

University of Iowa Basketball Media Conference

Friday, March 1, 2019

Fran McCaffery Men's Basketball



Q. Did Dolph take you up on your offer? Are you guys going to watch the game together tomorrow?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Yeah, we are. We're watching it together in my office. I called him before both press conferences on Wednesday and recommended that idea to him. He was all in. We finalized it yesterday.

Q. What do you think that will be like for you guys?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, it's interesting because, for some reason there's a narrative that we don't like each other, and that's just not true. It's unfair to him. It's unfair to me. I worked with the guy for nine years. At some point, you have a disagreement. These are some minor issues, when you work with somebody, you might want to be different, but I get along fine with Dolph. I'm sure we'll enjoy watching the game together. It's something we don't typically get to do.

Q. The suspension, other than not coaching in the game itself, is there anything else that you're restricted?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Not really, no. I won't be there right before the game, like right before they go out on the court. But I'm running practice right now.

Q. What about halftime?

FRAN McCAFFERY: No halftime, no.

Q. What's the dynamic like? I know Andrew will be kind of a lead guy tomorrow and Kirk on Thursday. What changes, or kind of what's the chain of command?

FRAN McCAFFERY: The guy that has the scout has a lot to say anyway. So we're going through some things right now that, in practice, that he would be doing himself anyway. So they're used to hearing that voice in that game, before that game. They've watched a million tapes on that particular team. In both cases, they had them in the past. The coaches are the same for the last couple of years.

Q. Speaking for myself, I hadn't realized Andrew was a head coach until you mentioned it yesterday that they've all been head coaches. What was his head coaching experience like?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I forget where it was. It was only

for a short period of time. I forget, but I know he was.

Q. Andrew has been with you the whole time. How did you kind of come to put him on your staff at Siena and bringing him here?

FRAN McCAFFERY: At Siena, I had an opening, and I got a call from Jay Wright because he was on the Villanova staff. Jay had watched him, as a young coach at camp, and said, I think you have a chance to be really good in this business. If you really want to get into it as your full-time job and as your career, and he said absolutely. So he got a chance to work with Jay. Ed Pinckney was there at the time. He had some really good opportunity to have great mentors.

Jay basically said, you don't need to talk to anybody else. This is your guy. He just needed to get out on the road. He was a young guy who was on staff, but he wasn't on the road. He wasn't a recruiter yet. So somebody had to put him on the road. So I brought him to Siena and did that. He was terrific, and he was the first guy I hired when I got this job.

I was lucky, Jerry Strom was here, director of operations for many years, and I knew Jerry well. So I had somebody kind of in the office, and Shelly has been there forever. So we had the office manned. We had to get two guys to get on the road and run practice and so forth.

We always remember that we didn't have a lot of guys in those days. We only had four the first practice we went to. We just had to put a team together and try to figure out are we going to go try to sign some guys that are available, or are we going to lock in to the younger players and look down the road? We were lucky, we got a really good player in Bryce Cartwright and Basabe came with us, and we re-recruited McCabe, Marble. That was critical. Then, okay, we had a team that we could compete with and then lock in to the next couple of classes, which ultimately was Woodbury, Gesell, Clemmons, and White.

Q. You've spoken so many times over the last four years about Nicholas. How would you summarize his five years as he reaches the final home game?

FRAN McCAFFERY: We're lucky, that in many ways, I think he red-shirted that first year so he could be so good in his fifth year, which is obviously always the

hope. I think he's been tremendous, in particular this year, for this team. But he has been that the whole time he's been here. His work ethic is unparalleled. His character, his demeanor in the locker room, his influence and love of his teammates and respect for the game. The guy's every coach's dream to have somebody that embodies all those qualities, but also is a really good player. He's a really good player.

I remember earlier in the year someone asked me a question about he's an intangibles guy, and I kind of got insulted. Yeah, he does the intangibles, but he's a really good basketball player. He can dribble, pass, and shoot. He can rebound. He can run. He defends. He's smart, he's always in the right place. That's why he's on scholarship.

Q. How much has he transformed his game? You go back and look today, and he shot one three-pointer as a high school senior?

FRAN McCAFFERY: You're right. He was a high school center. When you watched him in high school -- I mean, I was at the game we always talk about, the semifinals in the state tournament. He was posting up, -up and under moves, jump hooks off either shoulder, offensive rebound, put-backs. He scored around the basket, and we didn't know if that would develop or not. You could tell that he had the length and the athleticism to do that. Sometimes you're just not asked to do that at the high school level. He was their tallest kid. He was really good at scoring the ball inside, and that's how they utilized him.

So now he comes to our system, and we're letting him run out on the break and dribble it and drive it. Now, to his credit, he really worked on it, in particular, three-point shooting. He watched us play as sort of a student of the game that first year. Yeah, he was at practice. Yes, he's in the weight room. And we talked to him and said, you know, you really want to make an impact, help us stretch the floor with your ability to step out and make shots. And he really worked at it and developed really good confidence in it and has been a really good shooter for us and many times in very critical situations.

Q. How difficult has it been to transition from being the inside player to being so versatile?

FRAN McCAFFERY: It's a lot harder than you think. It's a function of your athletic ability and your size and strength, but your willingness to put the time in. I mean, he could always shoot. Pretty good free-throw shooter in high school. So if you have a pretty good free-throw stroke, you can typically shoot outside. That's 15 feet. So I think just the extra few feet at the three-point line for him was a little bit different and just had to work on it. Probably shot a thousand a day, and that's how you get there.

Q. I know you don't like to call him a walk-on anymore. That's way in the past. But he did come here as a walk-on. How many have you had like that where you have kids that started as a walk-on because, if you look at Iowa's record, there's hardly any in the media guide that came as a walk-on who did what he did.

FRAN McCAFFERY: We had a guy at Notre Dame, Pete Miller, who did that. He was kind of an undersized, like a 6'3" forward at the school literally right across the street from Notre Dame, the high school. We invited him to walk on. He was thrilled, didn't have any options, and ended up starting for us at the two guard position for two years. Here's a guy that I remember nobody wanted him, and I look out on the floor, and he's guarding Ray Allen. So it was a pretty big jump for Pete.

Ironically now, he's the faculty rep for Wisconsin. So I see him at the Big Ten meetings. There are some out there. Darius Stokes played for us. He was a good walk-on. He was my first. I went up to see Marcus Paige. I saw Darius. I said, Darius, what are you doing? He said nothing. I said, well, you need to be a Hawk. He was thrilled and ultimately was a starter at Fairleigh Dickinson as a grad transfer. So I was thrilled for him there.

So I had some walk-ons that played, but Pete's the only one I remember that ended up starting at the BCS level.

Q. It's rare, what Nicholas has done.

FRAN McCAFFERY: It's incredibly rare, yes. It's rare at this level.

Q. Has what he done changed your level of thinking? Do you look more at walk-ons now?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I do. We've got Austin Ash. He's an incredible shot maker, but he's a skinny kid. He comes in, and we redshirted him and will continue to do that because there are those players especially in the state of Iowa.

Q. You mentioned Notre Dame, but how much has Nicholas meant to your career? It felt like more than just on the court. Could you elaborate more of what he meant to you?

FRAN McCAFFERY: He was right in the middle of a great run for our program in so many ways. When you talk about culture, that's what he is. We have an expectation of how you're going to work, how you're going to prepare, how you're going to conduct yourself off the floor, what kind of student are you going to be? There's no better representative of our program, and we've had a bunch. You go right down the line.

I mentioned a bunch a minute ago -- White, Clemmons, Gesell, Woodbury, Uthoff, all those guys, Marble, McCabe. They were all really good players, and so is Nicholas. They just sort of follow the lead of those guys and set a standard of what's expected when you go through a scouting report and you go on the road, and you're trying to compete and stay together in a difficult environment, and he's always been able to perform well under pressure.

Q. It's hard to think of a player under you that's had any even minor transgressions. Is that the culture you're talking about with Nicholas?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Yeah, we really pride ourselves on that and who we bring in. It's really hard anymore with -- we talk about the pressures that they're under and how they're just absolutely scrutinized in social media and criticized or applauded. So everything we do is very public, and we were all that age at one time. You're gaining some independence, and you go away to college, and it's a lot of opportunities to kind of do what you want to do.

What I want to be able to do is to put my head on the pillow and know they're going to be doing what they're supposed to do. I'm not getting a call at 4:00 in the morning, come get Nicholas. He's downtown. He's in trouble. No, I'm not getting that call, and I know that. And same with those other guys that I just mentioned and anybody else on our team.

Q. When times get tough, last season, just the transition between last season and this season, a lot of rumors going around with various things, how much was Nicholas' leadership important to really turning it around?

FRAN McCAFFERY: It's interesting. You kind of throw out there a lot of rumors. Rumors -- I don't know what they are. That's not reality. I remember some of the stuff that was being said, and I'm laughing to myself, like that's the farthest thing in the world that is actually going to possibly happen right now. No, that's not what's going to happen. And I don't know how that happens, but it happens, and we deal with it.

Nicholas was a voice in the locker room last year, and he's a voice in the locker room this year. If he speaks up, everybody will listen to what he has to say because he has the utmost respect of every coach, every manager, every player in that locker room.

Q. Sometimes on Senior Day, you put the kid in there to start even if he's not a starter, but it almost seems appropriate for Nicholas to come off the bench.

FRAN McCAFFERY: Yeah, we'll leave him right where

he is. Just do what you do, my man. And you know what, he's thrilled to do it. A lot of times he's on the floor at the end of the game.

Q. It looks like he literally plays himself to exhaustion before you take him out.

FRAN McCAFFERY: He does. He does. My staff are like, okay, we've got to go get him. Sometimes as a head coach, you're saying to yourself, I don't want to go get him. He's playing great. He just made five plays in a row that impacted the game in a way that very few people could impact the game. Blocked shot, a steal, a run-out, a post feed, a three, gets fouled, and just doing intelligent things when you need your team to do intelligent things.

So when you see him make mistakes, it typically is a result of fatigue. He doesn't get back. He doesn't get over. He'll be kind of hunched over, and you'll get him. He recovers pretty quickly. So I can get him back in there.