

University of Iowa Basketball Media Conference

Monday, October 7, 2024

Iowa City, Iowa, USA

Fran McCaffery

Men's Basketball Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Questions for Coach.

Q. Drew Thelwell, you brought him in with this experience to really bolster the back court. What have you seen from him so far? Have you gotten what you expected?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Yeah, Drew has been great. Really a special young man. Very mature. Competes. He and Brock have been going at it, and that's been good for both of them. It's been good for the team.

As I've said before, they can play together, which is important. And you're right, it bolsters our back court in a number of different ways, not the least of which is experience.

Q. When it comes to recruiting guys and maintaining a team culture, is it important just to find the right fit for the program, or is it about leaders stepping up? How do you maintain the culture in an era where guys are free agents and moving around?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I think that's the most critical thing. I still want to build a program. I still want to get guys that are really good players and develop them.

I think you look particularly at our sophomore class. Obviously we know what Owen did, but I'm talking about Brock, Pryce, Ladji. All three of them were really good last year, but they had an offseason, a summer, a fall, a number of cycles in the weight room. All three of them have really elevated their games.

That's what building a program is and not feeling like you have to go get eight or nine guys. We got two that we felt fit our culture and fit our needs positionally because we knew what we had coming back. That was established the day after the Utah game.

Who is coming back? So now we know who is coming back. We know what we need. We knew what we had coming in in the freshman class. We were excited about

those guys. That's how we're going to continue to try to do it.

Q. Can you discuss the competition at the four spot right now? What is standing out?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, all the guys that are competing for playing time there, they're all really good, and they're all different. Ladji, Cooper, Seydou. But, again, all three of them, they're not four men. They can play the four spot. They can play the three spot. They can play the five spot. Ladji maybe more four, five. Coop and Seydou, maybe three, four. I would be comfortable playing Seydou in the back court. Same thing with Coop. Somebody is going to start there, but there are going to be a lot of different guys there.

Q. Here in this offseason you made, I guess, a concerted effort to add more athleticism. Do you agree with that, or did that kind of happen, materialize?

FRAN McCAFFERY: We're just trying to get good players. We were very excited about Coop and Chris. We needed to get -- we needed to address the point guard position, without question. We felt like we needed another front court guy.

Q. Since Peyton decided to come back what are your thoughts on his attitude and the way he has looked?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Payton's attitude has always been fabulous. It's never going to be anything other than that. I do think the response to your question, while he was also a leader last year, I think he views himself as the guy that is going to be the voice in the locker room, the voice on the bench, the voice on the road.

I'm very impressed with what he learned going through the NBA Draft process and his attitude upon return and how it relates to his teammates has been, quite frankly, what I would have expected from him.

When he made the decision to come back, he made it for that reason, and I'm incredibly proud of him and very thankful, and so are his teammates.

Q. Did you ever think he was gone during that process?

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FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, anytime somebody goes through the process, that's a distinct possibility, right? Remember Joe Wieskamp. We always talk about him. He had the opportunity to come back. He shot 7 for 8 in the first competitive game at the combine. He also measured well. There were a number of things that happened in a positive way. Then he had a solid offer on the table, so then he was going.

Payton also had solid offers on the table, but none that I think would have drawn him away from this program or this opportunity to do something special and then also, as I've said many times, bet on himself to move into the first round.

Q. What have you seen in his game, and just what he's been able to learn from that experience?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Well, he's always been a guy that moves incredibly well without the ball. He is nonstop motion. He sprints the floor in transition. He really works hard defensively. He rebounds well.

So he tries to impact a game in a number of different ways. We saw him get a triple-double last year. I do think he's making a concerted effort to sort of be that guy. He has always been a great shooter. When he was Sixth Man of the Year in the league, he was really special with his three-point shooting in particular.

He knows in order to make the NBA, in order to help this team be what it could be, we need him to be an All-League player in all facets, and that's what he's going to be.

Q. When it comes to Owen Freeman, he has always spoken to us like he is a calm player. When you go into a season after the freshman year he had, how important is it that you already have a guy that's mature beyond his years when you talk about improvement-driven mindset? How have you seen him take advantage of that during the last few months?

FRAN McCAFFERY: The thing about Owen is he's a special young guy in so many different ways, and he is incredibly talented. He also recognizes that there's room for growth and wants to get better.

So for him it started in the weight room, but then it also morphed into doing more off the bounce, doing more from the perimeter as a shooter.

I used to tell him even when he was in high school to look for his shot more. Flash to the high post, turn and face and shoot it, shoot the foul line jumper. That sets up your shot

fake drive. Because he is a shot fake drive, one-dribble dunk guy from there.

He really worked hard on his shot on his own time. He worked very closely with Kirk Speraw just on their own and then, of course, with our coaches as well. He got it in this summer. You are seeing a dramatic difference because a lot of times it's not necessarily form or technique. It's confidence and knowing that your coach has the confidence in you to shoot the ball.

He is not going to encourage you to shoot the ball, then you shoot and you miss, then he tells you not to shoot. Well, you're never going to be a good shooter. I have been encouraging him since he's been 15 years old. You'll see a guy with a more complete game this year and be even more dominant.

Q. We've heard a little bit about Pryce where he takes his game to that next level this summer. Where did that start? How has it been going?

FRAN McCAFFERY: It sort of started towards the end of last season when he made a concerted effort from an attitude perspective. He was going to be more physical. He was going to be more aggressive.

A lot of times a guy comes in, he is a freshman, he is coming off the bench. He wants to be solid, and we need solid. We don't need mistake-makers.

In Pryce's case there was so much more in his game than we were seeing in the beginning, and you started to see it manifest itself at the end of the year. Again, through the spring, summer, and fall.

He also got in the weight room, so he put on probably 12 pounds of muscle. So he is way more physical. He's always had great length. He's always been an underrated defender with his length, and he will rebound his position well.

But at the end of the day he's just really shooting the ball at an incredibly high clip on a consistent basis. We stat everything from every five-on-five situation every practice. So from the second week of June into October, he's killing it.

Q. When Brock was Mr. Basketball his numbers were impressive. His intangibles, leadership stood out more anything. When it comes to those intangibles and leadership have those stood out this summer?

FRAN McCAFFERY: You're right. He's always had that in him. It's always been part of who he is. It's one of the

reasons why they won the state championship, why he was Mr. Basketball.

He was the same guy last year. It's just harder when you are coming off the bench. So he's going to be playing a lot more this year. He is not afraid to talk to his teammates, be direct. Sometimes he can be a little too tough, but everybody respects that about him because that's how he is wired, and he is as tough a guy as I have ever coached. It's why I recruited him. It's why we love him.

Q. Where have you seen the biggest growth in Brock's game this summer?

FRAN McCAFFERY: He has also improved his body. He has really defensively been way more physical. He is stronger, but is he shooting the ball extremely well. He changed his shot a little bit. Moved it up a little bit. Nothing major. He is shooting with great confidence.

Q. The depth that you have at the five, how do you feel about the physicality and how they are looking?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Yeah, the five spot is in great shape. It starts with Owen. And Ladji, as I said, can play with Owen at the four-five. We can put Ladji at the five, but you are talking about two seniors in Riley Mulvey and Even Brauns. Even is a fifth-year senior. Both of those guys have gotten a lot stronger over the last five years, four years.

They're not mistake guys. They know what we want to do. They've been here. This is Even's second year. Riley has been here longer than that.

I love those guys and, quite frankly, in many ways wish I could play them more. They're going to play. How much? I don't know. But this is probably the deepest team we've had.

Q. You lose many players. Is there anything about this team that they can do as well as last year's team did, or how do you replace such a broad base of skill there?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Ben averaged 16 points a game. He was a scoring front court guy. You have to find scoring in some capacity. He and Patrick also there. I think we've addressed that both with the guys that are coming back as sophomores and with the portal and with our freshmen.

So we sort of envision that being a necessity, and we took care of that. In terms of the back court with Josh Dix and being as special as he is and we can swing Payton back there, Pryce is obviously going to play back there. Brock is

going through a whole another level. We addressed the departure of Tony with Drew. So I think we're fine.

Q. What have you seen from Chris Tadjjo?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Toughest thing for Chris is he is so conscientious. He is such an incredibly hard worker. He is way too hard on himself. That has been my biggest challenge with him, which is a unique challenge, but you know, it happens.

He's such a perfectionist. As a freshman who was for the first time in a long time in a completely English-speaking environment, is now in a position to try to understand what we're doing and then compete for playing time. I'm hopeful that he doesn't beat himself up every time he misses a shot or makes a mistake because he has been doing that.

The coaches have been really positive and patient with him because we love him and we respect his work ethic, his intensity level. That's a talent. That's an underestimated talent.

Hard work, physicality, intensity level on every possession, not everybody does that, and he does.

Q. He is also still pretty good at basketball, and he has been all over the map. What have you told him entering his first year about what college basketball is actually going to be like, now that he is kind of at a consistent spot rather than having to learn it all?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I think it's the first time he's watched a lot of film of himself and of everybody else and just understanding that if I make a teaching point on the film to Owen, it's also for you. It's not just when I talk to you.

You're right. He went from speaking the dialect back home to going to Montreal where it's English and French. Then he ends up in Mexico City where it's Spanish, and now he's here where it's all English. So he is doing well, considering, but I think you're going to see a projection there because of how serious he is about his craft that will be impressive.

Q. Josh Dix, do you see him at point guard?

FRAN McCAFFERY: You will. He is so good off the ball, and he is a good defender. He is going to be guarding that wing guy from 6'4" to 6'7". He is really good there.

But I love his versatility and the ability to move him to the one spot. Then you put somebody like Pryce alongside of him, and that's a big team, and that's a lot of shooting.

Q. Tristan Spurlock seems like a guy that the players really gravitate to. How did you first kind of meet him?

FRAN McCAFFERY: Tristan moved to town a few years back, and it was still sort of at the end, but still playing professionally. So he is home in the summer. Then he would go somewhere in the winter and play.

So he started working out with Patrick. Then he started working out with our other guys. Then he started inviting a lot of the players out to Court 45, where Darryl Moore's operation is, and those guys in the spring would get in hellacious runs there, and he would organize it.

He was doing a lot of the training. Then we had an opening and interviewed him, and he was spectacular. He interviewed with our administration, and everybody loved him. Everybody that meets Tristan is impressed with him and his personality and his energy level, and he's good at that component, but he is also the total package.

He's now allowed by rule to be a recruiter, and he's done a great job there.

Q. Something that we've heard a lot on the recruiting trail or on the 3SSB Circuit is how good of a shooter Cooper Koch was. I went out and saw him this last year at his high school. He seemed like a three-level scorer.

FRAN McCAFFERY: A lot of times when guys are great shooters, that's what they're called. He's a shooter. What you were referring to, the 3SSB Circuit, maybe I think he was the best shooter statistically of all of those teams, which is incredible when you think about it.

I remember I went to see him out west, and he had eight threes in a row, that kind of thing. You remember, he is 6'8", so he can score inside. He does offensive rebound. He can post up.

So he is a three-level scorer. He had surgery this summer, so he has done amazingly well coming back from that. I was blown away that he was able to maintain the intensity level that he has from the minute he came back.

He was out for six weeks. Six weeks and one day he was sprinting the floor and competing.

Q. In your reviewing of film of Thelwell before he came here, what did you see from him like in the conference tournament or down the stretch in the games that mattered the most?

FRAN McCAFFERY: You know, we watch those games

that you are talking about, but you look at that kid, and when you are the all-time winningest player in a program's history, that's an incredible statement. I mean, they won 27 games last year, and he was the point guard.

So now you're watching. Okay, first of all, how did they play? How does he fit? They ran a few more sets. We're a little more free-flowing, but he clearly had the athleticism to play fast.

Does he make plays for other people? Does he engineer victory? And he did that. And he shot the ball well enough. I think he was a little over 34% from three-point range, and he fared pretty well against the Power Five teams that were on the schedule.

Q. What's the next step for Payton as he continues to evolve?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I think for Payton we all have an expectation, you know, when your best player comes back and lead the league in made threes, well, he's going to make more threes and he's going to get more rebounds.

The thing I've been impressed with is he was a really good rebounder last year. He's a special offensive rebounder.

A lot of shooters just don't do that. They hang around on the perimeter, and that's that. Throw me the ball, and I'll shoot it in the hole for you.

He does that, but he's done more off the dribble. He's done more passing to open people and reading situations, which is what you would expect from a senior.

Think about him. Freshman year he played a lot. He was on the Big Ten Championship team. Sophomore year, Rookie of the Year in the league. Last year led the league in made threes, was an All-League player.

Now, I think how do you go from being a second- or third-team All-League player to first-team? Obviously it's consistency of effort and performance, and he is going to work harder.

Q. Last season, what was this team's biggest weakness and what has been done to address that in the offseason?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I thought last year's team was impressive in a lot of ways. We had a lot of different guys that could score. We competed. We lost a couple of games that we didn't close. A couple that stand out in my mind.

You always go back. If we had just won that. We should have won that game. We didn't. If we did, we would have been in the NCAA Tournament. That's how close I think we were.

Q. What are your expectations for this team now especially in the expanded Big Ten this year?

FRAN McCAFFERY: We expect to be really good. We expect to win a lot of games. We expect to go to the NCAA Tournament. We expect to contend night in and night out in a very difficult league.

It's unique in the sense that a lot of coaches really don't know a lot about the other teams. Especially the ones that have eight or nine new players.

So we'll get into it and figure it out.

Q. What does Carter Kingsbury bring to the program?

FRAN McCAFFERY: A veteran guy that physically is capable of playing more than one position. Really good 3-point shooter, but really tough guy and smart.

Q. You mentioned on Big Ten Network that you feel like this is your deepest team. I'm curious, is that in terms of how many guys are capable of playing? Is it versatility?

FRAN McCAFFERY: It's both. I think that's the key. You're right. I legitimately have 13 guys I feel comfortable playing and playing a number of them in different positions and relying on them to be productive in those different positions because they're smart, and they've been around.

There's a little bit of a learning curve with our new guys, the two freshmen and two transfers, but everybody else has been here.

So I feel very comfortable. You're in a late-game situation, you have to run a press attack, you don't have a time-out, you run a side OB, you run in your late-game package. All of those guys can run that effectively without having to take a time-out and explain it over and over.

Q. Will you get to see Butler in person this year?

FRAN McCAFFERY: I will try as best I can. It's going to be hard. I think there's one game around Thanksgiving that I might be able to get to. It's hard. It's a 5-hour-and-20-minute drive, but I'll do what I can.

Q. When you talk about closing out games, what's key to doing that, especially with the guys on this team?

FRAN McCAFFERY: You can't make mistakes, and you have to execute. If you're running sets, if you're running out-of-bounds plays, if you're protecting a lead, you can't turn it over. You have to make sure the right people are getting fouled. If you are fouling them, you are fouling the right people.

Know time in score. Know if you are in the bonus, if they're in the bonus, if you are in the double bonus or not, if you have time-outs left. Everybody thinks if you're 10-20 or 20-10, one team is good, one team stinks. It's a fine line. You have to win five-point games, two-possession games, and that comes down to intellect.

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