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An interview with:

COACH FRAN McCAFFERY

Q. Northwestern seems to be on a surge. What have you seen out of them the last couple of weeks?

COACH McCAFFERY: Well, I think Demps is playing really well. He's made a difference, I think. It changes the dynamic of their team because it gives them another driver, another scorer, another guy that can go get his own shot. It makes them quicker.

I think Hearn has really stepped his game up. I've been really impressed with him.

Olah, they're using him more, he's doing more things. He's coming around. He's young. Early in the year he was finding his way. Now he's been through it, he's playing a lot better.

I think to a man, Swopshire, it takes a little bit of time to learn this offense, and as the season went on, now he's got it. He's really playing well.

So, I mean, they've got a good team. They make threes. They make plays. They guard you. It's always a tough game when you play them.

Q. Last time you held them to 15 points in the first half. Did you pull some of that tape to show the guys?

COACH McCAFFERY: That's about as well as we played defensively against anybody. So we're going to need another effort like that.

Q. Do you have to say anything to the team to remind them?

COACH McCAFFERY: We're going to tell them what they need to do. I wouldn't think we'd have to say anything special. They're going to watch and look at how they played against Purdue, for example. They played as well against them as

any team I've seen all year long in that game. They played well against a lot of other people.

They beat Baylor on the road. I mean, this is a team that can score. They've got enough experience and enough weapons to beat anybody in our league.

Q. Devyn struggled the last couple games. Have you thought about making any changes?

COACH McCAFFERY: No.

Q. Your team has been through a tough road trip. Where do you think they are mentally after those two games? Is this a test of their mental toughness going into the next game?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think they're probably about where you'd think they'd be. They know we're playing well. They know that we're playing with great competitive instincts. We're making a lot of really good plays. We're making some mistakes. We're not executing at times. We've got different people stepping up. We're not shooting the ball that well. So that's a problem.

If you battle, you can stay in games when you're not shooting it well. If you're not shooting it well and you soften up, then you're going to get drilled. They're showing a lot of fight in that respect.

Now we just have to be able to play better in the last couple minutes. Say what you want, I mean, the shot that goes in, hits the rim three times, and the shot that Austin hit, at some point you have to give the other team credit, they're making some plays, we're in their face.

Q. Has this team made progress in the mental toughness area?

COACH McCAFFERY: No question, yes.

Q. In the Michigan State game --

COACH McCAFFERY: We were not tough at the end with our execution, but it's a 40-minute game. There's a reason why we were up three with a minute to go. There's a reason why we were tied with 40 seconds to go. We're still right there against one of the top 10 teams in the country. We're not far.

Q. Going back to Devyn, you said you thought he was being tentative.

COACH McCAFFERY: I didn't think he was tentative at all against Wisconsin. He's usually not tentative. He was a little bit tentative, I thought, against Minnesota, but he was not tentative against Wisconsin at all.

Q. What about during practices throughout the week?

COACH McCAFFERY: He's always good there.

Q. This team has gotten up off the mat time after time. Even the other night, kept putting it together. How often can you keep doing that and not get that carrot at the end of the game?

COACH McCAFFERY: I don't know. We just got to keep fighting and go to the next game and try to beat that team.

You can't look five games down the road and say, Boy, I hope something good happens. You got to make something good happen on Saturday.

Q. In the last few minutes of those games, have you noticed your team pressing a little bit?

COACH McCAFFERY: No, not at all. When Marble made the drive against Purdue, he made that shot eight times out of ten typically. He made the same drive in overtime. We were down two. He missed it. He normally would make it.

Aaron White misses two free throws, we're down two. What happened before, the reason he got the two free throws was because we ran transition to perfection and got right to the rim, had a chance to score right on top of them, which is exactly what you want your team to do. He just happened to miss two free throws.

You go game-by-game. Oglesby, he's going to make that shot most of the time, execute to perfection, the shot was halfway down.

The reason I was upset in the Michigan State game was we didn't execute like I just described and we lost. That's when you get upset and disappointed as a staff, as a team, as an individual.

Nobody felt worse than Mike when he turned the ball over in that situation. But he hasn't done that since then. He made a turnover the other night, but that was a different kind of play. He thought Eric was going to cut to the basket when he drove it and drew the defense. Eric stepped back. He thought Eric was going to step up. That's different than the mistake he made in the Michigan State game.

Q. Against Minnesota and against Wisconsin, finishing the game has definitely been a thing. Is it more execution? Is the youth starting to show?

COACH McCAFFERY: No, youth's not a problem. I think what you're doing is you're on the road playing against two really good teams.

Q. You talked about Josh getting more minutes. He made some more shots. Seems to be more comfortable out there.

COACH McCAFFERY: You're absolutely right. That's a fine line. When he's out there, then Marble is not. We got to get Marble going. He's not going to get going if he's sitting on the bench.

I'm trying to juggle Marble, Oglesby, Clemmons, Gesell. Sometimes I move Eric May back there. I have the luxury to move him up and back. Same thing with Marble. Our big lineup has been playing well, McCabe has been playing well, Basabe was playing well. I thought Woodbury was terrific in the last game.

You're trying to get minutes for everybody and find a team that's clicking. We found a team that was clicking offensively in the last game. Fine line then is when you're in a tight game, it's right down to the wire, then we tired a little bit.

So if I go back, I say I probably should have subbed a little bit more to get some fresher bodies out there to keep the break going, keep maybe better defensive pressure on the floor.

But then again, we had trouble scoring, so I left my team out there that was making baskets. In that case, it was Oglesby, May, McCabe in particular, Gesell. That's what we're tinkering with.

Q. Last year Matt closed a lot of games for you. Is that what you are looking for, one player? Does it need to be one?

COACH McCAFFERY: It's nice if it's one. If you have more than one, that's also nice. Sometimes to have that one guy that you know, because what will happen is a lot of times you'll get something as a by-product of everyone paying attention to that guy. In Matt's case, he was able to come through for us, make a lot of late-game shots.

But it affects everybody else. When you have a guy like that, especially when you come out of a timeout, there's 12 seconds to go, everybody is going to run at him, run to him, trap him, double him, face guard him, which gives everybody else more space to make a play.

In our case, I mean, it's nice because you don't really know where we're going to go. We have a number of different options. We just need somebody to go ahead and make a basket in that situation.

I thought Josh had it. We've had a number of opportunities. I thought Whitey's steal was a game-winning play. Whitey's steal at Minnesota was a game-winning play. Mike gets hammered on the take-away, we miss two tip-ins. That was frustrating.

Q. Northwestern typically with its 1-3-1 has been difficult to deal with in the past. Do you sense it's more about control and discipline from your ball handlers?

COACH McCAFFERY: It's a lot of things. It's spacing, it's who's on the floor, where are they, who is making plays, who's getting tentative, who's not. Ultimately you've got to make a shot. A lot of times it's from the perimeter. Any team that's in the zone, a lot of times you end up with a perimeter shot.

We've done a pretty good job, certainly did a good job the last time we played them. The time before we had good stretches and bad. We've seen it enough. The guys on the floor, they've seen it, they know how they do it. Hopefully we'll do a good job against it.

Q. Northwestern isn't a great rebounding team. Is that an area where you see you can have some success, get the transition going?

COACH McCAFFERY: Yeah, a lot of that is philosophical. They get their defense back. You're not going to get a ton of offensive rebounds

when you're playing three guards and you're not sending everybody to the glass. You play Minnesota, they're sending four. Northwestern's not going to do that. You want to get out and run. But they typically get their teams back.

Q. You mentioned scoring baskets with Northwestern. They seem to like to hold the ball a little bit longer, live and die by the three. How important is it you make sure to get up on them?

COACH McCAFFERY: They're going to keep you on defense. But we went against that the other night. Wisconsin does the same thing. They only have 35 seconds.

What you don't want to do is give up a lot of offensive rebounding. You have to guard it again for another 35. They'll get some, even though they don't send four. They're very smart with how they do it and they're quick.

A lot of times they're spread at the lines, so the guys are running in from the line. That will be an important part of the game.

Q. How do you impart perspective to a group of 18- and 22-year-olds who play these teams and seems like they cannot catch a break?

COACH McCAFFERY: I think that's a good point. It seems like the ball has not bounced our way a couple times.

I will say this. I think they have really good perspective. I've been impressed with how they've approached practice, the things they've said to one another, the things they've said to us, the things they've said to you guys.

Sometimes you get the feeling they're just saying what they're supposed to say. But I really think they believe in themselves, they believe in what we're capable of doing. They're remaining confident, realize just how close we are.

Obviously, we want to get beyond 'close.' In many ways getting close against really good teams, a number of which were on the road, is a clear step in the right direction. Hopefully we can get over the hump.

Q. Some coaches talk a lot about season-ending goals. Do you talk much about that?

COACH McCAFFERY: No. It's the next game.

Q. Where as a coach have you drawn the line between finding things that could make the difference one way or the other or having that luck go your way?

COACH McCAFFERY: I try not to really get into the luck part of it. I just was kind of agreeing with, boy, it does seem like the ball has bounced funny a couple times.

I think typically those things even out over time. You would have hoped they would have evened out a little sooner in this case. You go back and say, maybe it's just not that, maybe it's something we're doing.

There's no question we're breaking down every aspect of every situation, late game, who's on the floor, what could we have run differently, what options did they have in that situation. Go back, show the kids the tape. What options were there that you didn't see that maybe would have made a difference.

Your only hope, especially when we're playing so many young guys, if they're in that situation again, they'll remember and see it and maybe make a better play.

Q. Do you think you attacked their 1-3-1 at their place as good as you attacked it the three years you've been here?

COACH McCAFFERY: Yeah, consistently. We've attacked it really well at times. I think that's what a lot of teams do, they attack it well at times, then they struggle for three, four, five possessions. Sometimes that's all they need.

You look at their Minnesota game, for example. Minnesota really struggled against it. They had some great possessions against it, phenomenal possessions. But they're getting passes deflected, they were getting tentative, standing around. They kind of got bunched up.

I'm fairly certain how their practices went. They prepared to do what they did when they did it well. I remember last year here we were really playing well against them. They go to the 1-3-1, we turned it over. The first time we scored, but then we turned it over a couple times, it really changed the complexion of that game. Then we went through it pretty easily after that.

It's kind of like the damage was already done. We didn't play well against them. We didn't, for that little stretch of time we didn't play well. I think that's what has made it an effective defense for them.

Q. Last year you were up by 14 or something in the first half, turned it over eight times.

COACH McCAFFERY: Sometimes it's not even the turnovers. You get a decent shot. It's not a great shot. You don't make it. You turn it over. Then you don't make it. You don't get a second. Then you come down and make a bunch of passes, you miss again. A ball gets deflected. They get a run-out.

That's exactly what happened at Minnesota. Minnesota was up 7, they went down 7 or 8, they missed a ton of free throws.

Q. Eric seems like he's playing the most consistent basketball of his career. What has he been able to bring to the team?

COACH McCAFFERY: Exactly what I hoped he would as a captain, as a senior: multiple position player, can guard a big guy, a small one, knows where to line up. What a lot of guys try to do in that situation is more than they're supposed to do. He does exactly what he's supposed to do.

He drives it when we need him to. He scores in transition. He'll shoot a three occasionally. He's not hunting shots. He's making plays for his teammates.

He got two huge offensive rebounds for us the other night when we desperately needed them. That's why I keep saying this, but regardless of who I start, somehow he ends up on the floor at the end of the game. I just leave him there because he's not a mistake guy and he's making plays in a variety of different ways that helps our team.

Q. What does that say about his stamina?

COACH McCAFFERY: With him, he's in great shape, but he's mentally pretty special. He has an assassin-type mentality. He's going to keep fighting. I think back to the UNI game in particular, I think he played the last 15 minutes of that game. They run good stuff. He was battling through screens, getting up on guys. They shoot the ball really well from three. He wasn't giving up any threes. He knows what the game plan is and effectively will execute that.

Q. Is it unusual for you to have a guy who brings those kind of leadership qualities off the bench and not be one of the team's prominent players?

COACH McCAFFERY: It's not the norm. But it has happened. It will happen again at some point.

Q. Going back to players who kind of struggle with their shooting. Oglesby or Marble, what do you do as a coach as far as making sure their confidence isn't hurt during the game?

COACH McCAFFERY: My thing over the years is to tell them to keep shooting. Keep setting them up. If they feel at any time like I don't think they're going to make it, they're not going to make it. They have to know they believe the next shot they shoot is going in. If they believe it, it will.

With those two guys, we're not doing a lot of tweaking with their form, anything like that.

The one thing I said to Dev, we're looking at film, he missed a shot in the Minnesota game. I said, Why do you think you missed that shot? He starts giving me 9,000 reasons why he thought he missed that shot. I said you missed the shot because you were covered. You shouldn't have taken that shot. I want you to shoot, but not that one.

I said, that's what keeps you in a slump when you're shooting contested shots. Shoot open shots, any open shot you want. You can take 30 open shots, but don't shoot that one when you're covered.

He's like, "all right, that makes sense."

A lot of times you think kids overthink. Sometimes they do. The one thing they accept is logic. If you can logically show them, that I think will have better ramifications down the road than trying to overthink it.

Q. Did you watch last year's Northwestern game in preparation for tomorrow? Did you see where Oglesby was inches from a three and would have won the game and been .500 in the league?

COACH McCAFFERY: I did watch that game. I didn't really think of that aspect. When I go back and watch a game, I'm trying to figure out what could we have done differently, what did they do to us that worked for them, what did we do to them that worked for us, what could we or should we have done that we didn't do. I'm not looking at,

"boy, if he made that shot, they would have been 9-9." That's ancient history.

Q. When you look at Eric, in the past he would take shots, miss a shot or two early, kind of be in a confidence funk.

COACH McCAFFERY: He doesn't rattle. The other night, he made a turnover. He hasn't turned the ball over much. Came back, made a good play, made another good play.

That stuff used to linger with him. He was trying so hard. There was a lot of pressure on him. We didn't have a lot of weapons. Look at our team his first year, who was going to score? Gatens? Basabe was a freshman. Cole was never a scorer, but once in a while. Where were we going to get points?

A lot of it fell on him. He had to go get us some points. And Bryce and he hooked up a little bit.

Now I think he's in a role that's perfect for him. He's just a winning player, that's what he is. He helps us in so many different ways. He has embraced that role and he's excelled in it.

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