

# University of Iowa Basketball Media Conference

Thursday, January 2, 2020

## Fran McCaffery Men's Basketball



**Q. We know this is Penn State's home game, but how did it get structured to where you were having discussions with them about it?**

FRAN McCAFFERY: It was pretty straightforward. They asked if we would mind playing the game there. Pat asked me before, I said I had no problem playing there. So it's their home game, so they kind of play where they want it.

**Q. What does this game mean to you on a personal level?**

FRAN McCAFFERY: I have a lot of family and friends there, grew up with that place being a big part of my life. I had an opportunity -- that was our home arena. My college coach is going to be there. A lot of those types of things. But I'm pretty good at kind of separating that from the task at hand. It's a big game on our schedule. It's a ranked opponent, a team I have a lot of respect for. They're playing extremely well. My responsibility is just to make sure we go there and play well.

**Q. Do you think this gives Penn State a bigger home-court advantage, the atmosphere and everything, as opposed to its regular court?**

FRAN McCAFFERY: I will say this: I don't think so. I think they're just playing at a very high level, and they have always played well at home. You look at all the games and some of the big wins they've had, they've played really well in their home arena. They do have six guys on their team from Philadelphia. The game will be sold out. It will be very loud in there. The atmosphere will be spectacular.

But I'm more concerned about the quality of our opponent and how well they're playing than the fact that the game may or may not be more beneficial one way or the other. The bottom line is they're going to have a ton of people there. We're going to have some people there, too.

**Q. They've got some two really accomplished big guys, Stevens and Watkins. Does that change your four-guard lineup philosophy? How do you think that'll change things?**

FRAN McCAFFERY: It could at times, depending on a

variety of factors. The thing about Lamar, he's their 4 man but he's a guard, and I think when he plays at the next level, he'll play in the backcourt. He's a driver, he's a play maker, has tremendous athletic power. Watkins is as you would expect, playing at a very high level being a senior. He's consistently putting up numbers.

But I think the rest of their roster is really what's also been very impressive. They're shooting the ball well. They've got a couple transfers. They've got two young kids. Myreon Jones and Myles Dread have really stepped up. They were good last year, but those guys have stepped up. So they've got depth. Harrar is now a junior. He's backing up Watkins at a very high level. Really good recruit in Seth Lundy who doesn't play like a freshman.

So they've got a solid roster of pieces that complement each other really well.

**Q. How has Jones changed their dynamic this year?**

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, he's really playing extremely well. He's shooting well over 40 percent from three. He's made over 30. But he's their backup 1. He goes off the dribble, hits floaters, hits big shots, tough shots in key situations. I think it's really critical as you look at that team, especially because you know what you're going to get from Stevens and Watkins, but then you've got Myreon Jones doing what he's doing, Dread doing what he's doing, Curtis Jones, Brockington, and then the guy that's sort of the engine that makes them go, the point guard Wheeler, who's really good in particular at the defensive end of the floor. But he pushes the ball, and they're playing at a very fast pace.

**Q. Most of us have never been to the Palestra. What's it like? What was it like for you? What striking memories do you have of having been there for the years you were there?**

FRAN McCAFFERY: You know, my memories are a little bit different because it starts with my mom and dad bringing myself and my brother to games when we were kids, like young. You want to sit up in the student section, you want to watch the games, you want to throw streamers, watch the really good players, maybe get to meet them, something like that.

And then as a high school player, you want to get your

team to the Palestra. Here it's kind of we want to get to the state tournament. We want to get to Wells Fargo Arena. There you want to get to the Palestra. That's where you want to go. So I had the opportunity to do that.

Then you hope to be recruited by one of those five teams so you get to play there. Well, I got recruited by the one that that's our home arena, so we practiced there every day and played pickup there in the summer, that kind of thing.

So, there's so many incredible memories. I've seen great high school games there, great players after I became a coach. I saw Kobe Bryant play there, Wilt Chamberlain has played there, Sixers would play there back in the old days.

But the thing that was really special about it is throughout the '60s, '70s and '80s, there were always doubleheaders, so you went and you stayed there for six, seven hours, and you watched four teams play, and nobody left. It wasn't like, okay, I'm rooting for Villanova, they play in the first game so I'm going to dinner while Penn plays South Carolina. It wasn't like that. Everybody stayed, watched both games. There was actually a TV package, before cable, you could actually watch those games on those old UHF stations. So if you grew up in Philadelphia, you watched all the games, you knew all the players, you knew all the coaches. Chuck Daly was coaching at Penn. He was Dream Team coach, the first one. Rollie Massimino won the National Championship. Harry Litwack and John Chaney are in the Hall of Fame. Paul Westhead revolutionized how to play fast while he was at LaSalle. Jack Ramsay is in the Hall of Fame. Jack McKinney ended up coaching the Lakers. Jimmy Lynam was a head coach in the NBA for many years after coaching at St. Joe's. Bob Weinhauer took us to the Final Four; he will be at the game. He was my coach; he'll be at the game on Saturday. Because ironically enough, at 7 p.m., Penn plays Princeton in the Palestra. So 9,000 people will leave, 9,000 more will come in and watch that game.

So it was a very -- and remains a very close-knit basketball community in Philadelphia that would convene every Saturday night at the Palestra, but oftentimes on Tuesday or Wednesday during the week, they also played double-headers during the week.

**Q. How do you think that Philadelphia basketball which you grew up on, lived on, has influenced the rest of your entire coaching career?**

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, you could argue that it's influenced the coaching profession, when you think about all the guys -- I just gave you a litany of Hall-of-Famers, so it's different styles of play. So it definitely

impacted me as a player, as a coach. Pretty much all of us remain close at some level. We all know each other, whether it be Jay Wright, known him for 30 years, and the guys that are there now, Pat Chambers, of course, I've known him since he was an assistant at Villanova.

But it's something that -- if you're talking about -- let's say you were at the Final Four and you're talking to basketball people. They will refer to all of those people that I just mentioned, myself included: Well, he's a Philly guy. So everybody understands what that means. He played or coached in Philadelphia, and he was influenced by watching -- when I'm watching Paul Westhead score 107 points a game before the clock and before the three-point shot. They were trying to score in four seconds, and nobody did that before.

Jack Kraft played a match-up zone. Nobody played a match-up zone in those days. Things like that.

John Chaney and Don Casey was the temple of zones. He replaced Harry Litwack and then went on to coach the Clippers, and Chaney replaced him. They played the zone kind of better and differently than most other teams.

Penn had its run with Dick Carter and Chuck Daly and Bob Weinhauer winning multiple Ivy League championships, NCAA Tournament runs. In '79 we went to the Final Four, which was the last time an Ivy League team did that, and it may never happen again.

**Q. How about being able to kind of share in this familial experience with Connor and Patrick on the team?**

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, I think it's one of the things that excited me about the opportunity. I had to make sure it was in the best interest of our program, but like I said, it's Penn State's home game. They can choose to play it wherever they want to, and we'll show up. But I took them there a few years ago, and we toured the Palestra and we toured the campus, so we've been there a few times. They've not seen a game there, so that'll be new.

But just to be on that court with Connor playing, in particular. Patrick will be on the bench. Pretty much all of my relatives will be there, as well.

**Q. Have the first 13 games gone as you expected them to in the preseason?**

FRAN McCAFFERY: Never does, no. You play them all and you hope to win them all and you hope to get better. You have times when you're really putting it together, times where you don't play as well, injuries that you didn't see coming. You've just got to keep grinding.

**Q. Where do you think most of the credit goes to for the offensive efficiency ranking you guys have had?**

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, it's the character of the players, their understanding and willingness to share the ball. And recognizing, okay, Luka is playing at a high level, Joe is shooting the ball extremely well, CJ is playing at a very high level, let's get those guys shots. When Bohannon was playing, he was terrific. Connor has been great playing both spots, Toussaint has really grown, Bakari Evelyn is playing well. Ryan Kriener is a guy that's had a spectacular year so far and it'll get even better as the season goes on.

**Q. You talked about the injuries; are you having to manage practice with less bodies?**

FRAN McCAFFERY: Yeah, we have to be careful how long we go, how hard we go because there's days where you just kind of want a little more physicality, and you have to be careful because we're pretty much down to where we really don't need another guy going down. Even Austin Ash is out; he's got mono so he's not practicing. He's a big part of what we're doing because he's smart, he's been around, and he's also a pretty good player and a guy that I would consider putting in the game. Even though he's a walk-on, he doesn't play like a walk-on. He's a really good shooter, but he's out for another week or two probably.

**Q. When you look at teams that have lost a starting forward to an ACL or back or a guy to hip surgery in Patrick, a lot of teams may take a stumble. Your team seems to have galvanized and showed a lot of mental toughness over the course of the season. Is there any kind of explanation that you can see for that?**

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, I think a couple things. Getting Cordell back was big. He's a senior. Bakari Evelyn, even though he's new, is a grad transfer, and I think those guys are mature enough, along with Ryan Kriener, and Connor's ability to switch positions, to recognize this is opportunity. So it's, okay, we feel bad for Jack, we feel bad for J-Bo and Patrick, but this is opportunity. It's I came here to play at a high level, I wanted to be on a good team. Well, I'm going to get a chance to play, and I have to compete and prepare the right way, know and understand philosophically how we want to play and have complete buy-in, so I think from that standpoint, to a man, we've got complete buy-in on everything that we try to do.

Obviously every game plan doesn't work to perfection, but I can assure you that every one of these guys does everything they can to execute to perfection what we lay out there, and then if we make adjustments throughout the course of the game, they do their best to do that. But they're smart and they're together, and

there's a real genuine love and respect for each other, so therefore they're able to step up. But we all know that these next 18 will really challenge that in a big way.

**Q. Have you seen any kind of difference in Joe Toussaint from preseason or early season to where he is now in terms of the way he practices, goes about his business as young as he is?**

FRAN McCAFFERY: I wouldn't say how he practices. He brings it every day. He's an incredibly hard worker. But you're watching a guy who is gaining experience in every practice and every game, so he's obviously further along in the process now than he was at the beginning of the year.

I was impressed with how he came back. He was really good until the Cincinnati game, then he got in foul trouble and he didn't get the opportunity to come back in and get it straightened out because Bakari played so well, we ran out of time. So he didn't hang his head, just kept grinding, came back, had three great workouts, had a terrific game the other day.

Bigger challenge now against a veteran guard on the road in a hostile environment. Another step in terms of his progress, and I think he's mentally tough enough to handle it.

**Q. Is this one of the most challenging years you've had as a coach so far with all that's happened?**

FRAN McCAFFERY: Yeah, one of them. I've been doing it a while. We've had some others that were incredibly challenging in ways like that but also other ways. Every team is different, whether you're young or old or you have injuries or you have one guy who's a problem. There's always challenges.

The thing that I will say about this team is there's just no issues in terms of off-the-court things that you have to deal with. Guys kind of take care of their business, a very professional businesslike approach to what they're doing, which makes our job as coaches a lot easier.