

Paige ready for final campaign, better than ever

Written by Jim Ecker

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Marcus Paige was one of the premier high school basketball players in Iowa last year, an all-state point guard and the driving force behind Linn-Mar's surge to the Class 4A title.

Now he's even better.

"He's a lot better than he was a year ago, probably in all phases of the game," Linn-Mar Coach Chris Robertson said. "His entire game is improving, and I think people are going to see how special he is this year."

People noticed how special he was last year, when he averaged 17.7 points, 3.5 assists and 3 steals on a talented club. North Carolina Coach Roy Williams noticed, too, and was delighted when Paige signed with the Tar Heels earlier this month.

"He's shooting the ball real consistently. I know he's been shooting a lot in the offseason," Robertson said. "Strength-wise, he's getting stronger. His lower body is very explosive."

Paige shot 58.1 percent from the floor last season, including 50.8 percent on 3-pointers, and nailed 81.0 percent of his free throws, so it might be scary for opponents to contemplate an "even better" Paige on the floor this season.

The big question at Linn-Mar, of course, is not Paige. He's a superstar and undoubtedly one of the top prep guards in the country. The question is the supporting cast.

All four of Paige's running mates in the starting lineup last year graduated after Linn-Mar topped Des Moines Hoover, 56-42, in the state finals to cap a perfect 26-0 campaign. Remarkably, all four of them are now playing in college.

Matt Bohannon, the captain of the state all-tournament team, is playing at the University of

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Northern Iowa, although he'll probably be redshirted this season. Shane Benton has joined North Dakota, Josh Montague is at Maryville (Mo.) and Ian McBrayer is at the University of Dubuque, where he also plays football.

Michael Thul, the backup point guard last season, is playing at Coe College, so even a reserve from last year's club is getting a chance to continue his career in college.

Robertson has big shoes to fill.

"Well, it's going to be interesting," he said. "There's a lot of excitement because of last year and with Marcus coming back. We feel like we've got the best player in the state of Iowa.

"From that standpoint, that's exciting," he said. "But on the other side of that, we've got to find a lot of new faces to complement him."

Linn-Mar has won three state titles in the last eight years (2004, 2007, 2011) and has compiled an extraordinary 186-18 mark during that span, partially because its feeder system keeps delivering well-rounded, fundamentally sound players.

Derrick Gogg, a 6-foot-8 center, and Matt Lassen, a 6-4 perimeter player, contributed to last year's success as sophomores and should be moving into the starting lineup. "I anticipate them stepping in and playing a lot bigger roles this year as juniors," Robertson said.

Andy Henry, a star receiver for the Linn-Mar football team this season, got a small taste of the action last year and could play a prominent role for the basketball team.

"We're hoping Andy Henry has half as good a basketball season as he's had a football season," Robertson remarked. "We'll be very excited about that."

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Robertson also mentioned Zach Martins and Nate Dick as two players who could make important contributions.

The Lions entertain Waukeee on Tuesday to get things started.

Linn-Mar had an exceptionally well-balanced team last season. Paige, Benton and Bohannon roamed the perimeter, while Montague and McBrayer gave them size and strength up front.

"That team was just such a special team," Robertson said. "They all played a role. They all played their role very well.

"Probably my biggest concern is the physicality inside. We had that last year. With Josh and Ian, nobody pushed them around. They were very physical inside.

"That's probably the piece we're looking to find, some bodies that can go inside and bang a little bit. I think we're going to miss all those guys, but I think the hardest ones to replace this year are going to be the big guys inside."

Gogg is 6-foot-8, but skinny. They're trying to beef him up.

Linn-Mar lost 80 percent of its starting lineup from a state championship team, but Robertson said "anything is possible" as he looks ahead to a new season.

"This team is going to have to go through some ups and downs early in the year," he said. "I think in the end, I think we could make a run and be competitive if things come together. We could make a run, because when you have a player like Marcus, anything is possible."

Paige was one of several good leaders on the team last year, but now he's the main man.

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"He's always been a great leader with his play, and maybe our best leader as far as on the floor," Robertson said. "I think he's going to have to be more of a vocal leader and push some of these younger guys.

"It's hard," Robertson said. "You hope he takes over a little bit more, but at the same time Marcus is the type of player that is so unselfish. He could probably go out and score 30 points a game, but I doubt if you'll see that.

"Hopefully you'll see it once in awhile, but I think he'll still get everybody involved and be that floor leader and try to make the team as good as it can be."

It was pretty good last year.

"It was a dream," Robertson said. "It was a perfect season, in so many ways. It was a special group of guys.

"It's a hard thing to do, to go through a journey like that and win every game. And to finish it off with a state championship was icing on the cake. Groups like that don't come around very often."