

## **Fidler's Stock Continues to Rise with Newfound Maturity**

Omaha's Junior Guard Plays to Defend 2022 Statement

BY KIENAN DIXON

Omaha, Neb. – In October of 2022, Frankie Fidler was a month out from his second collegiate season. Feeling strong after a freshman campaign in which he led Omaha in scoring, field goal percentage and three-point percentage while tip-toeing the esteemed 50-40-90 mark statistically, he wore his confidence on his sleeve. Playing in the hoops haven that is south-eastern Nebraska, Fidler felt in-command and poised for a big sophomore season.

Perhaps it was that sophomoric attitude that led him to say how he felt on-camera. It would end up being a quote that perhaps doomed his season before it even started.

“I think I’m the best player in the conference,” Fidler told me without breaking eye-contact. Those who know sports understood the necessary confidence, but the reality was that the lanky hooper from Bellevue, Nebraska wasn’t ready for that burden. Those nine words were remembered by those who pay close attention to Summit League and mid-major hoops across the country.

Omaha finished the regular season in last place in The Summit League, beating Kansas City in the first round of The Summit League Championship before falling in front of a sea of Jackrabbit blue in the quarterfinals to South Dakota State in Sioux Falls.

In October of 2023, the now junior seemed to know what he said the previous year and how it rubbed people the wrong way. “Last year, I think I might have been a little immature in saying [that],” Fidler said at Summit League Media Day. “It was confidence speaking, I just hadn’t proven myself yet.” Named First-Team Preseason All-Summit League, Omaha’s star has supported where voters put him on their ballots this season.

Over his past three games, Fidler has elevated his game, scoring 81 points in that span to help Omaha to a 2-1 record. He’s tied for fourth in The Summit League in scoring with 17.6 points per game. The recent run of games for Fidler shows not only his confidence in himself, which few doubted, but the confidence that second-year Head Coach Chris Crutchfield has in his junior leader to carry the offensive load for the Mavericks.

When Fidler expressed his confidence in October of 2022, it brought up a memory of Draymond Green drawing criticism in 2019 during the NBA Finals for claiming that he is the best defensive player in the world. The Warriors’ star forward received so much backlash from that comment in a press conference that he had to go on a rant to teach basketball fans and media alike one simple thing. “As a competitor, if you’re trying to do something meaningful, if you don’t have the mindset that you’re the best ever, you’ve failed already,” Green said. It’s true in every facet of life. Fidler embodies that confidence, even if his play didn’t entirely support that statement a

year ago. He finished his sophomore season as one of the 16 best players in the conference, earning Honorable Mention All-Summit League honors in a league that included NBA Draft hopefuls and All-Americans like Max Abmas and Grant Nelson. In fact, Fidler finishing with second-team honors perhaps gave him more confidence heading into his junior season considering the amount of talent that left the league. Abmas, Oral Roberts' two-time AP All-American, transferred to Texas, Nelson left North Dakota State for warmer pastures at Alabama, St. Thomas' star freshman Andrew Rhode went to Virginia, ORU's Connor Vanover joined Mizzou and Kansas City's Shemarri Allen transferred to UCF. However, he was far from the best player in the conference.

Of the 16 players named to the three All-Summit teams, just six returned, most notably South Dakota State's Zeke Mayo. The junior from Lawrence, Kansas, reportedly had offers from around the nation, including power programs, but decided to stay put. He ultimately earned Preseason Player of the Year in The Summit League.

The lack of a clear frontrunner through the non-conference portion of this campaign on both the team and individual levels should give Fidler optimism that he can cash in on his statement from 15 months ago. As it stands, Denver's Tommy Bruner might be that name etched into the Player of the Year award come March. The graduate student leads the Pioneers and the nation in scoring with 25.3 points per contest. There is still plenty of basketball to be played for that to change.

As the days slowly get longer and the thick of winter nears in the upper midwest, Omaha looks to improve on their 10<sup>th</sup> place finish a year ago on the back of their budding star. With Summit League play ahead, the focus for Fidler should be on every Thursday and Saturday. It's a grueling schedule that leads to The Summit League Tournament in Sioux Falls in March, with all to prove between now and then.

The confidence for Fidler started early and remains to this day. "I've never bowed down to anyone or said, 'I can't do it', so that's how I've been all my life," he said in that 2022 interview. Fidler is playing like that right now.