

Typical teen, atypical talent

Written by Tom Fruehling

Thursday, 30 December 2010 10:38 - Last Updated Tuesday, 04 January 2011 21:35



To hear basketball phenom Marcus Paige tell it, he's just a typical teenager.

The baby-faced 17-year-old Linn-Mar junior has loads of friends, some close ones from other schools he's known since playing YMCA ball together in grade school. He's active in a number of school organizations, his favorite being one that has him reading books in elementary classrooms.

"I like being with the little kids," says the soft-spoken, polite young man. "And I think it's important that the big kids be role models for them."

He has his own role models, too. His dad, Ellis Paige, is a juvenile probation officer, and his mom, Sherryl Gaffney-Paige, is a longtime English teacher at Marion High School and until this year the Indians' girls basketball coach.

The parents met while basketball stars at Mount Mercy College. Paige has always been close to his big sister Morgan and says he misses her more than he thought he would when she left this year on a basketball scholarship at the University of Wisconsin. Morgan's a blue chipper in her own right, an all-stater on her mother's very successful Marion teams.

Like most boys his age, Marcus has a collection of video games, which may partly explain his delicate touch with a basketball. But he says his folks are strict about homework and doing well in class. Since his freshman year at Linn-Mar, he's never had less than straight A's.

But all things considered, he contends, "I really lead a pretty simple life."

Except that a few weeks ago, he spent the weekend at the University of North Carolina and came back with yet another of the dozens of offers he's received to play major college

Typical teen, atypical talent

Written by Tom Fruehling

Thursday, 30 December 2010 10:38 - Last Updated Tuesday, 04 January 2011 21:35

basketball. His first two came when he was in the eighth grade, from Iowa State and the University of Northern Iowa, and it's been a steady stream ever since.

Illinois Coach Bruce Weber has hung out in the Linn-Mar gym this year. At a recent game, Cyclone Coach Fred Hoiberg and Bill Self of Kansas stood side-by-side against the wall at one end of the court. Hawkeye Coach Fran McCaffery's come-a-calling more than once.

UCLA and Virginia are also in the mix, and the 6-foot-1 southpaw point guard says he plans to narrow his list of suitors to a handful after this season.

"It's going to be a difficult decision for him to make. He's got so many great options," says his coach Chris Robertson, who has the Lions 6-0 at the winter break and ranked No.1 among big schools in the state. "But Marcus has a great, great future. He understands the game so well and never gets too high or low. He's so intelligent, it's like having an extension of the coach out there.

"And he's a tremendous teammate. He gets everyone else involved. He's a great leader and just a great kid. He's humble and unselfish. He makes everybody else better."

Paige has displayed those skills since second grade, when he teamed up on the Cedar Rapids Twisters AAU squad with current Metro high school senior stars Kasey Semler of Marion and Wes Washpun of Washington.

"We were pretty much interchangeable at point guard," Paige says of the trio that stayed together for five years. "We had good chemistry."

For the past four years, from April through July, he's played 60 games or more all over the country with the top-flight Martin Brothers select AAU team out of Waterloo. He's started all three years at Linn-Mar, and his team has never lost a game at home.

Typical teen, atypical talent

Written by Tom Fruehling

Thursday, 30 December 2010 10:38 - Last Updated Tuesday, 04 January 2011 21:35

Two years ago, the Lions lost in the state tournament to the Harrison Barnes-led Ames juggernaut; last year, they lost to Southeast Polk in the semifinals while Marcus was slowed with mononucleosis.

Robertson points out that his versatile point guard has always been surrounded by all-staters, so he's been counted on more as a distributor of the ball rather than the main scoring threat. It's a role that suits him fine.

This season, however, Paige has boosted his average to around 18 points a game, to go along with his usual arsenal of assists and steals. He has hit more than 60 percent of his field-goal tries, about half of his 3-point attempts and almost 90 percent of his free throws.

"He's become more explosive," says his coach.

This coming Saturday, Jan. 8, Linn-Mar travels to the Twin Cities to take on perennial suburban powerhouse Apple Valley at the 20,000-seat Target Center, home arena of the NBA Minnesota Timberwolves. For Marcus Paige, it likely won't be the last time playing in the spotlight on the big-time stage.

So much for the simple life.