. I thought he was great against Nebraska in a win. I thought he played well Saturday except for that one stretch in the first half where he got tentative, and he's not usually tentative.

So probably leaning toward starting Bryce, but they're both going to play about the same number of minutes either way.

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