

Offers were there early for Paige

Written by Jim Ecker

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MINNEAPOLIS -- Marcus Paige was just 14 years old, not yet in high school, when college basketball coaches began offering him full scholarships to attend their schools.

The first offer came from Ben Jacobson, the head coach at the University of Northern Iowa. The very next day, then-Iowa State coach Greg McDermott invited Paige to become a Cyclone.

This was during the summer of 2007, shortly after Paige had graduated from the eighth grade. College was still five years away, yet Jacobson and McDermott were willing to bet that the skinny, precocious point would grow into someone special.

They were right, but Roy Williams and the University of North Carolina won the grand prize. Paige committed to the Tar Heels on Thursday and made the announcement Saturday night before playing for Linn-Mar at the Timberwolves Shootout.

"Northern Iowa was the first one," he recalled Sunday morning. "We went down there for a team camp -- I think it was probably June -- and they offered after the camp. And the next day Iowa State did."

He couldn't drive yet, but college coaches wanted him to steer their teams in five years. He was flattered.

"It was awesome, because I wasn't expecting it or anything," he said. "I was just playing, trying to get better and fit in with the high school guys."

Paige did better than that. Suddenly, college coaches were telling him he could play for them.

"I wouldn't say it was overwhelming, but it was definitely exciting and a little surprising," he said. "But that was my goal when I was that age (to play in college). I reached it earlier than I

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expected. It wasn't going to stop me from working hard or anything like that."

Paige, a skinny 14-year-old point guard, played in the Prime Time League in North Liberty in the summer 2007 against players much older than himself, many of them in college at Iowa or UNI. He tried to fit in, often drifting to the corner of the basketball court, a point guard without the ball.

"If I demanded it, I probably wouldn't have gotten it anyway," he said.

"It was fun, because it obviously was challenging," he said. "Grown men are a little more physical than a 14-year-old kid. I knew I had some skills, and I knew it would be good to get pushed around a little bit and make me better."

Paige, a junior at Linn-Mar, got a good night's sleep Saturday at the Hotel Minneapolis after Linn-Mar played in the Timberwolves Shootout. He committed to North Carolina on Thursday, but waited two days to make a public announcement. As it turned out, it was two restless nights.

"I probably got the most sleep I've had in the last couple of days, at least," he said Sunday morning, refreshed. "I wasn't getting a lot of sleep at all. I was a little tired."

The Lions returned to Linn-Mar High School a little before 1 p.m. on Sunday. Most of the players quickly scattered, to do homework or get more sleep.

Paige had work to do. He had to call more college coaches and let them know he wouldn't be joining their team, including coaches who offered him a scholarship a long time ago.