

Paige enjoys life with the Tar Heels

Written by Jim Ecker

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He's gone snorkeling in Hawaii, played before immense crowds, started for one of the top basketball programs in the country as a freshman and gotten off to a good start in the classroom.

All things considered, Marcus Paige has made a smooth adjustment to college at the University of North Carolina.

"It's actually going pretty well. I'm enjoying it so far," he said Tuesday in a telephone interview. "I'm doing pretty well in school. That part has been fine. And the basketball has been great so far. I get along very well with the guys. It's been good."

Paige is the prep All-American point guard from Linn-Mar who helped the Lions win the Class 4A state title with a 24-0 record in 2010-11 as a junior. North Carolina Coach Roy Williams made him a top priority and Paige was eager to join the Tar Heels, his favorite college team.

So far, it's been about what he expected.

"Not really any huge surprises," he said. "The big difference is the speed of the game. Going from high school to the highest levels of college basketball is a pretty big jump."

Paige is averaging 7.9 points, 3.3 assists and 2.3 rebounds per game. He's shooting only 39 percent from the field and 30.8 percent on 3-pointers, but those numbers have been rising.

"I think it's just getting comfortable with the change and the speed and the physicality of the game," he said. "In my first few games my shooting percentages were terrible, but all the ones

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after that I've been around 50 percent or something like that. That's a little more where I want to be."

Paige has committed 21 turnovers in seven games, a figure he'd like to reduce.

"I definitely have a lot of things to improve," he said. "The point guard here in this system, it's kind of a tough one to learn. But I think I've picked it up pretty well and I'm getting the confidence of my teammates.

"Hopefully that can continue and I can build off of what I've done so far."

Paige jammed his left shoulder in practice last Friday and did not play Saturday against UAB, but he hopes to be ready for this Saturday's game against East Tennessee State.

"It's getting better pretty quickly," he said. "I'm hoping that I'll be able to play 100 percent on Saturday in our next game."

Paige traveled all over the country with his AAU basketball teams in high school, but he'd never been to Hawaii until North Carolina played in the Maui Invitational in November.

"That was a great experience," he said. "It didn't go quite the way we wanted it to on the basketball court, but I had a really good time with the team.

"We got to go snorkeling. I had never done anything like that before. It was pretty awesome.

"Our hotel was right on the beach, so we got to hang out on the beach and get in the water a little bit, too. It was a really good trip."

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North Carolina (6-2) lost to Butler, 82-71, in the semifinals of the Maui tournament. A week later, the Tar Heels were drubbed by top-ranked Indiana, 83-59, before a sellout crowd at Assembly Hall in Bloomington, Ind.

It was the most lopsided loss in a non-conference game for the Tar Heels during Williams' 10 years as head coach and dropped Carolina to 20th in the Associated Press poll. "We can learn a lot from what we did in that game," Paige remarked.

The North Carolina website lists Paige at slightly more than 6 feet tall (6-feet, 1/2 inch officially) and 157 pounds, but he said the 157 is a misprint. He said he's weighed about 165 since he arrived at college and is still about 165.

"I'm trying to get that up, but with the amount of running that we do it's kind of tough," he said.

He does not have a specific weight in mind, but would like to get stronger so he can absorb contact and finish at the basket. "That will come with time," he said.

A year ago, Paige was averaging 28 points and setting records at Linn-Mar High School. Now he's a freshman point guard in the Atlantic Coast Conference, one of the top leagues in the country.

Life is good.