



Putting On His GAME FACE

Bill Fennelly has rebuilt the ISU women's basketball program and brought the Cyclone faithful back to Hilton.

All that and he's a nice guy.

BY PAUL KIX



It is October 14, 2000. Winter has yet to cover Iowa with snow and ice. Inside Hilton Coliseum, things are just beginning to heat up as the ISU women's basketball team officially begins practice for the 2000-2001 season. Moments before head coach Bill Fennelly begins his sixth season at Iowa State this afternoon, he glances down at the words scribbled on a note card that when folded, comfortably fits into the pants of his wind suit. After the scrawled notes about offenses, defenses, shooting drills, and free throws, there's a reminder:

"Selection Sunday is March 11, 2001."

This is Judgment Day for Fennelly and his team. They will eagerly await the announcement on ESPN's Selection Sunday special, waiting for Iowa State to be picked as one of 64 teams competing for a national title in the NCAA Tournament. Fennelly is not bashful about his affection for this month. "I live for March," he says.

And so it goes. For every practice scrunched between a 25-5 regular season is a note card about opponents and how the Cyclones plan to defend against them, and at the end of every card is a reminder about Selection Sunday.

On Judgement Day, Fennelly sits on a folding chair in the Green Room of Hilton Coliseum. Winter has descended upon Iowa in full force. The mood is loose and smiles are exchanged among Fennelly, his three assistants, 14 players, and others closely associated with the team. There is no need to worry about making it to the tournament this year. Another good season has been etched in the record book, which will hopefully translate into a very good seed.

All eyes are transfixed on a black framed television sitting in the room where basketball press conferences are normally held. ESPN's Robin Roberts announces to the nation that the Cyclones are the No. 2 seed in the Midwest Region and their first-round opponent will be 15th seed Howard University.

Iowa State is in. There was scarcely any doubt after the Cyclones defeated the Oklahoma Sooners 68-65 some 18 hours earlier to capture the Big 12 tournament crown for the second time in as many years. Fennelly is grateful for this day though, if for nothing more than the free recruitment Selection Sunday offers. "We got to see Iowa State on national TV. They talked about us," he says.

Before 1995 no one talked about Iowa State women's basketball. There was no need to. No Cyclone team had ever made it to the NCAA tournament. In the 1992-1993 season, Iowa State went 2-25, and in the 1993-1994 and 1994-1995 seasons the Cyclones were 8-19.

When Fennelly came to Iowa State in 1995,

the team finished 17-10. Not good enough for the NCAA tournament, but good enough to earn Fennelly the best-ever record for a first-year women's basketball coach at Iowa State. Since then, the Cyclones have made it to the NCAA tournament five years running. In 1999, Iowa State went as far as the Elite Eight before succumbing to the Georgia Bulldogs 89-71. In the 1999-2000 season, Iowa State



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- Bill Fennelly, head coach

recorded its first-ever conference regular season championship, finishing the year with a 27-6 mark in the Sweet 16. Fennelly recorded his 300th win as a Cyclone this year in the second round of the Big 12 Tournament against the Baylor Bears.

Numbers aren't enough. They can't explain the change in fans' attitudes toward women's basketball.

William "Wild Bill" Yungclas is a crazy character. He is a fixture at ISU women's basketball games, wearing a gold sports coat, visor, and cardinal slacks. His outfit is as loud as his voice. He's devoutly followed ISU women's basketball since 1985 and can remember when the players on the court outnumbered the fans in the seats. "I used to have to yell for 12,000 people," Yungclas says.

Wild Bill doesn't have to cheer for empty seats anymore. On average, 11,814 fans

cheered on the Cyclones at Hilton. This season, more than 7,000 of them fought their way through a blizzard to attend a game against Oklahoma State. "Coach Fennelly has done so much for this program," Yungclas says.

Sarah Robson, a 5'6" member of the team, was almost always the last senior to come off the bench, and sometimes the last Cyclone. Yet, of the four seniors who thanked the Hilton crowd on Senior Day, Robson's chin was the only one that collected tears as she spoke of Fennelly. "And I would like to thank Coach Fennelly for ... giving me ... the opportunity ... to play," she said with *play* ending not as a word but as a cross between a chirp and a first soprano's high G. "He's taught me so much about life," Robson says later.

Fellow players show the same affection for Fennelly, and many cite him as the reason they chose Iowa State. Guard Tracy Gahan: "He's the reason I came here." Center Angie Welle: "He was the deciding factor on my part."

Point guard Lindsey Wilson sat in during a Fennelly practice during a recruiting visit in fall 1998. When practice was over, "I was sold," she says. Fennelly invited Wilson to speak with all the players, not just the ones who got playing time. "He's unique," she adds.

Fennelly's players say he recruits by simply being himself. "He wasn't trying to sell the school to me," Welle says. "He was so personable."

Fennelly recruits aggressively. After Gahan had a "lousy game" in a high school basketball tournament, she says it was Fennelly who gave her a call at her hotel room, telling her to keep her chin up.

Fennelly also came to Welle's high school volleyball games. "He put in so much effort," Welle says. During her basketball season, "He told me, 'Good luck against West Fargo.' And I'd be like, 'How does he know we're playing West Fargo?' My high school schedule was not on the Internet. He's just a little detective I think. I felt like I owed it to him to come to ISU."

Ask Fennelly what he thinks about the admiration his players feel for him, and you would swear you were in Mayberry and he was playing the part of Andy Taylor. "Well, I don't know about that," he says with only the Southern drawl missing. Then, with a touch more honesty, "Part of the recruiting trip for us is to promise the family to do everything we can to help. That doesn't just mean making jump shots and rebounds. I want the players to respect the coaches. But I also want the coaches to have respect for the kids. It's not my program. It's theirs."

When Bill Fennelly oversees practice, he is 3-foot tall. He spends a great deal of time coaching from ground level, in a deep-kneed crouch.

But when his legs start to burn too much, he rises to his full 5'10" stature with his arms crossed in front of his wind jacket. Whether crouched or erect, one thing remains the same — his face. Sometimes it holds a scowl of impatience or frustration, but never contentment. Never.

Fennelly rarely hands out compliments during practice. And at the end of some practices, the team will have a knockout competition or a half-court shoot out.

There he's been known to smile and turn into the lighthearted man he is when off the court. But during everyday practice, Fennelly is too busy searching for his team's flaws and how to correct them. "I'm a perfectionist at heart," he says. "And every coach's dream is to coach the perfect game. But you have to be careful in pursuing the perfect game."

Fennelly's caution is evidenced in his attitude following a pair of road losses.

The date is February 19, 2001. The Cyclones lost the previous week at both Colorado and Kansas. Any hopes of a Big 12 regular-season conference championship are now dashed. Fennelly is near mid-court in his familiar crouch, his white sneakers invading the out-of-bounds red space. He surveys the horizon with a pen dangling from his mouth. Every few minutes, he takes down more notes.

There is an edge to the players' movements. Quick shots are hoisted. The team is fast on defense in an effort to slow the coach's rising frustration.

Nevertheless, Fennelly is an open wound for most of practice. "It's a free god-damned ball! Go get it!" he yells at the starters as they perform offensive drills. Some players exchange dumbfounded looks.

Now another drill. Five seconds are put on the shot clock. Freshman Erica Junod stands on the out-of-bounds area opposite Fennelly. Her four teammates huddle around the lane, ready to execute an out-of-bounds play. She heaves the ball in, but it is deflected by a scout-team member. A poor shot is all the Cyclones can muster. Twice more the team is unable to get off a good look. Fennelly explodes. "This could be the difference in the game!" he yells.

Junod fires another pass into play, overthrowing the grasp of guard Megan Taylor. The ball skids around and ends up at mid-court with Welle tracking it down. With one second left, Welle picks up the ball and puts her body behind it as it travels some 40 feet before falling to the ground well short of the basket.

All eyes turn to Fennelly.

He does not move. His face is flushed red with anger, but in a surprisingly mild voice he says only, "Again."

"You know, I once heard a coach say it's not a long distance from your back to your butt. Sometimes you need a pat on the back. Sometimes you need a kick in the butt," Fennelly says. "You have to know the personalities of your players." And this team? "We play better when we're relaxed," he says.

The tense mood quickly diffuses. After a week of losing, the practice concludes with the team divvied up for a game of knockout, each team battling to reach ten before the other. The casual game puts a smile on Fennelly's face, and when the coach is happy, the team is happy.

Fennelly's players certainly know him. "Oh yeah, coach is superstitious," Wilson says. On the team bus, everyone sits in the same seat and they stay at the same hotels. When the players warm up before a game, they run out in the same order each time. In any arena, Fennelly always appears before the crowd exactly 12 minutes and 12 seconds before tip-off.

"If we win 12 games in the Big 12, we'll be in a great position for the post-season," he says. Also, he needs to touch the shoulder of every person on staff before the game, something he can explain only as coaches being "creatures of habit."

Despite these superstitions, Fennelly isn't paranoid. His practices are open to the public, which is almost unheard of among major college coaches. Whereas head football coach Dan McCarney and men's basketball coach Larry Eustachy's numbers are unlisted, Fennelly's is in the phone book. "He doesn't have anything to hide," his wife Deb says.

They met at William Penn University in Oskaloosa. Fennelly was an assistant coach and Deb was a senior, taping ankles for the women's basketball team she used to play for. After becoming good friends and dating for a year, Bill asked her to marry him on a muggy summer night in 1980 after Kenny Rogers wrapped up a concert at Hilton Coliseum.

Before the summer waned, Bill accepted an assistant's job at Fresno State in California. Deb had taken a teaching position in Iowa. "Oh, the phone bill that year," Deb says.

Deb joined Bill at Fresno State after the two were married in 1982. Son Billy was born in 1985, and Steven followed three years later. In the fall of that year, Fennelly became a head coach at Toledo after spending five years at Fresno State and two more at Notre Dame in South Bend, Ind. "The kids grew up in a gym," Deb says.

"Being a parent is very important to me. When I'm at home, I spend time with my family," Fennelly says. During the season, he'll watch game tapes late at night after the kids have gone to bed. During the off season, he tries his best to limit engagements. His family is well aware of the time he spends away, and Fennelly often feels guilty. "Sometimes the people who suffer are the people who are closest to you," he says.

Billy, a sophomore in high school, wants to follow in his father's footsteps and become a coach. Fennelly says he doesn't want Billy to pursue coaching, but Deb doesn't buy it. "Bill just says that. He's bursting inside for Billy to coach," she says.

It is March 24, 2001. Only a few days remain of the month Fennelly lives for. The Cyclones are still alive and playing in the Sweet 16.

Tonight they face the Vanderbilt Commodores. His family sits eight rows behind ISU's bench in the Pepsi Center in Denver, Colo. The clock strikes 12:12, and Fennelly emerges from the locker room. He watches Vanderbilt warm up and touches everyone on the shoulder.

As the game begins, Vanderbilt is too much. The Commodores' Chantelle Anderson scores ten points in the first half. At 21 points per game, she leads her team in scoring and the nation in field-goal shooting at 73 percent.

What isn't expected is Ashley McElhiney. Megan Taylor later says McElhiney was "the person we were worried about the least." However, the Vanderbilt guard hits three three-pointers in the first half and stretches the Cyclones' defense too far. Iowa State's defense is always one pass behind, and its offense ten points behind.

McElhiney finishes with 23 points and Anderson with 34. Iowa State loses to Vanderbilt 84-65. Fennelly tells his players to hold their chins up; they were beat by a better team.

As he walks out of the arena into the Rocky Mountain night, Fennelly pulls a note card from the back pocket of his khakis.

After the scribbled notes about Vanderbilt's offense and ISU's defense, Fennelly writes a new reminder:

"Forty minutes of Iowa State basketball. No regrets."

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