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Will players-only meeting help the Gophers get back on track?



By Heather Rule (https://web.archive.org/web/20170701142756/http://www.1500espn.com/author/heather-rule/) | @hlrule (https://web.archive.org/web/20170701142756/https://twitter.com/hlrule)

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When losses start piling up, it can be a cause for concern and a chance for teams to re-group to find solutions. Players-only meetings have also been known to happen when teams get into these skids. Five losses in a row for Gophers men's basketball meant they held one of those meetings this week.

"It was intense," said sophomore Dupree McBrayer. "We talked about just the little things."

Perhaps it was a good time for a bye week, giving the Gophers (15-7, 3-6) the opportunity to rest and practice after their fifth-straight loss last weekend to Maryland, a 85-78 decision. Akeem Springs and junior Nate Mason were a couple of the players that spoke to their teammates at the meeting and "told us the truth," according to freshman Eric Curry.

Those leaders came forward and told the team what it needs to start doing to win, make the NCAA tournament and even make a run in the Big Ten Tournament.

"You can tell that our leaders are fed up with us not doing the little things," McBrayer said. "I think all the guys got that message."

Everyone can judge for themselves how well that message was received, as the Gophers go on the road to face Illinois (13-10, 3-7) for a 3 p.m. tip-off Saturday. A victory would give the Gophers three Big Ten road wins in a season for the first time since 2011-12.

The Gophers looked promising early in the Big Ten season this year, with road wins at Purdue and Northwestern that pushed them into the Top 25. But they're ending up on the wrong side of close games.

"We've been close," said Coach Richard Pitino. "Hopefully, we break through soon."

Close. It's a point Pitino has gone back to more than once after the past few games. It may be true, but the ultimate question is: How can this go from close to breaking through completely for the next win? Pitino said they have the players to play with anybody, which they've shown.

There's no doubt the Gophers looked great in these road victories early in conference play. FEB 16 2017 16:06:43

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It just hasn't come together lately. Whether it's missed shots at the end of games, not shutting down top opposing players or getting into foul trouble, it hasn't worked out.

As for that players-only meeting, McBrayer said he didn't think Pitino knew about it. The players met before practice on Monday. Curry agreed that it was intense.

"We needed it though," Curry said. "We needed to come face-to-face with the truth."

That means manning up and doing the little things it takes to win.

Curry's new to this as a freshman, but McBrayer can draw on his experience with the Gophers 8-23 team last season to see the differences about trying to break out of the slump. It's all about being positive.

"Last year, after we lost a bunch in a row, we had a negative mindset," McBrayer said. "With this team this year, we're always positive."

It's easy to be so sunny when things are going well, like during the non-conference portion of the season or earlier in the Big Ten season. You have to wonder how much positivity and confidence they've got in those closing moments of games, however.

Up next: Gophers face the Fighting Illini for the only time this season. 6-6 senior guard Malcolm Hill leads scoring for Illinois with 17.4 points per game. For the Gophers, it will be interesting to see if Mason can regain his shooting confidence. He's still the team's leading scorer with 14.0 points per game. Jordan Murphy might another player to keep an eye on to see what he contributes. Before his 10 points against Maryland, he hadn't been a double-digit scorer since the Purdue game New Years Day.

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