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Paul Kix

Iowa State University

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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
Another good season has been etched in Iowa in full force. The mood is Sunday.

"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 scratched between a 25-5 regular season is a note card about opponents and 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. "It is October 14, 2000. Winter has yet to corner 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:

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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 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 Lindsay 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 "louzy" 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-feet 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 frustration.

Fennelly is near mid-court in his familiar crouch. "This is a good look," Fennelly says. "We'll 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 everyone 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 McCartney 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.