

Uthoff takes first step as new Hawkeye

Written by Jim Ecker

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NORTH LIBERTY - Jarrod Uthoff played in the Prime Time League in 2010 after his junior year at Cedar Rapids Jefferson, but back then he was a tall, skinny high school kid and not a lot of PTL fans cared a whole lot about him.

They care now.

Uthoff returned to the Prime Time League Tuesday night at the North Liberty Recreation Center and the small gym was packed with Iowa fans eager for their first look at 7-foot center Adam Woodbury, new point guard Mike Gesell and the skinny 6-foot-8 kid from Marengo who created a national stir when he bolted the Wisconsin Badgers after one year.

Uthoff is a Hawkeye now, but he brought a little bit of the Badgers with him by wearing his old red-and-white Wisconsin sneakers in the first PTL game of the year.

"I don't have any other ones," he said with a smile.

Uthoff is a guy on a budget now, a walk-on who has to pay his own way at Iowa until he gets a scholarship for the 2013-14 campaign.

Uthoff held his own Tuesday night against the toughest competition he's faced since his final practice at Wisconsin in March. He scored 13 points, grabbed 13 rebounds and collected three assists, but he shot only 6-for-15 from the field, missed all five of his 3-pointers and was called for traveling three times.

"I haven't really played a game in awhile, so it was a whole lot different," he said. "It was a lot of fun and it was very intense."

Uthoff announced he was leaving Wisconsin in early April, and he quickly became a marked

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man in Madison as Coach Bo Ryan slapped all sorts of restrictions on his ability to find another school. Uthoff couldn't exactly stroll into the Kohl Center once that happened and participate in pickup games with his former Badger teammates.

"I couldn't play with the Wisconsin guys, so I was basically just working out," he said. "I really didn't have any games to play."

Uthoff is normally a good outside shooter for a big man, but his shot looked rusty Tuesday. "I wasn't feeling it. I could have shot a lot better, but that's how it goes," he said.

The North Liberty Rec Center was packed. The bleachers were filled and people stood everywhere, and PTL director Randy Larson had to shoo folks away from the south basket so none of the players (or fans) got hurt.

Uthoff received a round of applause after he hit his first shot. "The first one went down, but the other 15 didn't," he said, exaggerating. "Yeah, I was struggling."

Uthoff has found a new home, but he's the first to acknowledge he has lots of work to do before taking the court for the Hawkeyes in 17 months. First of all, he knows he has to get stronger so he doesn't get knocked around in Big Ten games.

"Yeah, definitely," he said.

Uthoff is 6-foot-8 and 200 pounds, but said he does not have a target weight in mind.

Ryan was soundly criticized for the way he treated Uthoff, but Ryan is a smart, successful coach who knows basketball and knows talent. If Ryan thought Uthoff could have significantly helped the Badgers this past season, he would have put Uthoff in the rotation from Day 1 and not let him redshirt.

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At this point, Uthoff is a former Iowa Mr. Basketball who still has to prove he can play in the Big Ten. He appears to have the skills, talent and work ethic, but the Big Ten is filled with highly skilled players who all want the same thing.

"You need to work wherever you go," he said. "To be the best basketball player you can be, it takes work."

Uthoff said he's enjoyed his first few weeks in Iowa City as he gets to know his new teammates. "They've been treating me really well," he said. "They welcomed me right in."

For the record, Uthoff was not the only new Hawkeye who did not light up the gym Tuesday night. Woodbury, the 7-footer from Sioux City, scored two points and committed seven fouls (players are not allowed to foul out, but there are team penalties for excessive fouls).

Gesell, the point guard from Nebraska, looked like he has the ability to play in the Big Ten. He scored 27 points, went 5-for-6 on 3-pointers, grabbed six rebounds and collected five assists.

Uthoff played on the same PTL team with Woodbury and UI veteran Zach McCabe. Cedar Rapids Washington grad and current Hawkeye Josh Oglesby is on the same club, but he did not play Tuesday due to a night class at Iowa.

McCabe hit seven 3-pointers and led their team to a 93-89 victory over a team that included Gesell, former Hawkeye Jarryd Cole (19 points) and current Hawkeye Melsahn Basabe (18 points).

Uthoff was not entirely happy with the way he played, but he appeared to be in good spirits after going through a difficult transfer process that took two months and put him in the national spotlight.

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"I'm relieved it's over," he said. "I'm looking forward to being a Hawkeye."