

Paige nets 23 as Lions trim Waukee, 53-48

Written by Jim Ecker

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Marcus Paige has not lost a basketball game in the Linn-Mar High School gym since he joined the Lions as a freshman in 2008.

He wasn't going to let a sprained ankle get in the way of that winning streak Tuesday night.

Paige popped in 23 points as Linn-Mar rallied to defeat Waukee, 53-48, in a season opener that matched two of the premier Class 4A programs in the state.

Paige rolled his right ankle in practice Monday night and was questionable until 90 minutes before tipoff.

"I just wanted to come out here and help my team and do whatever I could," he said. "I thought if I hadn't played I would have left them hanging. I'm glad I was able to make it through the game."

Paige was limping after the game, but happy he played as the 2011 state champions rallied from a seven-point deficit in the fourth quarter.

"I think he really wanted to play in the home opener, especially in front of the home crowd," Coach Chris Robertson said. "He knows how good Waukee is. He wanted to be out there battling."

"I don't know if he was 70 or 75 percent, but he's pretty good at 75 percent."

Paige is the leading candidate for Mr. Basketball honors in Iowa this season, but he's the only returning starter for Linn-Mar after losing Matt Bohannon, Shane Benton, Josh Montague and Ian McBrayer to graduation. It took a while for the new lineup to click.

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The Lions trailed, 42-35, early in the fourth quarter when Paige and his new partners went to work. He found Matt Lassen in the corner for a 3-pointer, then scored two baskets himself with a coast-to-coast layup and lefty floater to tie the game, 42-42.

Jimmy Roth completed a three-point play to give the Lions a 45-42 advantage, then all-state receiver Andy Henry caught a pretty no-look pass from Paige for a layup and 47-42 lead.

It was a 14-0 streak that took less than 4 minutes and turned a seven-point deficit into a seven-point lead.

"Marcus took over," Robertson said. "He took it to the basket on three straight possessions. Obviously Marcus is a difference-maker. Not many teams have a guy like that who can just take over the game. We're fortunate to have him."

Paige led his team off the court as well.

"Marcus pulled us together and said, 'We're not losing this game.' We all nodded our heads," Lassen said. "Playing with him, if you're open by just a little bit you're getting the ball. He has a pass-first mentality."

Paige hit only 3 of 10 shots in the first half, but made 8 of 12 in the second half to finish 11 of 22 for 50 percent.

"I rolled my ankle a little bit in practice yesterday and I think that made me settle for jump shots," he said, downplaying the injury. "And plus it was our first game, so there was kind of a feeling-out thing."

"I think I forced some 3's early that I probably shouldn't have shot. Then our offense got settled

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down and we started getting more aggressive and taking it to the rim in the second half. I think that was the difference."

Waukee (0-1) played in the Class 4A state tournament last year and returned five key players from that team, including four with starting experience. The Warriors have good shooters and good size, and for a while it looked like they'd spoil the party.

Chad Gutschenritter, a 5-foot-11 guard, hit four straight 3-pointers in about three minutes to give Waukee its 42-35 lead early in the fourth quarter, but he didn't score again as Paige and Henry took turns guarding him.

Lassen, Henry, Roth and Derik Gogg joined Paige in the new starting lineup for the Lions and all four of the newcomers contributed to the victory.

"I'm so proud of our guys right now," Paige said. "To see us come together and really click like that at the end of the game was a great start to our season. I think we can build off that."

Paige soaked his right ankle for several hours Monday night, again Tuesday morning and again Tuesday afternoon.

"I wasn't real optimistic last night. It was pretty swollen up," Robertson said. "When we left practice last night, a lot of guys had their heads down."

Paige has already signed with North Carolina and didn't have to play Tuesday night. "I think that shows a lot about Marcus," Robertson remarked.

Lassen scored 10 points for Linn-Mar, including a pair of clutch free throws with 19 seconds left after Waukee had pulled within 51-48. Gogg scored eight points.

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"I like our team. I'm excited," Robertson said. "We're young. We may take some lumps early, but I think at the end, if this group keeps working, the pieces are there to make a run at the end."

Gutschenritter led Waukee with 20 points. Cole Pederson scored 11 points for the Warriors.

WAUKEE (48): Gutschenritter 8 0-0 20, Stotts 2 0-0 5, Easley 1 0-0 3, Pederson 4 1-1 11, Gehring 1 2-2 4, Allen 1 0-0 2, Lejukole 0 0-0 0, Jacobson 1 1-2 3, Wellendorf 0 0-0 0, Kollmorgen 0 0-0 0. Totals 18 4-5 48.

LINN-MAR (53): Lassen 3 2-2 10, Roth 2 1-3 6, Gogg 4 0-0 8, Henry 2 0-0 4, Paige 11 0-0 23, Martins 0 0-0 0, Dick 0 0-0 0, Schlotterback 0 0-0 0, Hutchins 1 0-0 2. Totals 23 3-5 53.

Halftime - Waukee 24, Linn-Mar 23. 3-point goals - Waukee 8 (Gutschenritter 4, Pederson 2, Stotts 1, Easley 1), Linn-Mar 4 (Lassen 2, Roth 1, Paige 1).