

January 27, 2014



An Interview With:

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY

Q. When you go into a game like this, do you try to keep an even keel with your team, not let them get too high, too low, or do you try to emphasize the importance of ---

COACH McCAFFERY: No, I try to keep an even keel. We try to have a very consistent and businesslike approach to every game in terms of game plan, practice. We're pretty regimented in that regard.

Q. This is the kind of game you talked about playing when you took the job at Iowa. Now that you're there, how do you feel your team is prepared for this?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think we have a tremendous amount of maturity on our team, and we've got great senior leadership. That class in particular has been through a lot. We've played Michigan State many times. We beat them the first time we played them when I was here and haven't beaten them since, but have had some really good games with them, so we obviously respect them tremendously, and hopefully the next time you play them, you do a little bit better learning from what you did or didn't do the last time.

Q. Aren't they really kind of the gold standard for Big Ten, the Izzo regime?

COACH McCAFFERY: Yeah, I think from a consistency standpoint, they're a program that I think every coach in this league understands if you're going to win a championship, you've got to go through Michigan State. Plain and simple.

Q. When you talked to Devyn in the first half and at halftime, kind of emphasized the message, what do you want to see from him in the first half of Tuesday's game?

COACH McCAFFERY: He's been pretty consistent with his effort and his play in pretty much both halves of every game that we've played. I thought that was a little uncharacteristic of him. He just seemed to be out of sync, and I challenged him in a rather direct way, when I took him out and then when I talked to him at halftime.

For him, he's a guy that responds to those kinds of challenges. Maybe somebody different you'd have to come at them differently, but I went right at him, and because I expect more from him, and I think the beauty of him is he expects more from himself, and to see the way he played in the second half I think speaks to who he is and his ability, his talent, his leadership, and what he wants to get out of this season.

Q. With a win tomorrow, that would be 21 straight at home. Talk about the importance of that...

COACH McCAFFERY: You know, that's something for everybody to talk about. It's not something that I think about. All I'm trying to do is continue our pursuit of winning a Big Ten championship, and we're playing a team that's above us, at the end of preseason was ranked No. 1, a team that has our full attention, and that's quite honestly my concern.

Q. How difficult does that chase for a Big Ten championship become if you guys were to drop one at home?

COACH McCAFFERY: It would be harder, but not impossible.

Q. How does Michigan State differ right now without having guys like Payne and Dawson in their lineup?

COACH McCAFFERY: Well, obviously they're two of the better players in our league. Forget about two of the better players on that team. So it's going to impact them, there's no question. And what it does and what I've seen is Appling and Harris have really taken their games to another level, and that's been impressive and not unexpected. But the other thing is what I think Tom has done is really expanded his bench. I think they have really utilized in particular Kaminsky and Costello, Trice, and those are all really good players, and they've gotten a chance to play more. He's also gotten Ellis and Schilling playing time that maybe they wouldn't have gotten as much of, and they've performed well.

So now they've had so many injuries, those guys are ready to play. It's not like they got hurt yesterday and they're not going to play today. They've missed Payne for a while. They had -- I don't remember the Oakland game, I don't remember which four, but they had four guys out for that game. They had to gut out a 67-63 win, things like that. It may benefit them in the long run to have been able to have the opportunity to expand their bench the way they have. Obviously, they'd like to have them back, and they'll eventually get them both back.

Q. Even despite the injuries they seem to be real sharp offensively. They only had a couple of turnovers against Michigan. What kind of leadership has Appling provided in that role?

COACH McCAFFERY: Well, I think the leadership you would have expected him to provide. He's a senior point guard who's been through a lot, a very talented player. He's a gamer. That term is kind of thrown around loosely a lot of times, but he is truly a gamer and responds to any challenge. The challenge is to continue to engineer victory for his team regardless of who he's playing alongside. He's been impressive.

Q. Early in his career the team did struggle a little bit making that transition from two to one, but he seems to look more comfortable.

COACH McCAFFERY: You know, his freshman year, he's playing behind Lucas at that position. He was really the other guard when he played most of the time. So I think it's unfair to say

he had trouble making the transition because he really didn't play that position, so he did his sophomore year, and he had a few ups and downs, but there hasn't been too many bumps in the road for him.

Q. Seems like the rotation now you're pretty comfortable, seems to be flowing, has some flow to it. Are you happy with how it's developed to this point?

COACH McCAFFERY: Yeah, I am. I still want to get Peter Jok more opportunities than I have in the previous couple games. I think he deserves to be in there. It's been harder to get 11 in. Not that we didn't anticipate that that would be difficult; it's so much easier with 10. But we're thrilled with Zach McCabe and how he's played, that group... Olaseni has been phenomenal, and Basabe is playing very well. The beauty of it is we can absorb a couple of those guys having an off day and still have six or seven, sometimes eight other guys playing really well.

Q. Clemmons seemed to have hit maybe a sophomore slump, doesn't seem to be playing with a lot of confidence. What is it about his game that's maybe not --

COACH McCAFFERY: Well, I think it's a combination of things. He hasn't played as well as he was. His minutes have been curtailed, and that's a tough thing for me because I know the one thing that would help him is to play him more and sort of let him play through some of his mistakes, but the way Josh Oglesby has been playing that's been hard to justify. Josh has sort of been the guy that's gotten those extra minutes, and it's affected Anthony Clemmons without question.

You're seeing it, I think, in his offense in particular. He's not shooting the ball -- forget about not shooting the ball well, he's not shooting the ball much. It's not like he's shooting poorly. He hasn't really taken many shots in the last three or four games, and he was a guy you could rely on to score the ball. We've just got to continue to encourage him to play up to his capabilities and be ready when his name is called.

Q. How satisfying is it to see a guy like Gabe, he's doing it on a more consistent basis now, seems to have gotten past his lack of confidence issues and is all in with playing the game right now?

COACH McCAFFERY: Well, you're thrilled with a guy like Gabe who works so hard and is so conscientious. As I've said before, sometimes he's almost too conscientious, and I'm trying to get him to understand it's okay to play the game with a little reckless abandon because he just never did that. He tried to get everything perfect, and it's not.

I thought Saturday was a great example. He goes for 14 and 10, made a few mistakes but played through them and came back and did great things. I think the transformation in his game that we've all seen, and you're right, there's so much more confidence now in his overall body language, everything he does he feels good about. He knows what he's supposed to do, he knows what he's capable of doing, and he's going to be a critical part of this game tomorrow night, no question.

Q. Do you ever sit back and take it all in? Four years ago you played this game in a huge snowstorm, maybe some seats were filled by guys wearing green, small arena. Now it's sold out and on the street tickets are going pretty high. Do you ever kind of look and go, how far have we come in that way, not necessarily on the court?

COACH McCAFFERY: I probably will later, not now. We're too focused on work. What do we have to do? How do we prepare? Again, we're respectful of our opponent, so we'd better be locked in as a staff and we'd better make sure that we have these guys prepared in a way that gives them the best opportunity to win. That's my job. It's great that the building is filled and it's going to be an unbelievable atmosphere, but my job is to get those guys ready to play, and okay, what have we done that's worked, what have we done that hasn't worked, what do we have to do differently. Are we going to make a lot of changes, are we going to make subtle changes, all of those things. So we've had a lot of meetings and a lot of discussion, and that's my responsibility, and that's kind of where my focus is.

Q. How is the health of the team?

COACH McCAFFERY: Health is fine, legs are fine. I think we've been intelligent in terms of -- you get locked in and you want to work, ork, work. We can do it but you've got to be careful that we don't put too much pressure on their legs, especially with two road games in a row before this one. I think our practices have been sensible. We've had a lot of meetings, a lot of film sessions, and I think they're in a good place.

Q. It might be hard to quantify, but how much further along are you at this time this year than you were at this time last year do you think?

COACH McCAFFERY: Well, substantially. If you remember, we played these guys last year, it was earlier in the season, but we started three freshmen. So that was something that -- you never know how that's going to work out, and we got fairly productive play from all three of them, but our two freshman guards did have eight turnovers in that game, so obviously they're not doing that now. Adam is way further along than he was. But again, those sophomores are juniors, those juniors are seniors. Gabe, who didn't play much as a freshman, has had a ton of experience, and his game is in a completely different place. So we're deeper, we're bigger, and I think we have a few more weapons offensively.

Obviously we're playing one of the best defensive teams in college basketball, so you'd better have some guys that can make shots, and I think we're better suited in that area than maybe we were this time a year ago.

Q. When you took this job, a lot of people were maybe hoping for a quick fix, things to happen faster. You took the approach you took to slowly build this thing and it's paying off. Are you happy with the way that part of it's gone?

COACH McCAFFERY: Yeah, I just don't think we're an institution that would work the other way. Not in this league, not at Iowa. That's not been my style anyway. I've sort of done this before at other places, not at the BCS level, so I recognize that when you're playing against the teams with the caliber of athlete and the caliber of coach that are in this league, it's going to be a little bit harder and maybe take a little bit longer. But if you get the right staff and the right players and

have character in your program, you're going to be okay.

At the same time you never want to be satisfied. We feel really good about a lot of things we've accomplished this year, but clearly we have a lot of goals left.

Q. The depth of your team is well known and how deep you can go and throw guys out there, but the unselfishness is maybe a little more nebulous but maybe a stronger bond with these guys. Have you seen a team that has as many contributors playing well that all seem to be rooting for each other as much as your team?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think that's a fair statement. I think that's rather unique, to have that many players all of whom could legitimately be starters because the reality is we all know everybody wants to start. We have guys that don't care if they start, they know they're going to play, they know they're going to have a valuable role, and they share the ball. I don't ever look out there and say, okay, I've got to get him out because he's just going for his right now. I've never had that feeling with this team.

And when you don't have those sort of distractions, you can make the kind of progress you want to make because that tells you you've got great people. They love each other, and they want to be successful, and they want to win, they want to compete. They want to be coached. They want to learn from their mistakes. And I think we could talk about where people are, but you look at each class, not only those guys are good players but they've continued to get better. That's because they put the time in.

Q. Is this the most unselfish team you've coached in your career?

COACH McCAFFERY: Without question. I've never had a team that was this deep, so it's probably an unfair comparison. I had some really good teams at Siena, but we just weren't 11 deep. Really good teams at Lehigh and Greensboro; we weren't 11 deep. So they shared the ball, but those guys were playing 36, 37 minutes a game a lot of them. It's a different situation completely.

Q. How do you slow down Gary Harris?

COACH McCAFFERY: The thing that's been impressive to me about Gary Harris is, talented offensive players like him typically don't guard the way he does. He really works

defensively. Those guys take possessions off, usually, and he doesn't do that. He's a really intense competitor.

He also obviously is a great three-point shooter, but he's got an in between game, he can get to the rim, he's got a great burst. He can play in traffic, he can play in the open floor, they can set him up. He's a guy that you have to spend a lot of time game planning for, and clearly other teams have done it and have struggled getting him under control. He's been over 20 a number of games in a row.

So we're just going to have to make sure we have the right guys on him.

Q. You talked about how you've played them close the last few times and come up short. What has to change --

COACH McCAFFERY: We can't turn the ball over. That's it. Not against this team.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

ASAP sports
...when all is said, we're done.®

visit our archives at asapsports.com

Coach McCaffery - 1.27.14