

Paige impresses with leadership, unselfishness

Written by Carl Gonder

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There was a time when I thought Marcus Paige was just a bit overrated. Not anymore.

Paige had a sub-par shooting night against Cedar Rapids Washington Friday night and missed four free throws in the first half. But he still had 24 points and displayed a whole bunch of intangibles that didn't show up on the stat sheet.

"Marcus needs to get his act together on his free throws," his mother, Sherryl Gaffney-Paige, told me at halftime. "He's not playing very well."

No, he wasn't. But it says something when you have a bad game and still get 24 points, five assists, five steals and five rebounds. For most players, that would be a career night.

"I don't know what is the matter with him," she said, shaking her head.

The only person shaking their head was me during the second half.

Paige, who will play for the legendary Roy Williams at North Carolina next year, is cat-quick and has an explosive first step. When he finally got to the rim in the fourth quarter, he flashed by everyone for a nifty scoop layup that took my breath away.

The kid is more than pretty good. He's a leader. He's unselfish. And he's incredibly talented.

He averaged 17.7 points per game as a junior. He's better this year. A lot better.

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He might just be the best guard in the country, as listed by some scouting services. It's even possible we'll see him playing the game for money one day.

When I first saw Marcus Paige as a scrawny ninth grader, however, I frankly did not know what the hullabaloo was all about. He looked like a lot of kids with potential, not a budding nationally rated superstar.

In fact, I saw former Washington all-stater Wes Washpun outplay Paige last season and the season before, only to play second-fiddle to Paige in media hype and awards. I didn't think that added up.

When Washpun held Paige to just nine points in a contest at Linn-Mar a year ago, I sat there thinking, "This kid is good enough to play at North Carolina?"

Shows you what I know. Paige is the real deal now.

He's worth the price of admission and one of the finest guards to ever come out of the state of Iowa. He's still a bit scrawny and will need to add bulk and muscle to compete in the ACC, but he can shoot, pass, jump and drive like few 6-foot 2-inch 17-year-olds I have seen anywhere in the world.

One of the best things about him - that not many people talk about - is his ability to elevate and finish at the rim. Watch out down below. The kid has springs. Paige had only one chance to flush it Friday night, but the Warriors wisely fouled him.

Wanna see a player with a handle? His ballhandling ability is among the best I've tracked in 30-plus years of following high school hoops in Eastern Iowa. And he uses a one-handed pass to dish to teammates, adeptly with either hand, in perfect rhythm off the dribble. He plays like he knows he's good, but there is a likeable humbleness to him, too.

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Paige the passer might be as fun to watch as Paige the ballhandler. I saw him thread a needle to a teammate in traffic in the first half that I didn't think could be threaded. And he made it look easy.

He's averaging approximately three assists, four rebounds and 2.5 steals and sits quickly when his team gets a big lead. No stat padding here.

An old joke says that former North Carolina coach Dean Smith was the only person to ever hold Michael Jordan to under 20 points per game. I wouldn't put Linn-Mar boss Chris Robertson in that same category, mainly because Paige is remarkably unselfish.

Maybe we can say Robertson is the only guy to hold Paige to under 40 points a game?

Scoring didn't seem to be his first priority Friday night until the game was on the line. Paige found the open man against Washington every time. That's pretty impressive because it looked to me like he could get to the basket at will. Instead, he involved his teammates, ran the offense and showed flashes of why he was recruited by everyone in the country.

Even though he had a sub-par game by his own high standards, I was impressed with his leadership and poise. When the free throws and outside jumpers weren't dropping, he kept feeding his teammates and distributing the rock.

Not once did he shoot when I thought he should have passed. He ran the floor and was the clear leader. He looked over at the bench and took directions from his coach. I don't think I saw him take a really bad shot. Maybe there isn't such a thing when you are Marcus Paige?

When a kid makes good things happen on a so-so night, I get to thinking there are a couple more pages to be written on this Paige.

He's averaging 28 points a game, tops in 4A, and shooting 86 percent from the foul line and 54

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percent from the floor, but that too is a bit of a mirage. He could be putting up bigger scoring numbers, if he wanted.

And this on a team without the likes of Matt Bohannon, Shane Benton, Josh Montague, Ian McBrayer, Michael Thul and the other stars from last year's undefeated campaign. That's five former teammates who are now playing college basketball somewhere - almost unheard of.

When I heard he dropped 31 points on South Sioux City phenom and Iowa recruit Mike Gesell recently, I figured Paige had 30 field goal attempts, shot the ball every time down the floor or had a bunch of layups and free throws. He didn't. In fact he was 11-for-14 and 6-for-6. But Friday night proved to me something else.

Maybe the fact that Paige is as unselfish this season - as he was last year on a team with much more talent - tells you a little something about the kid.

For sure, I was impressed with a scrappy, winless Warrior group that didn't back down to the defending state champions or the state's best player. They didn't double-team Paige, instead employing straight-up man-to-man.

There was no junk. No box-and-one defense. No special "Paige Rules." They rebounded, got some easy layups, attacked the paint and trailed by only nine points with under five minutes to play.

The Warriors played a heckuva game. Coach Brad Metzger and his troops gave the Lions all they could handle. They will win some games before this season is over.

For awhile, it even looked like an upset was in the making. Until Paige decided he had seen enough.

Paige had 13 points in the final stanza, including a three-point play, two long jumpers and seven

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free throws, all of which swished without touching the rim. So much for those missed free throws in the first half.

And he found open teammates for some easy baskets and generally took things by the jugular with the game on the line. Game over.

Leadership. Unselfishness. Talent. Marcus Paige has it all.

Being overrated has never been better.