

No reason to wait, Paige commits to UNC

Written by Jim Ecker

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MINNEAPOLIS -- Marcus Paige has been a big fan of the North Carolina basketball program since he was in the second grade, barely big enough to dribble a ball.

Now his dream of playing for the famed Tar Heels will come true.

Paige, a junior at Linn-Mar, announced Saturday he's accepted a scholarship offer from North Carolina Coach Roy Williams and will join the Tar Heels for the 2012-13 school year.

"It's exciting," he said after playing in the Timberwolves Shootout at the Target Center. "There's not really a whole lot of words to describe it, especially when you know it's a dream you've had as a kid. It's just a great feeling."

Ellis Paige, the point guard's father, summed up the family's feelings in one word. "Elated," he said.

Paige had planned to wait until after the 2010-11 high school season to narrow his list of colleges, take more visits and make a decision, but he saw no reason to wait any longer.

"That was the plan, but I always said if something feels right I'm not going to drag it out for no reason," he said. "Things fell into place and it felt right. There's no need to wait."

Paige called Williams with the news Thursday night.

"He was pretty excited," Paige said. "It was good to see him happy that I'm going to be a part of the program in a couple of years."

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Williams has a rich history of landing some of Iowa's elite basketball players. He signed Raef LaFrentz and Kirk Hinrich while coaching at Kansas, now he's lured Harrison Barnes and Paige to his new post at North Carolina.

Williams has visited Paige four times in Iowa, and Paige said his relationship with the successful coach was a pivotal factor in his decision.

Paige is averaging 17.7 points for the top-ranked Lions and is considered one of the top prep point guards in the country, a left-hander with great quickness, jumping ability, ballhandling skills and intelligence.

"His intelligence as a freshman was unbelievable," Linn-Mar Coach Chris Robertson remarked. "That's why we brought him up and he started as a freshman.

"He's one of those rare kids who has the ability to understand the game. He's very smart. A great floor leader."

Paige was being wooed by major colleges before he attended his first class at Linn-Mar. "He's been recruited since the eighth grade, so it's been kind of a long haul," Ellis Paige said.

The first offers came from Iowa State and the University of Northern Iowa, then grew to include Kansas, UCLA, Illinois and many others. Ellis Paige said his son almost committed to Kansas at one point, but decided to wait.

"He's always been really mature about it and adult-like," Ellis Paige commented.

Robertson said Paige handled the process extremely well, especially when Williams, Kansas Coach Bill Self or Iowa Coach Fran McCaffery visited Linn-Mar.

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"That's one of the things that's impressed me the most about him," Robertson said. "You watch him in school, he's just hanging out with his friends. A normal kid.

"He just takes it in stride," Robertson said. "He's a humble kid. I was really impressed with how he handled the whole process."

Paige visited North Carolina in December and came home with an offer from Williams. A month later, he accepted.

"It's exciting, and we're so excited for him," Robertson said. "For people who don't know him, he's a great kid. He's a super young man, a great student.

"And for him to go to one of the most prestigious programs in the country is a great tribute to him. His teammates are excited, our staff is excited."

Paige visited with Barnes during his trip to North Carolina. Barnes, from Ames, is a freshman with the Tar Heels.

"He told me a little bit about what it's like and how nice it is down there and how everyone treats you well and how the coaching staff is great and everything," Paige said.

There has been speculation Barnes may leave college and make himself eligible for the NBA at some point, perhaps after this season. Paige said Barnes did not talk about that to him.

"It would be nice to be able to play with him, but you never know," he said. "No, no guarantees on that one."

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Paige is still in the process of notifying the other coaches who recruited him.

"I've done some of that, but I still have a little more to do," he said. "It's not easy."

Paige issued a statement about his decision prior to Linn-Mar's 81-35 victory over Apple Valley at the Target Center.

"I would like to thank all of the coaches across the country who have taken the time to recruit me to be a part of their basketball program," he declared. "The recruiting process has been exciting for me and my family.

"The decision process has been difficult, and the deciding factors for me include: The great relationship I have developed with Coach Williams and his staff, the history and tradition of North Carolina basketball, having the opportunity to play for a national championship."

Paige can sign his national letter-of-intent this November.

Paige's sister, Morgan, is a freshman on the basketball team at the University of Wisconsin.