

NCAA Men's Basketball Championship: Second Round - Oregon vs Iowa

Monday, March 22, 2021

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Bankers Life Fieldhouse

Iowa Hawkeyes

Coach Fran McCaffery

Postgame Media Conference

Oregon 95, Iowa 80

FRAN MCCAFFERY: I just want to begin by congratulating Dana and Oregon for a well-played game. We congratulate them as they move forward. I want to say how proud I am of our guys for the way they fought today and the way they fought all year long.

I also just want to say that if anybody is wondering why I didn't go back with Connor and CJ, neither of them are healthy, and I didn't want to put them back in there. That's why I left them out the whole second half. They've been gutting it all out year, both of them, with injuries, and really proud of them both. We'll get them healthy in the off-season.

Q. Fran, what can you say about the legacy Luka Garza has left behind? He comes out today and puts up nearly half your points. He was the ultimate competitor up until the last moment of taking him out.

FRAN MCCAFFERY: Yeah, the only thing I can say is I have been truly blessed to have had the opportunity to have Luka be on our basketball team for the last four years. His leadership, his work ethic, his determination, his example for the young players, his consistency of effort and performance -- we may never see another one like him. Certainly we've had some great ones that have worn the black and gold, and he's right there at the top with his production, and like I said, his consistency.

I think that's the legacy that he will leave, and that's why I think everybody in Hawkeye Nation just so appreciates who he is.

I think that's the message that I have. I just told him I just appreciate so much who he is more so than what he's done. It's been an honor.



Q. Fran, obviously you haven't seen a team like that all year I wouldn't think. How difficult were they to match up with on the perimeter?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: Yeah, anybody can bring it. Anybody can go. Everybody makes threes. They spread you out. It's a hard team to cover in so many different ways.

They stretch your defense. We tried man, zone, we tried pressing them, had moderate success with all three, not enough in any one.

Q. Can you just paint a picture of what the emotions are like in the locker room, not only for the players but for yourself?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: Yeah, it was incredibly emotional, as it always is when your season comes to an end. This team and every other team this year has had to experience something totally and completely unique in the history of college basketball. And I've said this before but I'll say it again, how proud I am of their commitment to one another and their sacrifice to get here.

It's been an incredible journey with this group of young men. A lot of people telling each other how much they love them. I certainly did. And how proud I am of them. But also we had two seniors that literally rewrote the record book at the University of Iowa, which is quite a statement.

I talked for a while, was real emotional. It's always emotional for everybody, in particular for me when I think about specifically Patrick's journey. Seven years ago he had surgery for a cancerous tumor, and the other night I put him in on his birthday, and he was terrific in both games here. So that's emotional.

You always feel a little bit empty when your team loses and you're eliminated, but I tried to stress the incredible amount of positive things that happened, the great things we accomplished this year, the great things we have accomplished as a unit over the last two years, and I wanted them to know how much I appreciate them, how



proud I am of them and how much I love them.

Q. This question kind of piggybacks off what you were just talking about. Once you have some time to look back on this season and reflect, how do you want to remember everything that took place this season?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: Obviously for me, it'll be incredibly positive, how we persevered. We've had a number of injuries, we lost four out of five at one point, but we just kept grinding and we stayed together. And that's what you -- as a coach, that's what you want your players to strive to do. And I was really impressed with how they did that, accomplished a lot of great things, and celebrated two of the best players ever to wear that jersey.

Q. I know as well as anybody that now is not really a time for looking ahead, but what's the state of your program right now?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: I think we have a really good core of young guys who experienced what it's like to have winning people in your program and how to prepare and how to compete, so I'm really excited for the future.

Q. You mentioned it before just a little bit about all the things that the team has gone through, really many of the teams around the country. Does that add to the pain at all of -- the players have put maybe even more into getting to this point than in a normal season. Does that maybe make the pain a little sharper when you maybe fall short of where you wanted to go?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: Yeah, obviously this has been an experience none of us have ever dealt with before. It's been difficult from the beginning, the uncertainty as to whether we would come back and play, whether we'd have a season, whether we'd play only conference games, would there be a tournament, would there be a Big Ten Tournament. Just so proud of all the folks that made that happen, but most importantly the players themselves, all of whom, not just the ones in our program, made so many sacrifices to get here.

So I think the important thing is to appreciate what you've done, and that's what we're going to do.

Q. Could you elaborate on -- it's not an excuse, obviously, but elaborate on the injuries to Connor and CJ and Joe going down there, too, how hurt were these guys playing down the stretch?

FRAN MCCAFFERY: Well, I was really impressed with Wiesy's ability to come back. He tweaked it. It's the same one he hurt in the Wisconsin game, so he went to the back

and kind of ran it off and met with our doctor and our trainer, and they felt like he could go.

CJ is in pain. Now, he gutted through it for the better part of the games when he came back, and he was really good in some of them, but he hasn't been himself half the season. I'm just so proud of that kid for how he fought through and how he helped our team, particularly on the defensive end. I remember his defensive performance on Duane Washington against Ohio State when we won there. He just sacrificed and did what he had to do to help us win.

Connor has torn labrums in both hips, so he will have surgery forthcoming, actually two surgeries. They do one, then they do the other one. He's been struggling all year long with that but has consistently given us quality minutes and veteran leadership, and that was important for this team. So we'll get those guys healthy and well in the summer.

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Q. Luka, how do you sum up kind of the emotions of walking off the court today?

LUKA GARZA: You know, it's heartbreaking. It's so surreal that it kind of just all hit me at once that this is the last time that I'll put on this jersey. That hurts a lot.

I just feel bad that I wasn't able to lead this team to where it needs to go, and we did a lot of really, really good things this year, and it just hurts that we weren't able to do it when it mattered most, and that's something that's going to haunt me forever.

But I've been so blessed and so lucky to be able to play here at the University of Iowa, and it changed my life. I really truly -- I did everything I could, and those guys in the locker room did everything they could, and we worked so hard.

When I came here my freshman year, we were 14-19. We were one of the worst teams in the Big Ten. We were the laughingstock. Teams were coming into our building and beating us by 30. There was no postseason for us. There was no March Madness. We would have made it three times after that, and obviously one year we got cut short, and the two years that we did have, we were just -- couldn't make it past the second round.

It's incredibly heartbreaking, but I love those guys in that locker room. I love my coaches. Everybody in there really changed my life, and I did everything I could.

Q. Luka, can you maybe describe for us the challenge of defending these guys? Looked like 1 through 5 they had really, really elite athletes. I don't think you've seen a team quite like that this year.

LUKA GARZA: You know, honestly, I don't think we have, either. It was different. They have a bunch of smaller guys who can -- they try to speed the game up really fast, and we can play that fast, and obviously we showed that our offense had no problem today, we were able to score whenever we wanted to, but they pushed the pace really fast and made it hard for us to be able to get back and rotate and do all the things we needed to do to be able to get stops consistently throughout the game.

And obviously that's what led to us not being able to win this game, is just we weren't able to get the stops necessary to do so. That's unfortunate, but credit to them; they really moved the ball around well. And we knew they were a good offensive team, but they played really, really good. And they had a really good game plan, and they tried to move the ball as much as they could. And Richardson did a great job getting to the paint, and obviously Figueroa is a really good shooter, he was able to get some clean looks and knock them down.

Against a team like that, you've got to be able to get your defense back and set in the transition game, and they beat us in the transition game. That sucks. We had some looks that we couldn't knock down in the first half, but it was honestly -- we could score on them every single time, and we had a lot of good offensive possessions, but that doesn't matter when you're trying to win a game like this.

Q. What's the toughest part about all this for you? Is it that presumably this is your last game as a Hawkeye, that it was the last game with this group of guys, that it was before you expected to be out? What made it so difficult when you walked off the court there?

LUKA GARZA: You know, I just -- I really wanted to take this team and lead this team to where we could be. I felt like this was a team where our season wasn't supposed to be over today. That's upsetting to me because I just -- everybody in that locker room worked so hard to be able to get back to this moment, and it's upsetting that we couldn't be able to excel and win the game. That's obviously the most upsetting thing.



It's just -- obviously I love the University of Iowa. I love my teammates. I love my coaches. These guys changed my life, and I worked as hard as I could, and I played as hard as I could, and obviously it just hurts that it's over.

For me, it's added motivation to be able to do great things in the future. Obviously it won't be as a basketball player here at the University of Iowa, but I'm going to do whatever I can to push myself to success in the future, and I just feel heartbroken that I couldn't -- with all the work that I did, I couldn't lead this team to where it needed to go, and that's something that's going to haunt me for the rest of my life. It's just upsetting to me.

Q. I know it's been an emotional press conference thus far, but can you give us your thoughts as you got the call to come out of the game for the last time and started hugging everybody? I think you got about everyone.

LUKA GARZA: Yeah, it just kind of all hit me at once, just obviously looking up at the scoreboard and knowing that I would never put on this jersey again. I think it just all hit me at once. I was trying to tell those guys, the next time that they get back there, back here, they're going to be able to push us to where we need to go. I couldn't do it, but they can, and they're all a bunch of hard workers and they're going to be able to do it.

I'm just so thankful and so grateful to have played here at the University of Iowa. I was ranked No. 100 in my class. A lot of teams stayed away, and they didn't want to recruit me. I was too slow, everything you could imagine, couldn't jump, he's not going to be able to score at the next level, all of this. And Coach McCaffery saw right through that, and guys like Connor McCaffery, Joe Wieskamp, who I never knew before I got to Iowa, they saw me as a player who could come in and help this team and help this program.

I worked hard to be able to do that to the best of my ability. Like I said, when I came in here, we were 14-19. We were one of the worst teams in the Big Ten. Our season was over March 1st, the second day of the Big Ten Tournament. To come from there to here with obviously a lot of the same -- like some of the same players, me and Jordan Bohannon, Connor McCaffery, Austin Ash, Michael Baer, a ton of guys, when you talk everybody who was there then, Tyler Cook, Nicholas Baer, everybody, and then Joe Wieskamp stepping in our sophomore year and us being able to get back to the NCAA Tournament and be that close to a Sweet 16 and to come here again, obviously we would have made it last year, and then to come here again and fall short again and not being able to get to the Sweet 16 and beyond, that's heartbreaking.

The one thing I know is that I couldn't have played any harder. I couldn't have worked any harder. I put everything I could into this, and it just wasn't meant to be. Like I said, that's something that's going to sting for the rest of my life because I won't ever have another opportunity at it.

Obviously I had that in my whole mind every single time I've been on the court as an Iowa Hawkeye; that there's always another game until it's your last. It's just upsetting.

I'm so proud of this team, what we were able to do, and we did so many great things, so many great wins. Got 14 wins in the best conference in America, and obviously we've had a lot of really good teams in the Big Ten, to be able to win at Ohio State, the No. 4 team in the country, to be in a game against Gonzaga who was No. 1 versus No. 3. If you would have asked me my freshman year at the end if we would have in a game that we were No. 3 in the country, I would have told you you were crazy.

There's a lot of things that we did over my time here that I'm proud of as a team, and I'm excited for the future of this program. Fran McCaffery, he's changed my life, and he's changed so many people's lives, and he's the coach to do it. I just unfortunately couldn't lead us out on the court.

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