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An interview with:

COACH McCAFFERY

Q. What do you expect from Eric May this year?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think Eric is going to have a great year for us. He's in great shape. He's playing with a lot of confidence right now. He's healthy as he's ever been. This will be year three playing for me in terms of what we do and how he fits. I know that he's hungry to have a senior year that he'll be able to remember. And I hope that that's how it works out.

Q. Woodberry and Gessell, true center and true point guard, what do you expect from them?

COACH McCAFFERY: I expect both of them to obviously contribute immediately. I think what we all hope for when we recruit freshmen is they don't play like freshmen. I don't think they will.

Now they may have some freshmen moments, but both of them are incredibly mentally tough, physically ready, and of course they're both going to get better and I'm very confident they'll be good players right of the bat, and most importantly, be consistent performers right of the bat.

Q. Is the goal to make the NCAA tournament?

COACH McCAFFERY: Same goal every year. Obviously you want to get to the NCAA tournament and advance. That would be the goal, but for us, in terms of our progression, year one we weren't sure exactly how we were going to end up, and we had some excellent moments and some other struggles that were to be expected.

Last year we expected to improve, which we did, accomplished a lot of things which we hadn't the previous years and then now we obviously want to get better. So if you're looking at

18 wins and an NIT bid than the next logical step is the NCAA tournament, but I think as everyone knows, this league in particular, is difficult. It's doable because I think without question we have the best conference in the country, I don't think that's arguable anymore. So now you're talking about anywhere from potentially six to eight teams getting in, seven is usually the number, but I don't think eight would be out of the question, particularly this year, considering we have three or four in the top 10 preseason.

So I think where we have made phenomenal strides filling our roster with talent and addressing needs in terms of depth at the point guard position, size, versatility, the ability to have the personnel that can play the style that we want to play, there's no question that we've done that, but now we have to go out and win consistently. We have to do it in the nonconference portion of our schedule and against the teams in the best conference in the country. Last year we won eight in league play and it's probably going to take a little more than that.

Q. What kind of impact will the freshmen have this year?

COACH McCAFFERY: In order to do that, we're going to need fresh legs, and we have those. But the practices this year will be so much more competitive than they've been in the previous two years, where players are going after playing time. They're going after starting roles. That's only going to make our team better. It's going to make it deeper, obviously, but it's going to make it better, because the more competitive practices are, the more capable we're going to be competing, especially on the road and especially late games.

Most of you guys were in attendance last year when we struggled on the defensive end of the floor, and that's where the rest usually takes place. It's not that they don't want to play defense. It's not that they're neglecting that side of the floor,

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but they're tired.

We had a lot of our key guys playing significant minutes. The reality is they all want to play 34 to 36 minutes or more, and you can do that, but there are going to be a negative side to that.

So, hopefully, this year I can cut down on some of those minutes, and the players will buy into that, give others an opportunity, and then have the flexibility to go with different lineups throughout the course of the game depending upon who we're playing. Whether we go small, whether we go big, whether we go zone, whether we press more, play more half court, man, whatever. But I've got some versatility in terms of how I can maneuver personnel around to make that happen.

Q. What do you really want out of Marble?

COACH McCAFFERY: Well, I need him to take that next step, which I think he will. The reason I think he will is I watched him this summer and this spring, and in the fall, and I saw someone who is determined to continue to get better. We saw a skinny freshman have some phenomenal moments, then we saw him establish himself in this conference as one of the premier players in the league last year. So now what's that next step? We've got to be a little more consistent. He's really worked on his shot. He obviously can score the ball, but his shooting is going to have to be a little more consistent. I'd like to see him sort of settle into that role where Matt was last year, as maybe our go-to guy, our go-to guy late. I think he can do that.

The other thing he'll have to do is play defense more consistently, which he did not do last year, and he knows that. I think what he's done to prepare himself to make that happen is he's gotten in phenomenal shape. He's much stronger, and I think feels really good about where his game is.

Towards the end of last year you saw him become one of the premier players in our league, and he did that by showing an array of skills. He played point. He drove it. He was able to play in transition. He was able to score one-on-one. He was able to play in pick-and-roll, and able to play in zones and really play with a tremendous amount of confidence.

I think right now what you have is a junior who is going to play with great confidence with a complete skill set who now has to challenge himself to be able to do it at both ends every night, and that's what we need him to do.

Q. What will Aaron White's role be?

COACH McCAFFERY: Aaron White's role will be a little bit different in that he's going to play some three. He likes that, but he was a difficult cover for most fours, no matter who we were to play against. So for him now, he's really worked on his pull-up jumper, coming off screens, hitting jump shots, shot fake drive. He needs to finish a little bit better, because he can get to the rim any time he wants and his stamina has to improve. He struggled last year with that, with just being a freshman who as the season went on, I think, got a little bit tired at times. We had them logging a lot of minutes.

So this year, for example, he's going to play four. He's going to play three. He's going to have to guard threes and fours, and I'd like to see him step up offensively and take those 11 points to 15 or 16, which I think he's capable of doing.

Q. What are the expectations for Melsahn Basabe and Zach McCabe?

COACH McCAFFERY: Well, Melsahn, I think the key for him is number one, what kind of shape is he in? Last year I don't think it was all his fault. We felt like he needed to put on weight, and he did. Turned out he wasn't as good a player at 235 as he was at 222. So he's back down physically where he needs to be. I think he's smart enough to realize what he went through as a freshman, what he went through as a sophomore, the good and the bad. Process that so that this year we see more of the good.

So I think for him, he's playing with a tremendous amount of confidence. He's in the best shape of his life. I want to see him play with that kind of reckless abandon we saw more of when he was a freshman than we did last year. We saw it at times, and that was the unique part of his sophomore year. Everybody looks and says he had a sub-par sophomore year, and he had great games for us as a sophomore. He just didn't do it consistently. So for him, the key is going to be consistency.

In terms of Zach, I mean, Zach has sort of been the model of consistency, except his freshman year he turned the ball over a lot. Way too much. Part of that wasn't his fault. It was my fault. I had to play him at the three, and that was a little out of position for him then. Now he can play the three, play the four, play the five. Smart

enough to remember where to go on all three positions. Probably one of our best shooters without question. And again, another guy that's really strong with 235, playing with a tremendous amount of confidence. He's giving us a lot of versatility when we look at personnel.

Q. How has Josh evolved as player. I know he's bigger and stronger, but have you seen his shot becoming more consistent?

COACH McCAFFERY: What I'd like to see Josh do is look for his shot more. We've struggled with that since he got here. He's one of the best shooters I've ever seen, and he's shooting the ball really well. But the thing to remember is a lot of times when a kid is a good shooter, we label him a shooter. Josh is a player. I want Josh to drive the ball and handle the ball, and he's a tremendous passer. He likes to pass the ball. He likes to load up his teammates. So I don't want him to lose that part of his game, but I'd like to see him come out firing on a regular basis.

If he misses two or three, shoot the next five like he's going to make those because when it's all said and done, he's going to make close to 40% of his threes. What that's going to do is good for us, because it's going to stretch the defense in a way it gives others the opportunity to drive the ball.

So in particular, with the loss of Matt Gatens and his shooting, we need somebody else besides Marble and Aaron White, and Zach McCabe, and Mike Gesell, we're going to have to make up those three somewhere, and I think Josh is a logical place.

Q. What's college-ready for Woodbury's game?

COACH McCAFFERY: Well, the first thing that I look for with a freshman in terms of being college ready is how do they approach everything that they do? The hardest thing for a lot of freshmen is the discipline that's required when they first get here. You get up in the morning. I have class. I have academic meetings. I have strength and conditioning workouts. I have study hall. I have practice. I have training table. I have to get rest. I have to make sure I watch what I eat, and then I have to get up and do it again, and again, and again. A lot of freshmen struggle with that. They just don't know how to do that.

He is mature beyond his years with taking care of his business. So that's step one. Step two, you watch him in development sessions. You

watch him in strength and conditioning sessions. Is he able to push himself? Is he able to really push through discomfort and get himself physically ready to play because he is a running seven-footer. He is a guy that can move his feet and trap a ball screen and continue to point guard and get back to his man. He can run consistently, and more importantly he can run effectively.

Secondly, on the glass he's tremendous. He's a two-handed rebounder, goes from both ends. From that standpoint he's going to be able to rebound the basketball. Defensively, he knows where to go. He's the kind of guy that's in the back telling people where to go. He's pointing, communicating, he talks. He was coached in high school so he does that. That's another step.

Anybody that wants to play as a freshman expects to play. He expects great things from himself, and you need that. Offensively, he will continue to get better. But what he understands how to do is post up and how to get the ball. He commands the ball. He wants the ball, and he'll steal, and he understands all that stuff, and he can do it in half court or in transition.

So when you combine all of those factors, a very impressive freshman who a lot of people might expect more from offensively right off the bat. He's going to be really good, but I think that will be something that continues to improve, whereas the rest of his game will be solid right off the bat.

Q. Last year you started strong but then got beaten by Creighton and had to battle through that adversity. How are those moments going to impact your team moving forward?

COACH McCAFFERY: Nobody wants to go through that. You get your ears pinned back a couple times, and you're in the locker room looking at each other like what went wrong. What you do in those situations as coaches, as players, you break everything down. You try to analyze, how can we improve a little bit here, a little bit there?

And as that happens, you make progress and you move forward, and you continue to believe in each other and continue to believe in the philosophy and the game plan. If you have character on your team, you're going to get better, and that's what we did. It would have been easy to point fingers at that point in time, because there was so much wrong. It was not just the Creighton

game. It was three or four others in that stretch where you're wondering what's it going to be like? You're thinking it's only going to get worse. We're going into the Big Ten. We're going to be playing really good teams, Final Four caliber teams. How is it going to get better?

Well it's going to get better if we make it better, and we put the time in. We have great senior leadership, and I have a great staff, and what we're able to do is continue to let these guys play and improve their confidence level. Because at that point in time, there was no question that it was at an all-time low. The other thing was, and we improved it a little bit.

Defensively in those games that you're referring to we were atrocious. We got better. Now we're not where we need to be, but we got better. And that was something that was addressed directly at that point in time. And that was something addressed directly at that point and a major point in turning things around.

Q. Do you welcome the fans' expectations?

COACH McCAFFERY: We are very appreciative of how our fans have responded to our team, have responded to me, and my staff, and how we've tried to improve. They have been patient at times through some struggles. But I think they see progress.

As I have said many times, I do believe it's a sophisticated fan base. They have seen phenomenal basketball over the years here, and they're going to see, if there's a bump in the road, how do we respond? And our players have responded in a positive way, and so has our staff. So I'm okay with expectations.

Q. You used the word consistency before. If you get that this year, how will this year be?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think you're right. I think consistency is the key to pretty much anything. You break each player down, and a lot of times the guy that will get you 6-4 every night is better than a guy that gives you 18-2. So you look at each player, can they be consistent and can they consistently reach their potential? When somebody doesn't, if someone else has reached their potential on that night, that will be fine.

As far as that's concerned, I'm expecting much more consistent effort per man, much more consistent effort at the defensive end of the floor. We have a number of individuals, for example, that

have more turnovers than assists. That has to get reversed. You know, if we're going to play fast, we're going to play nuts.

We're not a turnover team. We can't be a turnover team. A lot of college teams say they're not going to turn the ball over. They hold on to the ball. They don't shoot. We're going to shoot it quick. We're going to push it. We're going to attack, but we're not going to turn the ball over. So those are the kind of things that I think we're referring to. Those are the steps we have to make.

You can't turn the ball over and don't defend and expect to win. That can't happen. So if we cut down on our turnovers, play a little better defense, and fewer second shot opportunities, the shooting percentages are going to go down. Our running opportunities are going to increase and we'll certainly be better off.

Q. Is it tougher to rebuild programs in this conference compared to where you've rebuilt programs before?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think it is if you factor in the league wins. But cracking the top five or six in the Big Ten, and no disrespect to the Southern Conference or Metro Athletic Conference, it's not the same. You see Ohio State, Wisconsin, Purdue, and you go right on down the line, Indiana's preseason. To crack that group is a lot more challenging. They're really good players and have really good coaches, and they have great fan bases.

So I think we're all encouraged by the fact that we knocked some of those folks off last year and we'll have to do it again. It's not easy, not in this league.

So I think it's a very good question when you look at trying to make comparisons. But I do think that the big difference is the Big Ten.

Q. You have a true freshman point guard, and what do you think of him?

COACH McCAFFERY: In particular with Mike, it's his make-up. If you know him, and if you're around him at all -- and this is a very strong statement. There have been very few, if any more focused athletes I've ever been around. Very similar to Matt Gatens in that respect, and I could name some of the great players that I've had over the years. Talk about having the ability to focus and keep your day in order.

The first academic report I received in the

summer, A, A, A. Where's Mike? We can't find him. He's not in class. We were supposed to have a meeting. He didn't show up. Well, nothing but A's. Nothing but A's in high school, valedictorian. Gatorade Player of the Year, state champion. Well, there is a reason why he accomplished all of those things.

Those are the qualities that typically differentiate a freshman who comes off the bench and contributes versus one who is capable of being a starter and engineering a victory on a regular basis.

Fortunately for us, we have two players in the exact same mold. Mike Gesell and Anthony Clemmons, now they're both freshman. I could play Marble there. He's done extremely well for us at that position. I would rather not, because I need Roy off the ball scoring for us and attacking the basket and being the guy that we go to, as I said, on a regular basis.

So I feel good about our point guard position in that we have -- that's why we brought Anthony in. We told him -- when I play all three of those guys at the same time, because they play the three. The other thing is they both defend. You can talk about defense and shooting percentage and rebounding. Defense starts at the point of attack.

We've got to continue to play in transition. We've got to pressure the ball at the point of attack. Whether they're going to pick-and-roll, or they're going to have continuity or run motion, it doesn't matter. We've got to put the pressure on the basketball as it comes down the floor and crosses the ten-second line. We have to stay after the ball. It's not just once in a while or half the time, and that's what Michael did. He would stay up there.

Also, and I use this term about him a lot, he's got the greatest case of amnesia I've ever seen. If he does turn it over or misses a shot, it's like it never happened. He's on to the next play and on to the next challenge. That is truly something that we often times try to encourage our guys to be like that.

You know they'll make mistakes -- we'll make a mistake or two. We're not happy, but the real test is what happens next. As you know, a lot of times it's more of the same.

Q. Can you talk about Gabe's progress from last year and in the summer?

COACH McCAFFERY: Gabe has made unbelievable progress. I think anybody that knows

him would have expected this. They know his make-up, his work ethic, his character, his athletic ability. The challenge for Gabe is he tries to be too perfect a lot of times. We're constantly encouraging him to let him know that it's okay. It's okay to make a mistake. Run back, get the rebound, block the shot, get over toward the ball and get back. Just play your game that way, and he's getting so much better with that.

He knows what we want from him now. So the next step in his progression is getting out on the floor, and having the ability to play through his mistakes. He's going to make mistakes. I don't care how good he is. He can't get down on himself. If he does that, now you have a running, jumping, 6'10" athlete who can guard, who has bounced everything and can shoot. He can make a baseline jumper, a foul line jumper, and affect the game in so many different ways with his length.

Q. What is the ceiling for this team?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think any time you talk about the ceiling at this time of the year, it's going to be a function of health. If we stay healthy and make the cuts I think we can make, I think we can be playing for a while. Obviously, we want to play into March. At this point in time, we've got a lot of things to figure out today and tomorrow.

As I said earlier, that's what it comes down to. It's going to be an interesting team to try to figure out how everybody's going to fit.

I don't know that I've ever had a team, and I mean this sincerely where we've got 12 guys that can play the game. They all expect to be put in the game. It's not easy to get 12 in. So we'll see how that goes.

Q. Can you talk about the players fitting your style of play rather than having to adapt your style?

COACH McCAFFERY: Yeah, I don't think there is any question about that. We do have those kinds of players. I think in the last couple of years we did obviously last year, but even our first year we could play like that, but we weren't deep enough. We're going to press, but how are we going to press with a short roster and a short bench? You're just going to get beat. You have to be prudent with how you decide how much you're going to employ here.

So now, again, we have enough depth, enough athletic ability, enough size, enough

versatility. And we have smart players. It's great to see our versatility, but that guy has to remember where to go on every set play when he's playing three, four, five, every out of bounds play, every out of bounds play against zone, every zone offense, every press offense, every outside play, every late game play. All of our pick-and-roll option, where do you go?

And if you don't have intelligent, smart players, you could have all the versatile athletes in the world, but it's not going to be effective on the floor. We do. That's also part of how we recruit. We recruit individuals that can play the game.

As I said, sometimes it looks like we're just playing fast and attacking, but there is a plan and a method to everything we do. Something has to come behind that, because you don't score in transition every time. You've got to have other ways to score.

Now we have to figure out how that's going to take place. We have guys that can handle that and execute it on a regular basis.

Q. Do you anticipate any red shirts?

COACH McCAFFERY: There is a good shot that we'll have somebody red shirt because of our numbers situation. But to tell you who that might be at this point probably doesn't make any sense, because if somebody gets hurt, that will eventually mean if somebody does get hurt, that's who we'd red shirt.

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