

University of Iowa Basketball Media Conference

Tuesday, March 2, 2021

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Fran McCaffery

Men's Basketball Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We'll go to questions for Coach McCaffery.

Q. A lot of teams in Nebraska's situation might have kind of folded up a little bit with COVID, the pause they had, not much hope for going to post-season. They've really fought. What's impressed you about them?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I think you have to give a lot of credit to Fred. When he got sick, when they first paused, he called me to tell me. He said, We're going to make up the games. We're all systems go. We'll get better.

You have to give them credit. Not only have they done that, they played well. They played really well yesterday. Won three out of the last four, whatever. Really playing well, sharing the ball.

I think making a statement with, okay, we had some difficulties we had to overcome, but we're going to go ahead and finish out the schedule, continue to compete. You got to respect that.

Q. You've been asked a lot in the last few of these that we've done about the way the defense has come around, really made a difference. Could you detail how the progress has been made and the results have been gotten.

FRAN McCAFFERY: It's not complicated, it really isn't. You have to get down and guard the ball off the dribble, you got to get back, you got to rebound. It's all connected that way.

When you only give up two offensive rebounds to Ohio State, a very good offensive rebounding team, that's a big statement. How we defend ball screens, doing a much better job there. This stuff is hard to guard when you have other actions going on.

I think our guys have really locked into personnel, scouting, really committed to playing defense on all levels, which is obviously transition, halfcourt, regardless of which defense

we're in, and fighting people on the glass.

Q. Looks like you're going to be able to get all 27 of your games in this year. What does that say about your program? How have you been able to do that? A lot of teams can't say that.

FRAN McCAFFERY: I think it starts with the commitment our institution made, our department, to daily testing. It really comes down to the discipline I think that our players showed and a commitment to one another to be safe, do everything we could in terms of making good decisions off the floor so we can show up in practice every day, we can show up and play in all of our games.

I'm really proud of our institution, our department, Mr. Barta has done an unbelievable job along with Bruce Herral and Kevin Warren, our commissioner, to put us in a position where we could make this happen.

Q. What do you see in Nebraska now that's different from a couple weeks ago? What are they doing differently now that they weren't doing before?

FRAN McCAFFERY: They're really sharing the ball, making really good decisions, playing very unselfishly I think. You look at the last six or seven games, they've played really well. Even before that, sometimes you look at a team's record and you think, They lost a bunch of games in a row. But every game they're right there. You kind of see it coming, they were going to win some.

Great play out of their center position. They're just playing more consistently, I think, with their decision making, their ball movement, their commitment on defense. They're a tough team. Just happen to be in a really good league.

Q. We haven't had a chance to ask you, I know this could change, but Jack's timeline for getting back, how he's dealing with this mentally? Where is Josh at? Is there a chance he could help you out as a big body in there?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Jack had surgery today. Went well. We expect him back sometime during the summer, maybe the middle, maybe the end of the summer. We expect him back next year. He has a very positive outlook on this whole thing despite what he's been through. He's been

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amazing, in my view. I've been doing this a long time. Really, really proud of him. We're all pulling for him.

Josh is getting better. He didn't make the trip to Ohio State. He wasn't feeling good. We'll see how he is today. But the other guy that can jump in there is Kris Murray. I think he's ready for a shot. That's a possibility. We could also play smaller, put Tony Perkins in there, a really athletic wing that really attacks the glass. There's a lot of ways we can go.

Obviously it starts with our top three subs: Keegan, Patrick and Joe T. We're able to play those eight, do okay with it. But at some point we're going to need another big guy, you're right. I'm comfortable, I should say getting more comfortable, with the possibility of playing Josh and Kris in particular.

Q. This will be the last two home games for Luka and for J Bo. You'd love to have fans there for them, but can you talk about maybe not having the fans there to honor those guys, what they've meant to your program.

FRAN McCAFFERY: We all wish the place was full and they could be honored properly. We're going to do the best we can, pretty much what we always do. But unfortunately not even the parents are going to be allowed on the floor. They're going to be up.

Hope to honor them at another time, maybe at the banquet, maybe next year at a game when it's full again. But those two guys have been so instrumental and had so much success in our program's history. I'm just thankful to have had the opportunity to coach both of them, watch them grow and develop and become record setters essentially.

We'll do the best we can on Sunday for them, but at some point they'll be honored again, I'm sure.

Q. Continuing along that line, Jordan has said repeatedly how he appreciates that you believed in him from the get-go and took a chance on him when other major programs weren't as interested. You were in early on Luka. Luka and his dad have mentioned that repeatedly. If you could go back five years, six years, and talk about in a nutshell what you saw in these two guys.

FRAN McCAFFERY: I had the luxury of watching Jordan at a very young age. He played with Connor. They went to Las Vegas to play. He was terrific there. Obviously watched him throughout his high school career, because they used to play against West High two times a year.

Then they would play in the fall leagues, in the spring leagues. I really watched Jordan develop.

When you're doing that, the reality is you're comparing him to other players that you may have seen or your staff is recruiting that are from other states, play on other AAU teams. You're going through the process.

I think what happened with Jordan was he just consistently played well no matter who he played against, whether he was playing for his high school coach, whether he's playing for Frank, Martin brothers. He just always played well. Whenever he played against high-level guys, he played well.

I think it just got to the point where it was a no-brainer for me. I can't speak to why others didn't think so because it wasn't like he ever played poorly in any game that I ever attended, and I saw him quite a bit.

The other thing is he has a competitive side that most people don't have. They just don't have it. He has it. He's fearless. I think you saw it when he was a freshman, some of the performances were amazing. His sophomore year, which is one that I will always remember, he gutted it out. Connor got sick, had to redshirt. We didn't have a point guard. He's playing on two bad hips and plantar fasciitis. That's the epitome of toughness right there.

He just fought through and never complained one time. I didn't even know he had anything wrong with him. He just showed up and played.

To watch him enjoy the success that he has, break Jeff Horner's record, who was a tremendous player here, I coached against him, be where he is on the scoring charts and three-point makes, I'm really happy for him, for his family, who I've gotten to know really well, and very proud of him.

Luka, different situation coming from a different part of the country. I've said this many times. I was fortunate enough to watch him play against Connor, who was on an AAU team that was a provisional EYBL team, which is the Nike organization. He just impressed me the first time I saw him. Then I was fortunate enough to see him again in St. Louis at the Nike Elite 100, then at the Nike Top 100, then I saw him on the circuit, played for Chuck Driesell, a chance to watch him for his high school team.

Again, for whatever reason that I couldn't figure out, there were knocks on him in the recruiting process. What was interesting, Frank and I would talk about this, we both knew that in the end he would have everybody there wanting him.

I think it was important, maybe not so much to Luka, but to Frank, to see how his hard work paid off with the recognition that he deserved. So by the end of the summer of his junior year, before his senior year, when really the recruiting decisions are made, he pretty much had everybody that wanted him.

Like you said, we were in first in terms of a BCS school that said, Hey, you're our guy. We never wavered from that. The whole getting in early thing, a lot of people think that goes a long way, and it does, but it goes a long way because you develop a relationship. It's not we were the first school that offered. You develop a relationship in a way that I think builds trust. That's what we had.

Luka and his parents, his high school coach, trusted us. That's a tremendous feeling as a coach. Then you bring a guy in with tremendous work ethic, you watch him compete at the highest level, achieve phenomenal success, and most importantly you watch both these guys really, really have fun and enjoy this experience. You watch them become talented freshmen and ultimately team leaders.

That's what you want as a coach. You want your leadership to come from within the locker room, not just from the coaching staff. If it does, it never works. Really, really happy for both of them, proud of both of them.

Q. It sounds like because your son was a player, was a major college prospect, played on these teams, traveled around, that you got extra benefits from that, the chance to see these other two guys, get to know them a lot better a lot sooner.

FRAN McCAFFERY: Yeah, I think it would have been a little bit different with Jordan. I would have seen him in a number of places probably anyway.

But you're right, the first tournament we went to was after the recruiting period, during a dead period. I was able to go because Connor was on the team.

Luka, again, we got an early peek at him. He was playing in events that coaches could go to eventually. Not only did I get to see him early, I got to see him play against really good players. Same thing with Jordan.

You're watching these young kids play against high-level guys that are highly rated and perform at the level that they did. It's interesting that you guys were in early, you saw something nobody else saw. All I ever see these two guys do was compete and win. That's all they've ever done.

So I don't think it was anything miraculous. It was just a

level of respect that I had for both of them, a desire to get them into our program because I knew what that would lead to. That's a terrific locker room presence, camaraderie and success.

Q. On the Luka topic, I'm not sure if you have any say in this, do you believe he should have his number retired here? What does that say about an athlete when they get that kind of an honor?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Very rare. I've had a few. I don't think you're wrong on that one. I think that's a no-brainer, that will happen. It's a question of when. Well-deserved. I'll look forward to that moment. So will he and his family.

I think right now his focus is not on that, but I appreciate the question. It will happen, without a doubt.

Q. When Luka got here, I think there were seven Iowa natives on the roster. To see Luka come back for a senior season, give up a lucrative overseas deal, professional opportunities, speaks to the way the Iowa community has embraced Luka and vice versa. Can you speak on how Iowa has embraced him, that relationship in general.

FRAN McCAFFERY: I think it's been a great fit for everyone. From day one I think our fans looked at him and said, This guy is special. We all talk about his work ethic, which is not matched by many. We go back to his sophomore year what he overcame health-wise, the success he's had the last few years, I think sometimes that gets overlooked.

I think there's a healthy appreciation of our fan base and his teammates for what he's done. When you have a guy like that who is unselfish, just really speaks in the locker room in a way that commands respect, it's something that is special to see.

For me, it's something that I appreciate every day. As you guys know, it's a long season. There's a lot of ups and downs. There's a lot of things that happen, in particular this year, that anything short of that kind of commitment and understanding and the overall love for each other.

I think the season could have gone sideways, not necessarily in terms of wins and losses, but health-wise. There's just never going to be any selfishness in our locker room with the guys that are in there, with Luka as the leader.

The recognition he's gotten has been incredibly well-deserved, is something that I'm very proud of and very happy for him.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, coach. We appreciate your time today.

FRAN McCAFFERY: Thank you.

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