



IOWA BASKETBALL



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Uthoff Named Finalist for Karl Malone Award

Hawkeye leading scorer one of five finalists

Hawkeyesports.com, March 10, 2016

SPRINGFIELD, Mass. -- The Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame announced today the five finalists for the 2016 Karl Malone Power Forward of the Year Award. Named after Hall of Famer and two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Karl Malone, the annual honor in its second year recognizes the top power forwards in Division I men's college basketball. A committee comprised of top college basketball personnel narrowed the original watch list of 20 candidates down to 10 and now the final five.

The five finalists include University of Iowa senior Jarrod Uthoff, Iowa State's Georges Niang, Perry Ellis of Kansas, Brice Johnson of North Carolina, and Stony Brook's Jameel Warney.



Uthoff, a native of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, ranks second in the Big Ten in scoring (18.8), first in blocked shots (2.7), and tied for 10th in rebounding (6.5). The forward ranks 20th in Iowa career scoring (1,238) and fourth in blocked shots (172). Uthoff (6-foot-9, 221 pounds) has scored in double figures in all but one game this season, including netting 20 points or more a team-best 14 times. The team co-captain is one of only three Hawkeyes in program history to amass 1,000 points and 150 blocks in a career (Acie Earl and Greg Stokes). He currently is one of only two players nationally to total more than 550 points, 190 rebounds, and 80 blocked shots (Stony Brook's Jameel Warney). Additionally, Uthoff is only the second player nationally the last 20 years to average two blocks and two 3-pointers per game (Duke's Shane Battier in 1999-00 and 2000-01).

Uthoff was named a second and third team all-American by Sporting News and USA Today earlier this week, along with being named a unanimous first-team All-Big Ten honoree by the conference and the Associated Press. Uthoff also excels in the classroom, being named the Division I Men's Basketball Academic All-American of the Year last week.

"Throughout his career, Karl Malone earned a reputation as a dependable force and someone who could always deliver," said John L. Doleva, President and CEO of the Basketball Hall of Fame. "The young men nominated for this award have shown similar prowess throughout the season. We look forward to watching them as they work toward their postseason goals."

The winner of the 2016 Karl Malone Power Forward of the Year Award will be determined by a combination of fan votes and input from the Basketball Hall of Fame's selection committee. Fans are encouraged to visit HoophallAwards.com to cast their votes, March 11-25.

The winner of the 2016 Karl Malone Award will be awarded at ESPN's College Basketball Awards presented by Wendy's from Club Nokia in Los Angeles, California, on Friday, April 8. The Awards will be televised live on ESPN2 at 8 p.m. ET.

For more information on the 2016 Karl Malone Award, log onto HoophallAwards.com.

It Takes a Village to Make a Basketball Star, Just Ask Iowa's Jarrod Uthoff

By C.J. Moore, College Basketball National Lead Writer, Mar 1, 2016

IOWA CITY, Iowa — A month ago, Iowa coach Fran McCaffery called Jarrod Uthoff into his office. His senior star had failed to score in double digits for the only time all season in a loss to Maryland, and McCaffery sensed he needed a pick-me-up.

The coach showed him film of the Maryland game and what Uthoff could have done better. He pointed out the different ways teams were trying to slow him down, and McCaffery delivered a simple message: *You still have the green light. We want you to be aggressive.*

This kind of check-in on your star player after a rough game wasn't unusual for McCaffery, but how Uthoff reacted was.

"He said, 'Coach, thanks a lot. I really appreciate it,'" McCaffery said. "He was so genuinely appreciative of the time I took with him. To me, this is what I'm supposed to be doing. This is what I told you I'd do when I recruited you. We would coach you. We would help you. I'm not going to scream at you because you scored nine points. You've been one of the best players in the country. We love ya."

Uthoff has certainly been one of the nation's best players this season, averaging 18.5 points and 6.4 rebounds and leading the Big Ten in blocks at 2.7 per game.

Despite a recent slump for the Hawkeyes, who have lost three straight and fallen from No. 3 to No. 16 in the rankings, Uthoff is still in the conversation for All-America honors. He is in seventh place in Ken Pomeroy's Player of the Year ratings, which uses advanced statistics and team strength to rank the nation's best players.

The journey to potential All-America status has been an unusual one, starting at Wisconsin and then finding the perfect fit just down the road from his hometown after a controversial transfer, and didn't come without plenty of help from those closest to him.

Uthoff was slow to realize just how talented he was when he arrived at Iowa four years ago. He had been one of the most noteworthy transfers that year—not because of his ability but because of how the coach he left, Wisconsin's Bo Ryan, reacted.

Uthoff had committed to Wisconsin in the summer of 2010 in part because the programs closest to home (Iowa, Iowa State and Creighton) were all going through coaching changes.

Soon it became clear the Badgers' style of play was not a good match, and Uthoff began the process of transferring. "I had people telling me their style of play will fit you and all this," Uthoff said. "I really didn't know much. You're a 17-year-old kid. You don't know what you're looking for. You tend to make mistakes."

But all was not lost in his one year at Wisconsin. It was there that he met his fiancée, Jessie Jordan, who was on the golf team and eventually followed Uthoff to Iowa a year after he left.

Ryan made national headlines by blocking Uthoff from attending any school in the Big Ten and ACC, along with Iowa State, Marquette and Florida. When Ryan started to get some bad press nationally, he went on ESPN's *Mike and Mike* show and dug himself an even deeper public relations hole.

Ryan's biggest gripe was that Uthoff hadn't come to see him face-to-face. Uthoff doesn't like to talk about it now, but it's obvious that the fact that Ryan portrayed him as a player who avoided speaking to him bothers him.

Uthoff said he had told Ryan he wanted to meet after the season, then the coach was gone for the Final Four and then went on vacation after that. Uthoff was getting antsy because the spring signing period was approaching.

"I need to find my new home," Uthoff said. "I'm already checked out. I'm gone here. I need to start taking steps forward here. So I called him on the phone and I told him what the deal was. He's like, 'Well, I can't do anything until I get back.'"

Uthoff told Ryan he would see him in his office when he got back. Two days later, one of the Wisconsin assistants met with him. Following that conversation, he started getting calls from other coaches.

"I got it from another college coach that I'd been released, which was a shock to me," Uthoff said. "Because I was still waiting to hear from Bo when he got back. I didn't know when he got back. I thought he'd call me and we could meet. The last thing I wanted to do was have that phone conversation, and that's the way it had to be and sometimes you have to do the uncomfortable."

Eventually, Wisconsin released Uthoff to most schools. He decided to attend Iowa because he liked McCaffery's uptempo style and it was close to home. But the move had its costs. He had to sit out another year, and he also had to pay his own way since he was transferring within the conference. He couldn't even talk to the Iowa coaches until he was enrolled.

The dog days of February have been rough on the Hawkeyes, but Uthoff has the closest thing to a sports psychologist that you'll find in his fiancée.

Jessie Jordan knows athletic success. Her father, Ohio congressman Jim Jordan, won two national titles as a wrestler at Wisconsin in the 1980s. Her older brother, Ben, finished seventh nationally in his weight class and was an All-American in 2012. Her younger brother, Isaac, won a Big Ten title last year at Wisconsin, is a two-time All-American and is currently 21-0 this season and ranked second nationally at 165 pounds.

"I think that's why I like Jarrod, because I see that same fire that I hadn't seen in anyone other than the people I was related to," Jordan said. "Obviously, there are more people like that, but when you live in a little fishbowl, it's kind of hard to come across them."

Jordan said holidays at her house were built around training schedules—they couldn't open presents until her brothers were finished cutting weight.

Uthoff came about developing a special work ethic through his upbringing as well.

The youngest of five children, Uthoff grew up in a blue-collar family that lived down the road from Iowa City in the small town of Marengo (population 2,500). His father is an electrician at the nearby refrigeration plant. His mother managed a convenience

store, which his father would help run after his shift, often staying until 11 p.m.

"Above all else, they instilled in me hard work," Uthoff said. "You've got a couple of parents who wake up at 4:30 in the morning, go to work, and then they work all day. Seeing them and the amount of hours they worked to provide for all of us kids is something special, and you look at that and you're very grateful for what you have."

Jordan, he says, has helped him with his confidence, and that's something he struggled with early on at Iowa after not playing in a game that counted for two years. Uthoff spent his first year of eligibility at Iowa as a shooter off the bench, hitting 42.5 percent from deep and averaging 7.6 points per game in 18.2 minutes, but it took time to get back in the groove.

He spent many nights after games in the gym with Jordan. She would rebound, and he would shoot until he felt better about himself. "He can't sleep until he feels like he has corrected the problem," Jordan said.

Uthoff would also watch tape of his made shots—something he still does occasionally when he feels his shooting has gone awry.

There hasn't been much need for that this season, but sometimes he needs reminders of how good he can be. That's where Jordan comes in.

"She's always there to say the right thing and keep my mind right," Uthoff said. "Tell me what I need to hear at times."

Jordan's crowning achievement this year was a stern talk that came prior to Iowa's Dec. 10 road game at Iowa State. Uthoff poured in 30 points on 13 shots in the first half in Ames after Jordan had let him know she felt like he wasn't playing his best.

"I don't like getting into confrontations with him ever, but sometimes things need to be said to bring out the best in him," she said. "He was accepting less because he felt like that was more than anyone expected of him. I just quickly reminded him that's not what I expect of him. He needed to perform better."

Uthoff, who majored in economics as an undergrad, has his own analytical way of looking at the game. He likes to understand the reasoning behind things. And if he doesn't, he'll let you hear about it.

"I remember our first accounting class we had together, I felt like our entire class was a conversation between him and the teacher," senior guard Mike Gesell said. "He always wants to know why. Always wants to know why."

Such an approach has paid off on the court this season, his second as a starter but his first moving from small forward to power forward.

Previously, Uthoff had come off a lot of pindown screens to set up his jumper. Now, he's often used as a screener from the 4 position, and his looks are coming all over the court, forcing defenses to adjust constantly.

"I think it has allowed him to be more on the perimeter. He can bring his guy out when he has a 4 man on him because he's quicker than 4 men and bigger than 3 men," Gesell said. "When

he has a 4 man on him, we try to...iso him on the wing and then when that starts going, and they have to put a smaller guy, a quicker guy [on him], we'll roll him into the post and let him do his work down there."

McCaffery has given Uthoff the freedom to take just about any shot he wants, including from far beyond the three-point arc. Uthoff has already made more threes this year (55) than he attempted in his first season at Iowa (40) and connected at 39.9 percent.

McCaffery has also learned to accept some of the more unorthodox shots that are in Uthoff's bag of tricks. He shoots the Dirk Nowitzki-inspired one-footed fadeaway and also has an array of off-balance shots.

"Normally you would tell your guys, 'don't take that shot,'" McCaffery said. "Sometimes when he'll have what's seemingly an easy shot, he'll turn it into what looks like a hard shot when in actuality he makes the harder shot more often than he would make the easier shot."

"I know that sounds illogical, but he'll have an opportunity to go straight up off his left shoulder and he'll turn the other way and shoot a one-legged step-back and make it, and you just say, 'OK. That's Jarrod.'"

Uthoff's defense is just as frustrating to endure for the opposition. He ranks 11th nationally in blocked shots, but he's the best in the country away from the rim at swatting shots. Uthoff has blocked more jump shots than any player in the country, according to Jeff Haley of Hoop-Math.com.

"What's interesting is he gets most of his recognition because of his shot-blocking and his length, but his ability to move his feet laterally is phenomenal for a guy as tall as he is with that length," McCaffery said. "He can keep the dribbler in front of him, which a lot of long, lanky shot-blockers kind of play alongside of you and then they go contest you at the rim. He'll move his feet and then jump up right in your face and block your shot. That's really hard to do."

Uthoff is hesitant to bask in any of his glory.

"He's scoring points to where if he really wanted to hunt baskets and he was selfish at all—'I'm going to lead the Big Ten in scoring. I'm going to be one of the top scorers in the country'—he could," McCaffery said. "But he doesn't play the game that way. He doesn't think that way. It's been a struggle for me since he got here to get him to shoot more."

It's quickly apparent that the Uthoff who talks to reporters is not the Uthoff his family and teammates know. To those who know him well, he is a big goof, often turning pregame stretching into a dance. To reporters, he is guarded in interviews. Maybe because of what happened at Wisconsin.

At home, he doesn't have Internet or cable, partly because he's frugal—the Uthoffs didn't have cable for much of his childhood, either—but it's also about avoiding the outside noise.

"I think that's where kind of being a recluse now comes from because of that media firestorm," Jordan said of the response to Uthoff's transfer. "In that situation, he realized it was best to stay out of it and not follow it."

Away from the public eye, though, Uthoff has struck those around him with a generosity all admire.

During Uthoff's senior season at Jefferson High School in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, his coach, Stu Ordman, was approached by the mother of a grade schooler from a poor family. The child loved basketball but didn't like to read. The mom asked if her son could meet the team and meet Uthoff, his favorite player.

After a game, Uthoff talked to the boy and encouraged him to read. Four weeks later, Ordman got an email from the mother, thanking the coach for Uthoff coming over each week to read with her son.

"I'm like, what? He never said a word to me," Ordman said. "He continued to go visit the kid every week. He doesn't do it for the recognition."

In March (or possibly April), Uthoff will finish one of the best seasons in the history of Iowa basketball. Postseason accolades will follow.

And he's content if no one notices.

Jarrold Uthoff on faith, love, basketball and his Iowa legacy

By Chad Leistikow, Des Moines Register, February 29, 2016

IOWA CITY, Ia. — The story behind one of the most unique talents in Iowa basketball history is one about family, perseverance and a girl and her golf bag.

Jarrold Uthoff, the guy who scored 30 points *in one half* in one of the nation's most hostile arenas, traveled a patient path to becoming one of the Big Ten Conference's most dominant players. And while the perfect Senior Day sendoff didn't materialize after three straight Hawkeye losses, there's a lot to appreciate in Uthoff's story. Publicly, he's a man of few words, but Uthoff opened up about his personal life and journey in an interview with The Des Moines Register.

One thing everyone sees: Whether he's making his trademark fade-away jumper or missing seven shots in a row as he did against Minnesota before rattling off 24 points, Uthoff's expression never changes. So it's no surprise he won't get sentimental about his final college home game Tuesday against league-leading Indiana.

"It's not going to be emotional for me," he says. "I've got a game to think about."

Yet that quiet determination has made him a better basketball player.

The quiet part, that was always there. The youngest of Dale and Diane Uthoff's five kids, Jarrold's childhood was one of absorption.

"The other four kids talked many years for him, and he just took it all in," his mother says. "I was always so concerned because he never said anything. And he's still sort of that way."

His intelligence helped his game grow to match his now 6-foot-9, 221-pound frame. Fran McCaffery calls Uthoff "a coach's dream" because of his self-motivation and acceptance of teaching.

"Give him the green light, and he takes it from there," the sixth-year Iowa coach says.

Going the extra mile

Uthoff is an outdoorsman. He hunts deer with a bow and shotgun, and he grew up in Marengo fishing with his dad and older brother Dale Uthoff Jr.

Both activities require a quiet persistence for success — something Uthoff's transferred to basketball from the fishing boat on the Iowa River, where he and his brother once caught a 50-pound flathead catfish in the dark.

"You've got to be willing to go some places that aren't as easy to get to," Dale Jr. says, "and at times of day when it's a little painful to wake up that early."

That passion, especially for basketball, was evident in an ornery fifth-grader at Iowa Valley Elementary School. Uthoff, so gifted academically that those close to him say he doesn't even have to try, goofed off in class too much. ("I was a little wild child," he admits.)

So he was given an incentive: With good behavior, he could earn one bonus recess a week and pick anybody to join him.

When he accrued those recesses, his playmate wasn't another boy. He chose elementary principal Cindy Miller, who is about 6 feet tall and had played basketball at Central College.

"Probably because I was taller than everybody else," she jokes now. "... With all kids, we work with them to have something to work toward."

They would play H-O-R-S-E or shoot in the school's multipurpose room. But those 15-20 minutes a week underscored Uthoff's motivation to improve.

He got into it during the summer after his older brother by 13 years graduated from Drake. Before going into the professional world, Dale Jr. spent his last free summer driving Jarrold to basketball camps — including Iowa, Iowa State and Northern Iowa — around the state.

"That summer kind of got him started working on fundamentals," says Dale Jr., now an actuary in the Indianapolis area, "and got him going."

Finding love in an elevator

Basketball desires took Uthoff to new places and heights. After his freshman year at Iowa Valley, he moved in with older sister Erika on the southwest side of Cedar Rapids to enroll at Jefferson High School. He was Mr. Iowa Basketball as a senior after averaging 26.2 points a game and signed with Wisconsin.

It was a few days into his first semester in Madison that Uthoff met someone that changed his life. As Jessie Jordan, then a player on Wisconsin's golf team, stood in a Smith Hall elevator carrying her clubs, a large hand reached out to prevent the doors from closing.

"She was in there with her golf clubs, and I said, 'Well, you must play golf,'" Uthoff recalls, laughing about his introduction. "And she looked right at me and said, 'You must play basketball.'"

Though they didn't start dating until February 2012, they related to each other almost immediately. Jordan comes from a family of athletes. Her older brother, Ben, was a wrestling All-American at Wisconsin and younger brother, Isaac, still competes there and is ranked No. 2 nationally at 165 pounds. (A cousin, Bo Jordan, is ranked No. 3 at that weight for Ohio State.)

In April 2012, their relationship was at a crossroads. After redshirting for Wisconsin, Uthoff decided to transfer. His reasoning then was that then-Wisconsin coach Bo Ryan's scheme did not fit his skill set. His transfer made national headlines when Ryan made it contentious by putting more than two dozen schools, including Iowa, on a no-transfer list.

"The transfer is what Jarrod wanted," his mother says. "How it turned out is not what anybody expected."

Uthoff, of course, went to Iowa anyway. A Big Ten rule change that went into effect during the 2011-12 season lessened the financial cost to transfer within the league. But the price was higher than just paying his own tuition for a year — he would have to sit out another 12 months under NCAA transfer rules.

"Throughout the transfer process, I definitely matured," Jarrod Uthoff says. "It helped shape who I am."

A year of Skype, reflection

There's a famous quote from author Richard Bach: "If you love someone, set them free. If they come back, they're yours."

In a small way, that's what Uthoff did in letting go of another year of basketball eligibility. In a big way, that's what Jordan did with the man who gripped her heart. She stayed behind that year in Madison. Yet their bond became stronger.

As a transfer, Uthoff wasn't permitted to take road trips with the team. Connecting with Jordan helped.

"We would Skype every single night," Jordan says. "I'm not even kidding, for hours on end."

Jordan didn't have a car, so on Friday nights after practice, Uthoff would drive to Madison to pick her up and bring her back to Iowa City for the weekend and then make the round trip again on Sunday night — 12 hours of driving.

"Sitting out, not playing, having your girlfriend three hours away," he says. "That was tough."

The next year, she transferred to Iowa and continued her golf career here.

"I knew I loved him when I couldn't tell him to stay at Wisconsin because I didn't want to keep him from his dreams," she says. "And I knew he loved me when he

showed that unwavering commitment to me in that next year."

While she's now in the working world as a regional field director, including in Johnson County, for the Republican National Committee (her father, Jim, is a U.S. congressman from Ohio and was discussed as a possible successor to John Boehner as House speaker), Jordan is also improving as Uthoff's part-time personal rebounder.

"You should've seen her when she first started. She couldn't even catch the ball," Uthoff says, grinning. "She was afraid of it breaking her nose. It was hilarious."

Jordan is more than happy to fetch basketballs on off hours when Uthoff wants to get extra shots up at the Carver-Hawkeye Arena practice gym — often after a loss or bad game.

"If I want to see Jarrod, I have to be at the gym," she says. "That's fine with me, as long as he's working toward something. If he was at the bar, I wouldn't make that (a priority)."

Uthoff proposed this past summer, and they'll be married July 30 in Ohio.

A newfound faith

Uthoff averaged 7.6 points off the bench in his first college-playing season, one that (hard to believe) began 32 months after his last high school game. Iowa lost seven of its last eight games — not the year he envisioned after so much waiting.

He felt something was missing. Jordan encouraged Uthoff, raised Catholic, to find his faith. So did a random man in an ROTC class. So did Billy Taylor, Iowa's third-year director of basketball operations. Taylor's own faith journey was helped by reading Lee Strobel's "The Case for Christ." He was led to share that book with the ever-inquisitive, introspective Uthoff.

Sometime later while driving alone, Uthoff was flipping through radio stations when a man's voice caught his attention as someone who "knew what he was talking about," Uthoff says, "It turned out it was Lee Strobel talking about 'The Case for Christ.' That summer I became a Christian.

"That changes a person. You're more humble. It may sound corny, but you realize you're not the king of your own kingdom."

He says his faith "absolutely" unlocked more from his basketball game. He began to dwell less on mistakes.

"No matter what happens on Earth, there's eternity out there," Uthoff says. "You don't get consumed with little things."

Taylor saw a deeper transformation: Uthoff changing “as a person and as a man.”

“The way he is as a teammate and as a leader — he’s patient and loving to his teammates,” Taylor says. “I just think they’re all characteristics of his faith.”

“I look at some of the young guys on our team, for example. I’ve noticed Jarrod being more intentional about those relationships. Spending time with the younger guys, talking to them and trying to help them navigate a very difficult time in their lives. Everyone wants to play.”

Not playing, that’s something Uthoff certainly can relate to. How to deal with struggles, that’s where Uthoff has evolved.

‘A winning environment’

The fact that Uthoff doesn’t have Internet or cable in the apartment he shares with senior walk-on Okey Ukah (Jordan doesn’t in hers, either) gained national attention as he built up All-America-type numbers. Uthoff is the only power-five conference player this season with more than 500 points, 175 rebounds and 75 blocked shots. He credits blocking out distractions and his faith for elevating his mental game.

“I’ve had the physical attributes. I’ve had the skill for a while,” Uthoff says. “But it was that next step, to have confidence in myself — to create a winning environment for myself.”

Instead of TV, he’ll talk for hours with Jordan about politics, Christianity and the outdoors. As he puts it, “You talk to me without a camera, you could probably get me going.”

In public interviews, his answers are terse and honest. He only lets his guard down with those he completely trusts.

“The thing about him is, he’s as genuine a person as I’ve ever known. He is who he is,” McCaffery says. “There’s no acting going on. He’s as open and honest a person as you’re going to find.”

That’s why when Uthoff says of possibly playing in the NBA, “If it doesn’t work out, that’s the way it is,” you believe him. It’s not indifference, it’s a calming peace within.

“We’re kind of down after losses and up after wins,” says father Dale Uthoff Sr., an electrician for Whirlpool. “He’s not that way at all. That’s why he’s able to play the game.”

Uthoff’s college story isn’t over yet. He can either lead the Hawkeyes back from their recent slide (a Big Ten co-championship remains possible), or things could go the other way like in 2014. Whatever and wherever it ends, his parents will be there. They go to all the games, home and away — they even drove the 12 hours to Penn State a few weeks ago. Jordan will be there for him, too.

He cares about that more than any Hawkeye basketball legacy he might leave.

“I don’t want (fans) to remember me in any way — whatever way they see fit,” says Uthoff, who averages 18.5 points and 6.4 rebounds for No. 16 Iowa (20-8).

Fans will remember that 30-point half of long 3-pointers and high-flying dunks at Iowa State, the one that had his brother jumping up and down in front of his TV in Indianapolis. They’ll remember him as the face of a team that rose to as high as No. 3 in the Associated Press rankings with 11 No. 1 votes. And he’ll likely soon be selected for postseason awards, including first-team All-Big Ten.

“You enjoy your four years — or five years, in my case — and when your time’s up, your time’s up,” Uthoff says. “You can’t look back at the glory days. You keep looking forward.”

THE UTHOFF FILE

Born: May 19, 1993

Height, weight: 6-9, 221

Family: Parents, Dale and Diane Uthoff of Marengo. Four siblings, Dale Jr. (35), Erika (33), Jenna (30), Valerie (25). Fiancee is Jessie Jordan.

College career: Has 1,191 points in three years, No. 21 all-time at Iowa, including 517 this season in 28 games. He’s the third Hawkeye ever to have 1,000 career points and 150 blocks (joining Acie Earl and Greg Stokes). One of the 11 remaining candidates for the Oscar Robertson Trophy, awarded to the nation’s top player. ... One of only two Big Ten players in the last 20 seasons with at least 150 career blocks and 115 3-pointers (joining Minnesota’s Michael Bauer, 1999-2004). ... Named NBC/ESPN midseason second-team all-America. ... Career highs are 32 points (at Iowa State), 15 rebounds (vs. Minnesota) and six blocked shots. ... Academic All-District first-teamer. Graduated with a degree in economics in May and is in a graduate program for sports management.

REELING IN THE WINS: JARROD UTHOFF'S JUMP SHOOTING AND SHOT BLOCKING HAS SURPRISING IOWA ANGLING FOR A TITLE

By Brian Hamilton, Sports Illustrated, February 3, 2016

Jarrold Uthoff is many things—rebounder, three-point marksman, shot swatter, cord-cutter, devoted angler—but hopeless romantic is not one of them. Consider this account of how he asked his girlfriend of four years, Jessie Jordan, to marry him last August. "Took a walk down by the river," Uthoff says, "and I proposed to her."

The success of the Hawkeyes—who have surged to No. 5 after being unranked in the preseason—may come as a surprise. The ascetic nature of their national player of the year candidate should not. Uthoff, the 6'9" fifth-year senior forward who is averaging 18.6 points, 6.3 rebounds and 2.9 blocks for a 17–4 team off to its best start in 15 seasons, has neither cable television nor Internet at his apartment, yet is an Academic All–Big Ten selection who graduated with a B.A. in economics and is pursuing a graduate degree in sports management. Most of his memorable tales from the outdoors involve hooking fish, not fiancées. Whether he's missed or made five shots in a row, his demeanor is so stoic that his older brother has suggested that Jarrold should at least attempt to look like he's having fun.

But while Uthoff (YOU-toff) prefers to play it cool, that hardly means he doesn't care. He has an interest in politics and attended a recent Carly Fiorina event in Iowa City. He is also a stickler for grammar, wincing at poorly phrased text messages. And his proposal, if simple, was more romantic than he made it sound: After Uthoff and Jordan dined at 30hop—one of Iowa City's trendier spots—he said he wanted to take a walk, so the two parked down the road near the Iowa River Power Restaurant and strolled across the wood-planked bridge behind it.

Once they reached the water's edge on the other side, Uthoff asked Jordan to turn around. He had to ask twice because she suspected he just wanted to steal her view. Then Uthoff presented the ring from bended knee. "That's as extravagant as it gets," Jordan says. "To be honest, I would have hated anything else. We never try to make things a spectacle."

Their wedding is July 30 in Urbana, Ohio. Until then Uthoff has another date in mind that he hopes ends happily ever after: April 4, in Houston.

Like many other title contenders—Oklahoma, North Carolina, Villanova, Michigan State and rival Iowa State—the Hawkeyes thrive because they're led by veterans. With a starting lineup of four seniors and a junior, they are the only team ranked in the top 20 nationally in both adjusted offensive efficiency (seventh) and adjusted defensive efficiency (16th), according to kenpom.com. "[Upperclassmen] tend to not turn it over as much," sixth-year coach Fran McCaffery says. "They understand the importance of rebounding and ball movement."

McCaffery's teams play free and fast offensively; this is the second time in three seasons that Iowa has one of the country's 10 most efficient attacks. But two years ago the Hawkeyes' No. 5 offense was offset, to put it mildly, by a defense ranked 120th. Iowa won 20 games in 2013–14; the Hawkeyes also lost seven of their last eight, six of them by seven points or fewer. "The message was clear," McCaffery says. "If we want to be better, we have to play better defense."

Iowa's coaches preached squaring up on ballhandlers instead of forcing them baseline, to limit the angles from which an offensive player could attack. But that was a technical tweak. The Hawkeyes still play traditional man-to-man, with an occasional zone press thrown in. The difference has been the competence of the defenders.

Five players from that 2013–14 squad represent the current team's core: Uthoff, 7'1" center Adam Woodbury and guards Mike Gesell, Anthony Clemmons and Peter Jok (the team's only other double-digit scorer, with 15.3 points per game). They've improved each season, rising to 34th nationally in defensive efficiency last year before this season's breakthrough. "You know when somebody is going to go for a steal," Uthoff says. "You have a good idea of who you're playing with and help-side rotations. Defense is a lot of playing as one unit."

It doesn't hurt, though, to have a singular weapon. Uthoff's athleticism and Mr. Fantastic limbs make him a natural shot blocker; Gesell remembers pulling up for a jump shot beyond the free throw line during one of his first Iowa practices and seeing Uthoff in the paint. "I thought there was zero chance of him making it to me," Gesell says. Uthoff covered the ground and got a hand on the ball. "I thought every college player was going to be like that," Gesell says. "I quickly realized Jarrold is just very good at closing out."

Yet Uthoff only blocked 91 shots in his first 67 games for Iowa. He had 60 in his first 21 games this season, the seventh-best total in the country. Uthoff has been capable of high-volume swatting; now he has mastered the mechanics of doing it, and that has made him more confident and aggressive. He could become the first player since 1994–95 (the first season such data was available) to average three blocks and two made threes per game. "He's doing a much better job off the ball," Gesell says. "When someone is driving on me, I just try to tall up because I know [Uthoff] is coming weakside to block it. Or someone like [Woodbury] just tall up on his guy, and Jarrold comes over and tees off on it."

All this means that the Hawkeyes can play solid position defense and gamble less. The veteran players appreciate the ancillary benefits. "Our defense leads to our offense," Woodbury says, "and everybody loves playing offense."

The Iowa media guide lists Cedar Rapids as Uthoff's hometown, but he grew up about 30 miles southwest, in Marengo (pop. 2,513). Uthoff did go to Jefferson High in Cedar Rapids and regularly stayed with his older sister, Erika, who lived there, to minimize the commute. His father, Dale Sr., worked as an electrician at a refrigeration plant in Amana. His mother, Diane, managed a Casey's General Store in Marengo. They woke around 5 a.m. every day, and if Diane didn't have someone to cover the evening shift, she or Dale Sr. would take it on and return home after 11 p.m.

Jarrold, the youngest of five children, concedes he was a bit spoiled, or at least drowned in attention. But he was not oblivious. "They worked themselves to the bone," he says of his parents. "You look at that two ways: You can say, Well, they've given me everything—why should I have to work for anything? Or you can take the approach that they worked 15 hours a day, or sometimes even more than that, and they've given me everything. I want to take that mind-set."

Uthoff's hoops career has been a family affair. In 2002 his brother, Dale Jr., graduated from Drake and deferred a job opportunity in order to hang out with Jarrold. They spent the summer visiting fishing holes and hoops camps around the state. Along the way Dale Jr. talked to parents about AAU programs Jarrold might join. Jarrold, who had shown talent from an early age, subsequently earned a spot in a Cedar Rapids-based AAU team, and Diane or one of Jarrold's sisters videotaped his games to be celebrated or nitpicked by the whole family over pizza.

While Jarrold was developing the skills that made him Iowa's Mr. Basketball as a senior—he averaged 26.2 points, 11.2 rebounds and 3.2 blocks—it was clear that he was wired differently from most top athletes. "He looks almost nonchalant at times," Dale Jr. says. "Rather than running around and hollering and high-fiving people, he's purely channeled [that energy] into focus."

Uthoff signed to play at Wisconsin but left after a redshirt season in 2011–12 because he didn't feel the Badgers' methodical style of play was a good fit for his skills. He chose to come home to Iowa, even though he had to pay his own way for a season and sacrifice a year of eligibility because he transferred within the Big Ten. That season in Madison was far from wasted, though, as Uthoff met Jordan—who played golf for the Badgers before transferring to Iowa a year after Uthoff.

After arriving in Iowa City, Uthoff felt comfortable immediately in McCaffery's up-tempo system, playing in all 33 games and ranking second on the team in blocks (35) and fourth in scoring (7.9) in 2013–14. At power forward Uthoff shoots 46.4% from three-point range, and his 92 attempts from long distance rank second on the team. "Him at the four spot is a b---- of a matchup," says Notre Dame assistant Martin Ingelsby, whose team weathered 20 points from Uthoff in a 68–62 Irish win on Nov. 27. "It's such an asset. When you have a four man that stretches the defense, that opens everything up for the rest of the guys."

Uthoff's consistency, partly a function of having beefed up from 210 to 221 pounds and partly due to his metronomic personality, has become his hallmark. He has failed to reach double figures only once, a nine-point effort in a 74–68 loss at No. 8 Maryland on Jan. 28. He takes and makes big shots even though every team schemes to prevent him from getting the ball in critical situations. "The guys that are out there with him, when it gets a little sticky, they know where to go," McCaffery says. "That's a comforting feeling."

Back in the summer of 2002, Jarrold and his brother were on the Iowa River, fishing for catfish after dark, when Dale Jr. felt a strong tug. As usual, he handed the reel to Jarrold to finish the job. This plan was swiftly abandoned when it appeared little brother was about to be pulled into the water.

Once the fish neared shore, Dale Jr. shined a flashlight on the surface. The first thing he saw was the tail. It was three feet behind the fishing line. "We were like, 'Ho-lee buckets, this must be a dream,'" Jarrold says. It was, in fact, a 50-pound flathead. The brothers brought the monster back to the house, Dale Jr. lugging it on his shoulder as Jarrold roused his parents.

"You can't forget a moment like that," Jarrold says.

Now he's in line for an even bigger haul, with player of the year chatter circulating around Iowa's push for its first Final Four berth since 1980, which may require him to become more comfortable in the limelight. It was easy for Uthoff to avoid attention when he dispensed a ring; he's bound to attract it as he chases one.

Iowa's Jarrod Uthoff deserves national player of the year talk

By Nicole Auerback, USA TODAY Sports, January 26, 2016

If not enough people are aware of the season Jarrod Uthoff is having, it's not his coach's fault for underselling him.

"There's no question he's one of the best players in the country," Iowa coach Fran McCaffery said.

And he's right. Not only is Uthoff the best player on the best team in the Big Ten at the moment, he's also put up impressive individual stats to make the case, too. The senior is averaging 18.9 points, 6.2 rebounds and 3.0 blocks per game. He's scored at least 20 points in more games (10) than not.

Yet he's notably absent — or lagging — in the National Player of the Year conversation, kind of like how Iowa isn't getting enough respect as a true national title contender, despite a résumé that has the Hawkeyes as a No. 1 seed in the latest USA TODAY Sports bracketology.

"He's really an amazing player," McCaffery said. "He can do it inside. He can do it on the perimeter. He can do it in transition. We can run sets for him, and nothing seems to rattle him. We feel like, if he's open, everything's going in.

"So we just keep going to him."

Uthoff did not make the Wooden Award preseason watch list, which included 50 names. He was one of five players added to its midseason top 25 list, announced earlier this month. On Monday, he was added to the watch list for the Oscar Robertson Trophy, the player of the year award sponsored by the U.S. Basketball Writers Association. He's coming on, and if he keeps producing at this rate and Iowa keeps playing this well (the Hawkeyes are No. 4 in the USA TODAY Sports Coaches Poll and have won nine in a row), he could be a first-team All-American by season's end.

Regardless of individual accomplishments and awards that may come into the picture for the 6-9 senior from Cedar Rapids, the season is shaping up to be a great finish to what started as an itinerant career.

The former Iowa Mr. Basketball began his college career at Wisconsin, where he redshirted. When Uthoff decided to transfer, Badgers coach Bo Ryan restricted him from transferring to 26 schools, which included the entire Big Ten and Atlantic Coast Conference. The messy breakup ultimately ended with an appeal and some restrictions lifted, except the ban on the Big Ten schools.

Despite the restriction, Uthoff eventually chose Iowa, opting to pay his own way while sitting out his first year at the school, per transfer rules. He couldn't contact the Iowa coaching staff, either, until he enrolled and arrived on campus in fall 2012.

Even now, years later, Uthoff doesn't like to talk about Wisconsin and the way he left it. Between the way it unfolded and sitting out for two consecutive entire seasons, the stretch is far from a fond memory of his time in basketball.

"Very difficult — really, that's all I can say about it," Uthoff said. "It was one of the hardest things I've ever had to go through, not playing and watching your team go out there and the fact that you've never played in a college basketball game — it just kills you on the sideline."

He passed the time in the gym, working on moving forward and not thinking about the past. Uthoff kept busy, too, driving to visit his now-fiancée whom he met during his freshman year at Wisconsin. She ultimately transferred to Iowa the year after he did. So his time at Wisconsin wasn't all bad. "I got something out of it, yeah," Uthoff said, cracking a smile.

He finally saw the court in the 2013-14 season but struggled with inconsistent play. He said he had to focus on rebuilding his confidence all while adjusting to the college game.

Steadily, he grew more consistent off the bench, and more confident in himself, too. Last season was another stepping stone, as he became the nation's only player to tally 50 blocks, 50 threes and 35 steals. He was named third-team All-Big Ten at year's end.

Uthoff took yet another step this past offseason, which included putting on 15 pounds to get to 220, according to his coach. He also competed in the Nike Basketball Academy in Santa Monica, Calif., alongside the best players in college basketball.

Uthoff was primed for a huge senior season.

"You could just see it coming," McCaffery said.

He could. Now, everyone else is, too.

Iowa's Uthoff sets tone as a shot blocker

Hawkeyes forward rejects 50 attempts in team's first 15 games

By Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette, January 8, 2016

IOWA CITY — Few players, if any, in the Big Ten can match Jarrod Uthoff's scoring versatility. Perhaps none can equal his defensive presence.

Uthoff, a 6-foot-9 senior forward at Iowa, ranks second nationally in blocked shots with 50. That's 11 more than Purdue center A.J. Hammons, who ranks second in the Big Ten. But Uthoff doesn't just stand in the post and wait for opponents to charge the basket. What makes Uthoff unusual is that he defends multiple positions and attacks different shots.

"It's all about timing, and it's all about reading people's bodies," said Uthoff, who also leads the Big Ten in scoring at 18.6 points a game. "If you see them go up for a shot, you can tell by reading their eyes and their body language. That's when you go for it. Understanding the player, understanding the situation, understanding the timing of it. It's all that.

"I watch people and how they play and I get a feel for how they play. I understand how their bodies move and stuff. For the most part, it's an in-game read."

Uthoff, a Cedar Rapids Jefferson graduate, rejected six Michigan State shots last week in the Hawkeyes' 83-70 win against the previously No. 1 Spartans. Then in a road comeback at Purdue, Uthoff spurred the charge with five more blocks, including three in the second half. Those were vital in No. 23 Iowa (12-3, 3-0 Big Ten) rallying from 19 points down to beat the Boilermakers 70-63.

So what makes him so successful? His size plays a role. But it's more than that because college basketball is filled with tall players with long arms.

"I would just say his length and his ability to get back into a play," Purdue Coach Matt Painter said. "He blocked a couple of our shots and our guys shot them like they were in a desert, like nobody was around them. They lost him and we showed them film and told them, 'Hey, this shot fake is going to lose everybody else on Iowa's team, but it's not going to lose him. He's coming back, and he's going to be able to get a piece of the ball or change your shot. Understand that when you're past him, technically you're not past him because of his length.'"

"The first thing is obviously length," Iowa Coach Fran McCaffery said. "The second is timing. The third is he can move his feet laterally. A lot of shot blockers can't do that. They just kind of wait and try to go get it. But he can move his feet laterally and keep you in front and then block your jump shot. Most shot blockers only block you from the weak side. He does both. That's really hard to do, and it's really hard to do and stay out of foul trouble."

Against Nebraska on Tuesday, Uthoff was instrumental in keeping the Hawkeyes ahead late in the first half. Iowa outscored the Cornhuskers 12-0 over the final 7:35. Uthoff rejected three Nebraska shots, including two consecutive attempts inside of a minute.

"He blocked those four shots in the first half to make it hard for us," Nebraska Coach Tim Miles said. "We did a much better job in the second half of driving and pitching, but he really had a huge impact on the game."

After two seasons of playing primarily a wing position, Uthoff has worked closer to the basket this year out of necessity. In previous years Iowa had Aaron White and Gabe Olaseni near the basket but both players graduated. That has given Uthoff more opportunities to block shots in the post, while he still defends smaller players along the perimeter.

"It's rare that you see kind of a small forward with that kind of shot blocking," McCaffery said. "He can guard a small forward, he can guard a power forward, he can post. He gives you a lot of flexibility as a coach in terms of how you can use him."

Uthoff led the Hawkeyes in blocked shots last year with 56, which was the most since Erek Hansen had 89 in 2006. At his current pace, Uthoff could join Acie Earl as the only Hawkeyes to block more than 100 shots in a season.

"He's worked hard. He wasn't somebody who defended that way three years ago," Painter said. "He's put in a lot of time and really made a lot of improvements and really changes the games on the perimeter and the interior because of his length."

Hlas: Ho hum, another 25 points and 4 blocks from Jarrod Uthoff

Hawkeye senior also raised his blocked-shot total to 50

By Mike Hlas, Cedar Rapids Gazette, January 6, 2016

IOWA CITY — Lately, singing the praises of Jarrod Uthoff has become as trendy as Fitbits, Apple Watches and Greek yogurt.

Iowa's senior forward had a typical game Tuesday night in Carver-Hawkeye Arena, which is to say he was the most-dominant player on the floor. Although, senior guard Mike Gesell took the reins in the second half and finished with a great stat line with 22 points and 10 assists.

Gesell repped Iowa in the Big Ten Network's postgame interview. Uthoff can't do everything.

Still, Uthoff had a game-high 25 points in the Hawkeyes' fairly routine 77-66 win over Nebraska. It was his second-straight 25-point night, and seventh 20-point performance in first-place Iowa's 15 games.

That's right. First-place Iowa, as in sharing the Big Ten lead with Indiana at 3-0. As in nationally ranked Iowa. Hot Iowa. Trendy Iowa.

As Iowa Coach Fran McCaffery accurately summarized after the game, Gesell "was great." But Iowa climbed out of a 10-0 hole and into a 31-22 halftime lead because Uthoff asserted his will on the opposition and scored in a variety of smooth and savvy ways.

He scooped up an errant Nebraska pass, dribbled down the floor, then stopped on an invisible dime and casually sank a 3-pointer. He drove the paint for a jam off an inbounds pass. He put a sweeping left-handed shot off the glass and in on a drive down the lane.

That was all during a period of 2:36 midway through the first half in which he scored nine points.

"He's a hard cover," said Nebraska Coach Tim Miles. "He's a terrific basketball player.

"He's just a really, really hard one to deal with."

Then there were the blocked shots, a Uthoff staple this season. He had all four of his in this game by halftime, contributing mightily to Iowa holding the Huskers scoreless in the final 7:35 of the half.

That's 50 blocks for Uthoff this season after 56 all last season. He is fourth in the nation in blocks per game, and the 50 is second only to Florida International's Adrian Diaz's 52.

Fifty blocks in 15 games? Man! It isn't as if Uthoff is flailing his arms every which way trying to block everything opponents put up and coming up with air more times than not. His movement has been so efficient, so purposeful. And he blocks shots with both hands.

Basketball has had countless great shot-blockers. But how many were ever inside-outside threats at the offensive end? The nation's top three shot-blockers have a combined zero 3-point tries. Uthoff made a pair of treys Tuesday to give him 30 this season.

As people have begun to note with understandable amazement, Uthoff is displaying a skill set few players in the sport can claim. Maybe the best current comparison is New York Knicks rookie forward Kristaps Porzingis, who is averaging one 3-pointer and two blocks a game.

"It's rare that you see kind of a small forward with that kind of shot-blocking," McCaffery said. "He can guard a small forward, he can guard a power forward, he can post.

"He gives you a lot of flexibility as a coach in terms of how you can use him. He can play fast, he can play slow.

"When it's all said and done, he doesn't rattle, he doesn't get nervous. He's going to make big shots. He's going to take shots.

"If you get on him, he looks at you funny like 'Coach, I have everything under control. No need to worry.' "

Given what we've seen from Uthoff through 15 games, who would argue with him?

Big Ten Notebook

By Rick Brown, Sports Spotlight, February 2, 2016

IOWA CITY – Peter Jok never scored more than 16 points in a game during his first two seasons at Iowa. He scored 20 points in less than 5 minutes of the second half Sunday against Northwestern.

The kid with unlimited potential, who was getting recruiting attention from nearly every elite program in the nation the summer before his sophomore season of high school, has become an elite player.

It's been a long, and at times painful, journey for the former Valley all-stater and 2013 Iowa Mr. Basketball.

"Everything happens for a reason," Peter said.

A long road back from a torn patellar tendon he suffered in the summer of 2010 at an AAU event in Chicago.

Because of that injury, many college programs turned the page on Jok. Iowa is one of the few that stuck with him. And that decision is now being rewarded.

Jok has burst onto the national scene as a junior, helping carry the Hawkeyes into the Top 10 again. And remember the guy who had never scored more than 16 points a game? He's the Big Ten's fifth-leading scorer right now at 17.7 points a game. His teammate, Jarrod Uthoff, is No. 2 at 19.1 points. That one-two punch is a big reason why Coach Fran McCaffery's team is 8-1 in the Big Ten and 17-4 overall.

Jok scored 26 points against Northwestern, the eighth time he's scored more than 16 points in a game this season. He scored a career-high 29 against Rutgers and has scored 20 or more points six times.

"Last season I had confidence in myself, but I wasn't all the way back (from his injury)," Jok said. "Before this season, coach (McCaffery) talked to Jarrod and I. He said, 'You have the ultimate green light.' When a coach says you've got the ultimate green light, he's got confidence in you. Now I don't have to worry about going out there and making a mistake. I just go out there and do what I do best, which is score. I've been active on defense, too. I'm trying to complete my whole game instead of being just an offensive player."

Tragedy and injury shaped the direction of Jok's career.

His father was killed during military conflict in the Sudan, and the family moved to Des Moines when he was nine years old. And then there was the injury, which he tried to play through as a sophomore.

He had surgery to repair the damage in June of 2011. But he's come a long way from the guy who started to play basketball in the fourth grade, even though he wasn't crazy about it at the start. But when his coach and now

guardian, Mike Nixon, started taking the team to McDonalds after practice or games, it wasn't so bad. By the seventh grade, Jok had fallen in love with basketball as much as the golden arches.

Iowa assistant coach Kirk Speraw was the lead recruiter on Jok, the guy who joined McCaffery at an open gym at Valley High School on Sept. 17, 2012. McCaffery had seen Jok play as a junior and wasn't sold. A scholarship still hadn't been offered when McCaffery and Speraw walked into the gym that September night.

"I just had to show them I was back from my injury," Jok said. "I wasn't nervous. I didn't feel any pressure. I just went out there and played and had fun with my teammates."

The scholarship offer came, and Jok's game has made steady improvement ever since. He offered a glimpse of the future as a freshman, scoring 10 points in an overtime loss to Tennessee in the NCAA Tournament. It was the first time he'd scored in double figures since the 11th game of the season.

"I had nothing to lose," Jok said. "I just went out there and played."

After averaging 7.0 points a game and shooting 34.3 percent from 3 as a sophomore, the numbers tell a different story this year. He's averaging 15.3 points in all games, and shooting 40.3 percent from 3.

Jok hit three straight 3-pointers during his 20-point burst against Northwestern, but he's shown the most improvement from inside the arc. He's attacking the basket off the dribble, both in transition and in the half court.

"Growing up, I was always a scorer, not just a shooter," Jok said. "Now that I'm back to 100 percent, I can do everything. The scouting report on me says, 'He's a shooter, make him drive. Make him dribble.' Which I can do. I just try to get to the free-throw line as much as I can."

Using his length and 6-6 frame on defense has been the most telling sign that he's becoming a complete player.

"I didn't play any defense in high school," Jok said. "When I got here, I knew I had to learn to play defense or I wasn't going to play."

Jok leads the Hawkeyes with 29 steals, one more than he had in his first two seasons combined. That's helped make Iowa a Big Ten title contender.

"We saw we were picked ninth (at the start of the season)," Jok said. "That gave us more motivation, to come out every night and prove to everybody that we're a great team."

Iowa's Peter Jok went from superstar 8th grader to afterthought. Now he's one of the Big Ten's top players

Jok's skill set is finally taking form at Iowa, who suddenly looks like one of the top teams in the country.

By Kevin Trahan, SB Nation, January 20, 2016

As soon as he was hired as Iowa's coach in March 2010, Fran McCaffery got a tip from his friend, who was the assistant coach at Penn: Go see a high school freshman named Peter Jok.

"A good friend of mine, John Gallagher, the head coach at Hartford, had just signed his brother Dau at Penn, and he called me and said, 'Hey, his little brother is really good, you've gotta get on him.'"

Getting Jok shouldn't have been easy. Iowa was a major rebuilding project, having come off three straight losing seasons and having not made the NCAA Tournament since 2005-06, when Jok was in fifth grade and more of a soccer fan than a basketball fan. Making matters more difficult, some recruiters ranked Jok as a top-10 recruit nationally as a freshman. His offer list was competitive, and the offers started piling up in eighth grade.

"Marquette, Illinois, it was a lot," Jok said. "I was talking to Kansas, Louisville, Nebraska, Wisconsin, Kansas State."

What did these coaches see? As Jok put it, a "scorer."

"When I first saw him, I thought he could play the one," McCaffery said. "He was a big guard and he was a big presence, but the more I was around him, I said this guy can really make shots, as a shot maker, but also who can drive, who can post."

Six years later, that's what Jok has turned into as a junior at Iowa. He has an offensive rating of 123.3 in Big Ten play -- 15th-best in the conference -- and he's also in the top 20 in the league in effective field goal percentage, three-point percentage, free throw percentage and steal percentage. And after a rough two years, he's a big reason why Iowa is off to a 5-0 start against a monster Big Ten slate, scoring 19 vs. Michigan State, 11 at Purdue, 23 at Michigan State and 16 vs. Michigan. He is averaging 14.7 points per game against KenPom.com top 50 opponents.

Iowa now has legitimate national championship hopes, with the No. 2 ranking on KenPom and a No. 2 seed in SB Nation's latest bracketology. And much of that is thanks to Jok's performance. But it sure was a long time coming.

If Jok had stayed this good and continued to play like he had as a freshman in high school, there's a chance Iowa never would have had a chance for him. But at a Nike camp in St. Louis during his freshman year, Jok tore his patellar tendon, and from there, everything spiraled. He lost his athletic ability, and he couldn't even dunk.

At first, he thought it was tendonitis, so he decided to play through it. It didn't work.

"I went to see him his sophomore year, and he really wasn't himself, and I remember talking to his coach after the game, and he said his knee has been bothering him," McCaffery said. "And he took some time off, and I went and saw him his junior year, and he didn't play well at all, and I really questioned whether I should be recruiting him."

So did everyone else. When Jok finally learned of his real diagnosis, he got surgery to repair his knee. The doctors warned that it would be a full, but long recovery. But that wasn't good enough for recruiters. Many of them pulled their offers.

"At the moment, it was new to me," said Jok, who came to Des Moines as a refugee from Sudan and grew up wanting to be a soccer player. "I was getting offers from everybody and all of the sudden I got hurt and everybody left. As I got older, I realized everything happens for a reason and this is part of a business, and they wanted the best to come play for them. But at the time, it was new to me."

Rather than pull his offer, McCaffery consulted his team doctor, who said that recovering from a patellar tendon injury can be a long process. So, McCaffery decided to wait it out, hoping to eventually get that kid who dazzled everyone in eighth and ninth grade.

It was a long wait.

"I wasn't 100 percent until after my sophomore year (of college)," Jok said.

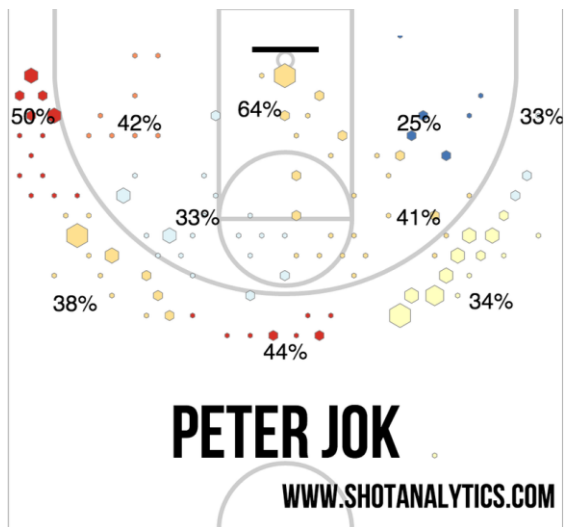
So here we are in Jok's junior year, and he's living up to the hype, and the timeline, McCaffery knew he had to deal with.

Year	Minutes per game	Offensive rating	Points per game	Steal percentage	eFG%	Three-point percentage
2014-15	49.30%	96.9	7	1.70%	43.50%	34.30%
2015-16	57.70%	113.4	13.9	3.20%	51.30%	38.70%
2015-16 Big Ten	75.50%	123.3	15.4	3.60%	54.10%	42.90%

Jok has made a major jump in virtually every statistical category. He's not only shooting better, he's also becoming a top on-ball defender, with one of the best steal percentages in the Big Ten. He's turning into the next

great Iowa player with a super unique, strange skill set that makes him a nightmare for opposing defenses.

First, Iowa had Aaron White, who could run the floor and get fouled better than anyone. Now, the Hawkeyes have the three-point shooting, shot-blocking sensation Jarrod Uthoff and Jok. At 6'6, he can handle the ball, shoot the three, post up and endlessly bug three-point shooters on defense. He can play pretty much every position on the floor, and that's reflected in his shot chart, from Shot Analytics.



Jok is money from three, but he can also post up smaller centers and drive the lane, where he's shooting a commendable 64 percent.

That all-around game was on display against Michigan. Jok hit four threes in the Hawkeyes' 11-point win against the Wolverines, but he also showed off-post moves like this: <https://vine.co/v/iebO0idt2pV>.

When Jok is doing that and hitting his threes, he's virtually unguardable. Put an undersized player on him, and he'll post them up. Put a slower big man on him, and he'll get open for a corner three. Michigan coach John Beilein was sufficiently perplexed.

"We didn't worry about him as a freshman. And now all of a sudden he's Tim Hardaway III out there," Beilein said. "He's getting all kinds of good stuff and good looks, and they've become a good team."

With Jok playing like this, Iowa is an elite team, and he fits in perfectly with Iowa's group of misfits under McCaffery that includes White and Uthoff -- players who do a bunch of random things really, really well. It couldn't have come at a better time for the Hawkeyes, who are at the destination of the rebuilding project that started when they first started recruiting Jok six years ago.

In that time, Jok has gone from a top recruit, to a fringe Division I prospect, to a star for the Hawkeyes. It was a strange path, but one that has Iowa on its way to being one of the best teams in the country.

Iowa's Peter Jok quietly becoming a Big Ten star

By Chad Leistikow, Des Moines Register, January 18, 2016

IOWA CITY, Ia. — Look no further than the evolution of Peter Jok to explain how this year's Iowa basketball team has launched itself into the nation's top 10.

Jok is truly healthy for the first time since a serious knee injury in the summer of 2010. And with every stroke of his sweet jump shot, his confidence seems to grow — if that's possible for someone who says he never gets nervous.

"I don't think about the last shot. I'm always thinking about the next shot," the junior from West Des Moines Valley said. "The next shot's going in no matter what. When I miss, I know the next shot's going in."

He scored 39 points last week against two conference heavyweights and on Monday was named Big Ten Conference player of the week for the first time in his career. He's the third different Hawkeye to win the honor this season — joining Jarrod Uthoff (in December) and Mike Gesell (last week).

Jok was the best player on the court in the two halves that mattered most for Iowa this past week. In the first 20 minutes of a 76-59 steamrolling of then-No. 4 Michigan State in East Lansing, Mich., Jok pumped in 19 points — tickling the nets on 6-of-8 shooting, including three 3-pointers. Iowa led 47-25 at halftime and maintained its double-digit lead.

And in Sunday's 82-71 home win against Michigan, he shot 4-of-4 from 3-point land in the second half to help break open a tight game. Like he said, there's confidence every time.

"We didn't worry about him as a freshman. And now all of a sudden he's Tim Hardaway III out there," Michigan coach John Beilein said, comparing Jok to his former UM star. "He's getting all kinds of good stuff and good looks, and they've become a good team."

Jok's proficiency from outside (a team-best 36 3-pointers at a 39 percent clip) and ability to create his shot have meant wonders for the ninth-ranked Hawkeyes, who are humming to their first 5-0 Big Ten Conference start in 19 years.

Jok has distracted opponents' attention from Uthoff, Iowa's star forward and the Big Ten's scoring leader at 18.6 points a game. Jok's presence as an outside marksman has allowed more room near the rim — softening things up for center Adam Woodbury and creating more driving lanes for guards Gesell and Anthony Clemmons.

"It makes me and Mike's job a lot easier, when he's making a lot of shots," Clemmons said. "It spreads the floor out."

As Beilein correctly pointed out, Jok has been a work in progress. As a freshman, the only member of Iowa's recruiting Class of 2013, he had a hard time seeing the floor in games that mattered. In 16 of Iowa's 18 Big Ten games, his minutes ranged from zero to five.

This year, he's averaging 30.2 minutes and 15.4 points a game (No. 9 in the league) in Big Ten play. No wonder coaches are taking notice.

Stamina was a past struggle, because Jok suffers from asthma. But he improved his diet in the offseason, and even though he still uses his inhaler, those symptoms have almost gone away. He's also gotten physically stronger.

"I feel great when I get out there," said Jok, averaging 13.9 points for the season, nearly double his 7.0 last season. "I don't really get tired like I used to."

The 6-foot-6, 205-pound guard, though, still has lapses. Twice at home in the last month, he's been chewed out and booted from the team huddle by coach Fran McCaffery for sloppy play — against Tennessee Tech and Nebraska.

Jok says it's usually careless offense that draws McCaffery's ire.

"He's just trying to make me a better player," Jok said Sunday. "When I'm sloppy out there, that's when he gets at me to try to pick up my stuff."

"He's just trying to coach me, so I can't really hold any grudges against him."

In that Tennessee Tech game Dec. 22, Jok responded to the benching with five 3-pointers in 6 minutes, 29 seconds of game clock.

McCaffery knows Jok can handle the tough love.

"If you're going to get into somebody, it has to make sense to them," McCaffery said. "OK, why am I getting into him? He deserves it. I don't pick on him. I'm not trying to build character and play mind games with him. If I'm in his face, it's because he deserves to have me in his face, and he needs to get corrected what we're talking about getting corrected."

"He's got character and he's smart, and every time I've challenged him he's come back and performed. That's who he is."

Iowa's Jok impresses, improves as he matures

Hawkeyes guard averages 13.4 points a game

By Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette, December 18, 2015

IOWA CITY — The eyes of the basketball world were focused on Iowa forward Jarrod Uthoff at halftime of last week's game at Iowa State.

Uthoff had 30 points and everyone knew the Cyclones had to slow him down. Iowa junior guard Peter Jok, who had taken just three shots in the first half, knew his opportunity was on its way.

"We all knew they were going to do whatever it takes to stop Jarrod, and I told (Coach Fran McCaffery) that at halftime," Jok said. "He was like, 'You need to step up this half.' The coaches told me it was going to be my half, and I came out aggressive."

When Uthoff saw tighter defense, Jok had his chance. He hit his first four shots of the second half and scored 14 of Iowa's first 16 points to pace the Hawkeyes to a 19-point lead with 15 minutes left. Then, his game dissipated in a haze.

ISU's Naz Mitrou-Long accidentally grazed Jok's eye, which led to the guard falling to the floor. Jok tried to play through the poke, but he had blurred vision for the rest of the game. That proved costly as ISU rallied for an 83-82 win.

"I actually got looked at by the doctor," Jok said. "I got scratched in the middle of my eye, and it was blurry the whole time. They told me 24 hours before it healed up, and I took 24 hours and it started feeling better."

Jok finished with 18 points that day, and he's become more than just a streaky shooter for the Hawkeyes. He's scored at least eight points in every game and notched a career-best 24 in an overtime win against Florida State. He added 20 in a victory at Florida State.

It hasn't always been easy for the Des Moines-area product. He had high accolades entering Iowa but struggled with defense and conditioning. His minutes waned his freshman year with Iowa's deep roster.

"You've got to figure out how to guard people who are really good who are juniors and seniors, and he couldn't do that," McCaffery said. "He was getting outplayed in practice, and there's two ways to handle that. You can run and hide and transfer, or you can battle and get better and work at it, and I'm just really impressed with his work ethic and the ability to get better in the weight room and get extra shots up and figure out what he needs to do defensively and cut down on his mistakes."

"I told him his game as a freshman, he had a sloppy game. He would fumble and stumble and run around and just try to shoot jumpers and make that the cure for everything. He needed to become a really good basketball player. I'm really proud of him because you do that when you have character."

Jok improved dramatically before his sophomore season and he moved into Iowa's starting lineup early on. Jok averaged 7.0 points and 2.6 rebounds a game last year. He's taken another step this season, averaging 13.4 points a game. He hits 37.3 percent from 3-point range, and has made 18 of 21 free throws. His defense has improved as has his stamina. He's shown he can compete consistently at a high level.

"He's always been able to shoot," Iowa center Adam Woodbury said. "I played with him throughout high school, and I knew about him in middle school. He's always been a very good player. What he's been able to do over the last couple of years and into the summer has shown me how good he is. He really has. I know I've got a lot of faith in him."

"I'm way better," Jok said. "It's a process, and I'm going to keep working. I feel like I'm way better than when I first got here. I'm just going to keep working hard."

Jok will have a homecoming of sorts Saturday against Drake. He played at both Des Moines Roosevelt and West Des Moines Valley in high school. He expects several friends and family members to attend their Big Four Classic game, and he's excited about it.

"It's pretty much like playing in front of my hometown," Jok said.

A New Start for No. 14

Peter Jok's switch to No. 14 signifies fresh start

By James Allan, hawkeyesports.com, October 7, 2015

IOWA CITY, Iowa -- Peter Jok's new number signifies a fresh start heading into the 2015-16 University of Iowa men's basketball season.



Jok, a junior, wore No. 3 for the first two years of his Hawkeye career, where he played 61 games and averaged 5.9 points per contest. When his junior season begins with an exhibition contest against Sioux Falls on Oct. 29, Jok don No. 14.

"I wanted a new start," said Jok. "I will have a bigger role than the last two years, and I need to step up. Coach (Fran) McCaffery gave me the green light the last two years, but I finally feel like I have the green light now. I want to go out and do whatever it takes to help the team win."

Jok's new start began in the offseason following Iowa's third-round exit from the NCAA Tournament last March. He took two weeks to regroup before examining everything -- his diet, weight training, and on-court skills.

"I have been eating better and am only drinking juice and water," said Jok. "My body has changed, I gained a couple of pounds, but I am leaner and feel faster."

"I have been able to do more (on the floor). I can run more, stay in the game, and make shots when I am tired."

As a sophomore, Jok earned a spot in the Iowa starting lineup in late December before starting 21-of-22 games. Jok averaged seven points and scored in double figures in 11 contests, including a stretch of 5-of-6 contests in Big Ten play in early February. He scored 12 points in the NCAA Tournament win over Davidson.

Jok was comfortable -- to a degree -- in his first two seasons. This season, he has a free mind and he feels he can truly play his game.

"The last two years I felt comfortable when (coach) told me I had the green light, but at the same time I stayed back a little because of the upperclassmen," he said. "Now I am the upperclassmen, and I finally feel comfortable that I can do what I came here to do and finally play my game."

Jok shot 35.8 percent from the floor as a sophomore, and made 36 3-pointers. He spent the offseason working on ball-handling and getting his shot off in a variety of ways.

"I'm trying to get my shots off differently," he said. "I can get my shot off when I want to, but it's more coming off screens, and taking my man to the basket. I am trying to get to the rim more so I can get to the free throw line."

With 42 victories and two NCAA Tournament appearances in his first two seasons, Jok wants to help the Hawkeyes continue their upward trajectory this season.

"We have to step up," he said. "The last two years and since coach McCaffery has been here, we have been improving ever year. We need to take another step forward this year."

Jok's ready to help Iowa move forward, and is embracing a fresh start.

"Coach McCaffery told me what he expected after last season," said Jok. "He wants me to go out, do what I do, and score. That made me more confident going into this season. I can just play as myself and go out and play my game."

It's a new start for the new No. 14.

At last, Woodbury appreciated at Iowa: 'It feels nice'

By Chad Leistikow, Des Moines Register, February 9, 2016

IOWA CITY, Ia. — To the former and current Adam Woodbury haters out there, Iowa's 7-foot-1 center thanks you.

Woodbury's contributions to the Iowa basketball program have been hard to miss this year, and as a result, the Sioux City native has seen the amount of appreciation for his game increase. He's had plenty of incentive to get here.

"Who would say it doesn't feel nice? Obviously, it feels nice to be appreciated," Woodbury said Tuesday with a laugh. "But for the few people that didn't appreciate me, that gave me motivation to work even harder."

Woodbury's fourth year as a Hawkeye has been, to steal a word from coach Fran McCaffery, spectacular. He's been a rock-solid force in the middle of the nation's 11th-most efficient defense, distributes as well as any Division I 7-footer you'll find (watch his outlet passes sometime), and he seems to win far more than 50 percent of the so-called 50/50 balls that spur momentum.

He's averaging 9.2 rebounds during Iowa's 10-1 start to the Big Ten Conference season — including 14.5 a game last week in wins over Penn State and Illinois. He's averaging close to a double-double (8.5 points, 11.5 rebounds) in the Hawkeyes' last six games, and has cracked double digits in scoring five of the past seven times out.

"I think a lot of people thought our team would suffer because we lost such a good player in graduation to (Big Ten sixth man of the year) Gabe Olaseni," McCaffery said, "but I think it's really helped Woodbury with his confidence. He's playing a lot more minutes. His role is obviously much more critical than it's ever been."

Entering this season, he was averaging 4.6 boards a game. He also was playing in the shadow of big men Aaron White and Gabe Olaseni for three years.

Perhaps that's why he was a popular fan target for criticism. He remains the highest-ranked recruit in the McCaffery era — No. 39 overall nationally in the Class of 2012 by ESPN — but never had the "20-and-10" type stat lines that sometimes accompany big-time prospects.

Senior point guard Mike Gesell, who had hype of his own as ESPN's No. 75 overall prospect that year, thinks fan expectations were always unreasonable for his classmate. Big numbers were never Woodbury's game.

Gesell saw the criticism for three years at Iowa, especially in January 2015, when some prominent national voices, including ESPN's Dan Dakich, charged that Woodbury was cowardly and gutless after eye-poking incidents.

"It's easy for the average fan to look at a guy who's 7-foot and think they should be the next Shaq, dunking on everyone," Gesell said. "But that's not his game. His game is really (being) a dirty-work guy, a leader on this team, a guy that does all the things that don't necessarily show up on the stat sheet."

Woodbury has reason to be gratified personally, and he deserves the appreciation he's now getting from Iowa's fans. When he agreed to come to Iowa more than four years ago, he turned down blue-blood powerhouse North Carolina to join a program that was near the bottom of the Big Ten.

Now, Iowa is ranked No. 4 nationally by The Associated Press and No. 5 in the USA TODAY Coaches' Poll. It's alone in first place in the conference with seven games to go. A spotlight game is next, at No. 22 Indiana (8 p.m. Thursday, ESPN).

Yes, Woodbury saw this coming.

"I think if you guys listen to some of my interviews back when I was a senior in high school, this is what I wanted to do," Woodbury said. "I wanted to help bring the Iowa team back to some of the national prominence that it used to have. It's a very storied program that we have here. We're just trying to help it try to regain some of the esteem it once had."

That's not hyperbole. Iowa has appeared in the AP Top 25 on 336 occasions since the poll's inception in 1949. That total ranks 22nd among Division I programs. But asked Tuesday why he chose Iowa, he simply said: "I believed."

Now, fans are believing in him. The Woodbury haters are virtually silent.

It's a story worth appreciating.

"For it to kind of come to fruition a little bit, so to speak, is cool," Woodbury said. "I'll look back on this time in my life in a long time and really appreciate what I've done. But right now, I'm stuck in the moment and just trying to win as many games as I can."

Adam Woodbury: Iowa's 'ultimate team player'

Hawkeyes center gives squad toughness, grit and a team-first mentality

By Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette, January 30, 2016

IOWA CITY — Adam Woodbury stood against a table at a Carver-Hawkeye Arena club room with an aura of accomplishment and a smile across his face.

The 7-foot-1 Iowa center battled fiercely with Purdue's power tandem of A.J. Hammons (7 feet) and Isaac Haas (7-foot-2) for 23 minutes. Woodbury gave up 30 pounds to Haas and some width to Hammons. Yet the Iowa senior more than held his own, grabbing 10 rebounds and scoring 13 points. That outpaced the Hammons-Haas duo, which combined for 11 points and seven rebounds in 33 minutes.

In the land of giants, Woodbury not only survived, he won. And so did his team, 83-71.

"If you've never been in a fight down low, you don't really know what it is," Woodbury said. "It's tough to explain. But it's a battle every possession, offensively, defensively, it's always a battle. It's fun though. You really get to see what you're made of, how tough you really are."

Toughness never has been an issue for Woodbury, who brought that mind-set into Iowa from his first day in summer workouts. He's battled expectations his whole life, then at times added opponents, national media and even his own fans to the list. Yet through it all, Woodbury remains personable and engaging. He cracks jokes in interview sessions and adds self-deprecating humor. He doesn't take himself seriously, but he's all business when it comes to his Hawkeyes.

"He's the ultimate team player," said his father, Lance Woodbury.

HIGH-PROFILE PERFORMER

Woodbury came to Iowa's campus as one of the nation's top 50 recruits. He was a three-time all-state honoree at Sioux City East and played AAU basketball for the All-Iowa Attack. His size, ability to run and team-first attitude attracted the nation's top coaches. Woodbury couldn't shake Iowa Coach Fran McCaffery, who attended each of his AAU games in 2010 and 2011. After whittling his list to Iowa and North Carolina, Woodbury chose the Hawkeyes.

Landing Woodbury was a big deal for McCaffery. It changed the program's perception and ended Roy Williams' poaching of the state's highest-ranked recruits. On the court, it gave the Hawkeyes a force in the middle and on the boards.

Immediate statistical success was fleeting for Woodbury and remains so even today. He didn't post superstar statistics as a freshman, averaging 4.9 points and 4.8 rebounds while starting 38 games. He wasn't a go-to scoring threat and missed some shots close to the basket. He had a similar role as a sophomore, averaging 5.7 points and 3.9 rebounds.

That led to some fans taking shots at Woodbury on social media. He heard boos from the student section. He plays mostly below the rim and rarely dunks, which led to questions

about his dunking ability. So on Feb. 8, 2014, Woodbury completed a fast-break with a slam, then turned toward the crowd and gave a "shush" sign.

For some in attendance, it was an exclamation point in a home blowout win over Michigan. For others, it was funny. For Lance and Brenda Woodbury, the shush moment was emblematic of the lack of appreciation toward their son.

"Like an offensive lineman, they don't get any credit," Lance Woodbury said. "That's OK. He doesn't care. But it's hard when it's your son getting ridiculed or beaten down by his own fans. That's what's hard. You expect it from the opposing fans. That's a badge of honor. When it's your own fans, that becomes harder to deal with."

"He grew up a Hawkeye. He's wanted to play for the Hawkeyes since he was born. That was the toughest part of the deal. I've got a thicker skin than his mom does. Rightfully so. I know where some of it's coming from, but it still doesn't make it any easier. It's tough."

The most attention Woodbury has received at Iowa was for eye-poking incidents last season. In a loss at Wisconsin, Woodbury poked both Nigel Hayes and Frank Kaminsky in the eye. ESPN analyst Dan Dakich called Woodbury "a gutless coward" for the episode. Three weeks later, Woodbury was whistled for poking Maryland guard Melo Trimble in the eye. This time, Woodbury was assessed a flagrant foul. It became a national topic.

Every time he talks about the pokes, Woodbury maintains they were accidental. Yet, as demonstrated by at least 10 student signs at Maryland on Thursday with the word "Poke" written on them, the situation follows him around.

"I didn't try to be anybody that I wasn't," Woodbury said. "I knew what they were saying about me wasn't true. So you've got to stay true to yourself in every aspect of your life. I stayed true to who I was and tried to get through it the best I could."

"It took a while for my parents. I'm not really on social media. I don't get involved in that kind of stuff so it didn't bother me like it did everybody. Obviously it was in the media for a long time so it affected them more than me. I just had to roll with it and let it play out."

Dakich's criticism still digs at Woodbury's parents.

"It was very difficult for the family," Lance Woodbury said. "It was harder on us than it was on him, I guarantee it. But we've learned to ignore it because of him. He stood tall and that's what we had to do. We had to stand by him because knew better. We know what kind of person he is. It was unfair what handed down to him. Some of it still is."

"(Adam has) always acted older than he truly is," Brenda Woodbury said. "That's his maturity and his level head. He has his bad days. We all have bad days. He can cope with it and he

turns everything off if he has to. He can lean on his family. He knows we're here for him. He knows that. I had to lean on him for that. Nobody tells the parents how to handle things like this. Nobody teaches you how to do this. This is the most difficult thing to watch your children go through. People don't understand you are picking on somebody's child. It's not fair."

Woodbury internalizes most — if not all — criticism and shrugs off the rest.

"That's part of the fan base on every team," Woodbury said. "You've got to take the good with the bad. When you're losing, everything is worse than it is and you're winning everything is better than it is. You've got to stay level ground and not get too high or too low."

Unlike Woodbury, McCaffery attacks any whiff of negativity when it relates to his senior center.

"I couldn't care less about what outsiders think about Adam Woodbury," McCaffery said. "I'm quite frankly tired of talking about it. The guy's a tremendous player. All we do is win games with him. I don't know what else he has to do. I think you guys should stop talking about it."

UNSELFISH TO A FAULT

About 45 minutes after dispatching Purdue at home, Woodbury stood about 20 feet from his family signing autographs for children. Woodbury asked questions and appeared engaged. It's not unusual for him to sign dozens of autographs while talking to his friends and family outside Iowa's locker room.

"He's always been a real good person," Lance Woodbury said. "He worked with kids when he was in high school. He went and had recesses and did stuff with the kids even before he came here. We couldn't be more proud of him. He's always been a real good kid."

Woodbury, a two-time all-academic Big Ten honoree, will graduate in May with a double major in communications and sports studies. Once his basketball days end, Woodbury is interested in providing financial advice. In some ways that's a metaphor for his Iowa career; helping others attain their goals without taking credit for it.

Early in the second half against Michigan two weeks ago, Woodbury had the ball down low with a decent shot. Instead, he drew in the defender and made a quick pass to a wide-open Jarrod Uthoff for an easy layup to turn a five-point lead into seven points. Uthoff, the Big Ten's leading scorer, put up 23 points that day.

"It's not always about me scoring," Woodbury said. "I really appreciate trying to get my teammates involved. That's really one of the key things I do on the court I hope to do every game out, whether it's screening or passing, even rolling and trying to get the defense to collapse a little bit.

"Could I shoot more? Obviously. I could take more shots. I've tried not to force as many shots this year as I have in the past. I've just tried to continue to play my role on the team. I could obviously score more and things like that, but I'm all about winning."

Woodbury took on a different role this year. He and former center Gabe Olaseni alternated at center for Woodbury's first three years. Now Woodbury is Iowa's lone true center. His minutes have increased by about four per game. He's notching career highs in scoring average (9.0) and rebounding (a team-high 6.9).

But statistics never have defined Woodbury, and nor will they when his Iowa career ends in a couple of months. He's a top communicator and tenacious defender. Few centers are better at setting screens for guards. For everything that he does, he's Iowa's most irreplaceable piece.

"He's without a doubt the smartest post player I've ever had," McCaffery said. "That's what sometimes you don't necessarily see, but if you're there for the run-throughs and walk-throughs you recognize how valuable he is. His ability to recognize action ... he sees it and he communicates it and he not only guards it correctly, he also helps his teammate, who's also involved in the action. Then he's physical, he's got great instincts for going to get the ball and positionally where to be."

That was on display Thursday at Maryland in a 74-68 loss, the Hawkeyes' first in Big Ten play. Woodbury, who posted 11 points and 10 rebounds, fouled out with 2 minutes, 47 seconds left and the Hawkeyes trailed by four points. On a vital possession a minute later, Maryland's Diamond Stone dunked on a post feed where there was miscommunication on defense. Maryland still might have scored on that possession, but the breakdown was obvious with Woodbury's absence.

"His presence defensively changes the game," Uthoff said. "He's 7-foot, 255 so not playing him in the post and directing traffic in the middle of the paint is essential for us.

"He does all the dirty work. He rebounds like ... not a human. He rebounds really well, he sets screens, gets people open. He knocks down midrange jumpers, he finishes at the rim. He does a lot for us."

Woodbury is 220 points shy of reaching 1,000 in his career. He might earn some honorable mention all-Big Ten acclaim and is sure to play pro basketball well past Iowa. He has posted three consecutive double-doubles, a feat no Iowa player has accomplished in 10 years.

But his impact soars beyond the statistics. The way he screens allows Iowa's point guards to find open shooters. How he defends in the paint deters guards from driving the lane. The toughness he displays in grabbing rebounds and his on-court communication make him the ultimate team player. And team players want the team to win. He's simply a product of his environment.

"I have great parents, honestly," he said. "The family I grew up in, where I came from, Sioux City. It's a hardworking town. It's just a matter of life. A lot of good things have come my way and adverse things. You've got to continue to take the good with the bad and continue to fight just prove to everyone who you really are."

Woodbury finally finds his free-throw stroke

By Don Doxsie, Quad-City Times, December 24, 2015

IOWA CITY — The first dozen games of Iowa's basketball season have been filled with statistical superlatives.

Senior forward Jarrod Uthoff has been at or near the top of the Big Ten in both scoring and blocked shots. Another senior, Mike Gesell, is among the national leaders in assists. The scoring averages of Peter Jok and Anthony Clemmons are up significantly and, of course, there is the stunning emergence of walk-on forward Nicholas Baer.

This one hasn't attracted quite so much notice: Adam Woodbury is shooting 82.3 percent from the free-throw line.

The 7-foot-1 senior has started all but one game in his college career, but the Hawkeyes seldom could afford to have him on the court at the end of close games because he was so erratic at the foul line. That has changed this season.

"I'm really proud of him," Iowa coach Fran McCaffery said. "It improved a lot before this year, but we need to be able to keep him in at the end of the game, and we can do that now."

Woodbury, who was a 60.5 percent foul shooter in his college career entering this season, said one of his teammates has been a big help in altering his success rate.

"I worked a lot with Jarrod in the offseason working on free throws and he's really helped me out a lot," he said.

Uthoff, who is Woodbury's fishing buddy and one of his closest friends, isn't the only one who has helped.

Assistant coach Kirk Speraw, the team's designated "shot doctor," also played a role in the improvement of Woodbury, who is naturally right-handed but always has shot free throws left-handed.

"I haven't really worked with him lately but definitely when I first got here as a freshman I did," Woodbury said of Speraw. "He almost changed my shot to a right-handed shot. He was working on some things and we put a lot of things on videotape and looked at them a lot. He tried to change my release point to be a little higher and I think that helped a lot."

McCaffery said that too often players struggling with their shooting are bombarded with advice from many different directions. His philosophy has been to turn them over to Speraw and have them listen only to him.

"He keeps it simple ..." McCaffery said. "Sometimes everybody wants to tell you do this, put your pinky here, move your elbow here and put your left hand here. Nothing good comes from that."

Woodbury only made 50.8 percent of his free throws as a senior at Sioux City East High School and he hit just 51.0 percent as a freshman at Iowa. That jumped to 71.0 as a sophomore, then toppled back down to 57.6 last season.

He's found his comfort zone now, however. He made 12 straight foul shots recently and has made 16 of his last 18 entering Big Ten play.

"Honestly, the coaches have told me my stroke was good enough to shoot that well for my entire career but my confidence wasn't always there," Woodbury said. "Confidence at the free-throw line is pretty big and I think I finally regained it this year."

STANDING TALL: Iowa's Woodbury knows he has his critics, but he doesn't listen

By John Bohnenkamp, November 12, 2015

IOWA CITY — Go ahead and criticize, Adam Woodbury said.

He's heard it before. The Iowa senior center has heard it all throughout his high school career, throughout his first three years with the Hawkeyes.

They come at him from all angles — some anonymously on message boards, last year it was the national media voices.

He isn't going to listen.

When you are 7-foot-1, you're a big target. There are expectations that come with height, and if you don't live up to the, well, lofty plans, then there must be something wrong.

There isn't anything wrong with Woodbury, his roommate and one of his best friends says.

"I think he handles it very well," said senior guard Mike Gesell, who played on the same AAU team as Woodbury and was part of the same recruiting class. "Honestly, I think his whole life, he's been criticized a lot. When you're 7 foot, everyone seems to think you're going to the (NBA) automatically. He's gotten a lot of criticism."

There isn't anything wrong with Woodbury, his coach says.

"I think he's been phenomenal in everything he's done," Fran McCaffery said. "His approach, he's professional every day when he comes to work. He's improved every year. He's one of the smartest players I've ever coached. He's one of the toughest players I've coached."

But Woodbury knows that this season will be different for him. He knows he no longer has the book-end center Gabe Olaseni, to share minutes with on game day and to battle with in practice and in pick-up games. He knows he is going to have to be a 30-minute man, stay out of foul trouble.

And yet, Woodbury says, he knows that this season will be like all of the others. For some, whatever he does, it won't be enough.

"People can say whatever they want," he said. "We've got Twitter, we've got all these forums where people can hide behind a screen name and write whatever they want, without repercussions. That stuff I've learned over the years, even in high school. The message boards, people come to me and show me. But that's something I have no control over, so it's not something I put much stock into."

"If you've never been through it, it's kind of tough to handle. But nobody's going to hurt my feelings. Nobody on a message board, or anything like that. I've handled that my whole life."

•••

It's a statistic that no one really notices.

Woodbury has started all but one game in his career — that came last season, when senior center Gabe Olaseni started in his place in the final regular-season game of the season.

The two had been a nice post combination in the last three seasons. Their playing time was almost equal last season — Woodbury averaged 20.5 minutes per game, while Olaseni averaged 18.6. Together, they averaged 14.7 points and 10 rebounds.

But Olaseni is gone now. Now the post presence will mostly belong to Woodbury.

"Instead of playing 18 to 22 minutes a night, in that range, Coach thinks I might be playing above 30 minutes a night,"

Woodbury said. "That extra 10 minutes — it might not sound like that much to the fan, but playing (an extra) 10 minutes in an NCAA game is a lot harder than you would think. So I have to be in that much better shape, and I think I've done a better job of preparing myself."

But to get to those 30 minutes, Woodbury will have to stay out of foul trouble. He and Olaseni tied for the team lead in fouls last season — Woodbury fouled out of three games, Olaseni out of one.

The key for Woodbury, then, is to stay out of foul trouble.

"I think Adam is in the best shape of his life," McCaffery said. "He's worked incredibly hard this summer. Physically, he's in a really good place. And his minutes per game are going to go up from probably in the 20-22 range to 34, maybe."

So with that, it will be an adjustment for him. He's always been a physical guy. It wasn't as much of an issue when you're playing 20 minutes. It is when you're playing 34, 35 minutes."

In Iowa's first exhibition game this season, Woodbury picked up two fouls in the first 11 ½ minutes and sat out the rest of the first half. He finished the 99-73 win over the University of Sioux Falls with eight points and two rebounds.

Then, in the 76-74 loss to Augustana (S.D.), Woodbury played 32 minutes and had six points and 14 rebounds.

"He's going to have to really stay conscious of it," McCaffery said. "Like I said, I started watching him as a sophomore in high school. He's always been physical. You've got to move your feet, and one of the things I love about him is that he can move his feet. Move your feet, get the body where it needs to be, and stay out of foul trouble."

But there will be those who will remember last season.

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Woodbury said at Big Ten basketball media day in October that he is tired of hearing the questions, and the jokes, about eye pokes.

There were the incidents in the Jan. 20 game at Wisconsin, when Woodbury, while on defense, poked the Badgers' Frank Kaminsky and Nigel Hayes in the eyes. A few weeks later, in a game against Maryland, he poked Melo Trimble in the eye and was called for a flagrant foul.

Woodbury said all of the incidents were accidents — Trimble and Maryland coach Mark Turgeon said the same thing about what happened in the Feb. 9 game — and McCaffery defended him.

"I know the kid," McCaffery said on the Big Ten teleconference the day after the Maryland game. "I know what we teach and I

know him. I know his character. I know his background. He does not want this attention. He doesn't deserve it. It's not anything malicious, anything intentional.

"I mean, think about it. I mean, here we are, we've got the game firmly in hand. Do you think he wants to stop it, give them two free throws and the ball, get a flagrant foul, be in foul trouble? He's playing the best of his life. He had 16 points. Do you think he wants to be out of the game with foul trouble? He's too smart for that."

ESPN analyst Dan Dakich, working the Wisconsin game, called Woodbury's actions "cowardly" and then, on his radio show in Indianapolis, said Woodbury was "gutless." Michael Wilbon, another ESPN commentator, suggested on-court retaliation to Woodbury.

Months later, Woodbury said the criticism "tested" him.

"It tested me in different aspects of my personality, to stand up for who I am and not what people said about me," he said. "To be completely honest, it didn't affect me as much as it affected my family. They heard those things about me and took it to heart. But I kind of let it roll off my shoulders."

Woodbury appreciated the defense from his coach.

"I'll be forever grateful for what he did for me in those couple of months, or however long that lasted," Woodbury said. "He always stuck up for me. But that's what he said when he recruited me. He said, 'Any time you need me, I'm going to be there for you.' For somebody to say that is one thing, but for somebody to do that in a national spot like that is another. And I think that shows people that he is a man of his word."

"I mean, he's done everything I've asked him to do," McCaffery said. "He really has been, from a coaching standpoint, you can't ask him any more than what he's given us. He's a tremendous defender, a very unselfish player. He puts a premium on winning every time he takes the floor. I think he's really hungry this year."

"I told him, 'Keep playing your game, don't worry about that. We know what we need to do to win,'" said Gesell, who is Woodbury's roommate. "I didn't have to tell him much, he's great at dealing with that."

Woodbury said the incidents didn't have much of an effect on how he played defense.

"Me, on defense, I'm not the most athletic guy, everyone knows that," he said. "So I've got to do things that are tricky, kind of quick, things like that. I had to back off a little bit because I didn't want it to happen again. It was just kind of mounting."

"And then I was worried about it. But once I played, I kind of forgot about it, and just tried to play my own game. Let the chips fall where they may, and pray to God it didn't happen again."

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It will be a different season for Woodbury, because he will miss Olaseni.

The battles made both players better, Woodbury said.

"I worked real hard," Woodbury said. "But I worked hard when Gabe was here. He helped me out a lot. I was excited to play against him every day. He made me bring my 'A' game every day. Got me a lot better."

"We never got into a single fight during practice, or anything like that. But we went as hard as anyone who has played on these teams. He was always a great guy to me. We always fought for playing time, but we never fought with each other. He taught me a lot about my game. Going against him made me the player I am today. I already missed him over the summer. You go against a guy every day for three years, you get accustomed to that. That's something I'm going to miss."

"He definitely does, he misses that," Gesell said. "Gabe was a guy who would push him every day. Maybe there was a day when he wasn't feeling his best. Gabe would be out there running the floor, pushing Adam to be his best. I think he's learned to adjust to that a little bit."

Woodbury has averaged 5.7 points and 4.6 rebounds for his career, but McCaffery said those numbers are a product of sharing time with Olaseni.

"We basically had he and Gabe splitting time," McCaffery said. "Both had completely different styles. With Woodbury, you look at his numbers and say, well, could they have been more? Yeah. But his playing half the time, they could have been higher. He's going to play a lot more now. So you'll see his numbers improve without question. He's a guy that could lead the Big Ten in rebounding. Will he? I think he could. Thirty-four, 35 minutes, he could be a 10-12 rebounding game guy."

"We have the ability to run our offense through him, because he's a willing passer. I think what you'll see is a guy who plays a little differently than he played last year, knowing that he's going to be out there more often."

"Now there's a lot more workload on my shoulders," Woodbury said. "I think that's what you want as a player. This being my last year, you kind of want it all to fall on yourself, see what you can bring to the table every night."

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The question, "What have you learned in your career," is a complicated one for Woodbury.

"I don't know if we have enough time in this interview to explain what I've learned over my career," he said. "I think, for myself, I've gotten a lot better. I've come a long way since I've been on campus as an 18-year-old. I've grown mentally, my personality has grown. Obviously my game has grown, and I attribute that to the coaches and the guys I've played around and played against."

"Looking back on game film, I can't believe some of the mistakes I've made. That's the thing about growing — you try not to make those mistakes over and over again."

In some ways, McCaffery sees the same player he saw during the recruiting process.

"He's doing a lot of the same things," McCaffery said. "He's always been a winning player. His teams won when he was at Sioux City East. He won when he played (AAU). He knows how to win, he knows how to work, he knows how to prepare. He puts the time in in the offseason. He's very concentrated in his effort. One of the most cerebral big guys you're ever going to be around."

"It was easy to tell (in high school). He was always in the right place. He's not afraid to open his mouth — he was always telling everybody where to go and what to do. I'm all for that, if you're telling the guy the right place to go and the right thing to do."

That's what he does. People listen to him to open his mouth."

On this season's team with four seniors and six newcomers, such leadership is going to be crucial.

"I know we've got a lot of young guys, and emotions are going to be running high," Woodbury said. "I know that our class (as freshmen), we were real emotional, always getting too high or too low. But the seniors, they were trying to keep us level-headed, because they've been through it before. And that's what we're going to try to do with the young guys. Everything is not as bad as it seems, everything is not as good as it seems. Trying to keep an even keel, a level head, is going to be the key to this season."

Woodbury has always tried to stay that way. But he admits it isn't easy.

"Oh yeah, I think everyone gets frustrated," he said. "It's a long season. Sometimes you don't see the daylight that much. You go in when it's light out, you come out when it's dark. Those days get real long. Everybody gets frustrated. You have bad practices and sometimes it carries over. You keep having bad practices. But that's when the leaders have to step up and try to get guys back together."

"Sure, I got frustrated. But I had great leadership to get me through the tough times."

"I know this — he does a lot of things that don't show up in the stat book that the general fan wouldn't see," Gesell said. "But he does all of the little things."

That's what Woodbury wants to do.

"Some of the criticism I've taken is that I don't dunk a lot, or I'm not a 3-point shooter, or stuff like that," Woodbury said.

"People like to see dunks — don't get me wrong, I like to see dunks as well. But that's not what my game is."

"But a lot of little things can add up to big things. It can help us win games, and that's something I pride myself on. Playing defense, making the right pass, getting the ball to guys who have open shots."

Asked if there are greater expectations for a player who is 7-1, McCaffery said, "I guess. I don't know. I've never looked at it that way."

"I always looked at him as a player who was really good. He earned a starting position right away, and has kept it. With him in the lineup, we've won 67 games in three years. He's a winner. He knows how to win."

Yet, Woodbury knows he will always have his critics.

"I never listen to outside expectations," he said. "The expectations I put on myself are greater than anything anybody else can put on me. I set high standards for myself, and I'm trying to achieve big things every time I step out on the court."

"So whatever anybody else says doesn't mean a whole lot to me."

24 HAWKEYES TO WATCH: ADAM WOODBURY

UI senior center wants to close out his Hawkeye career on top

By James Allan, hawkeyesports.com, November 9, 2015

IOWA CITY, Iowa -- Adam Woodbury has taken steps forward in his first three seasons with the University of Iowa men's basketball program. As a senior, Woodbury wants to follow it up with a leap.

The 7-foot-1 center has been a starter for the Hawkeyes since arriving on the UI campus in 2012. Woodbury has started 105 of 106 games and his numbers have gradually risen. His only non-start came on Gabriel Olaseni's senior day last season.



Woodbury averaged 4.9 points and 4.8 rebounds en route to Iowa's Defensive Player of the Year and Freshman of the Year honors in 2012-13. As a sophomore, he averaged 5.7 points with a 51.5 field goal percentage, and last season, Woodbury had career bests, averaging 6.6 points and 5.2 rebounds in 20.5 minutes per game.

"I have learned so much, not only about myself, but my game," said Woodbury of his first three seasons. "It has been a great learning process. Every year my game has taken a step, and I think (my senior year) will be the biggest step of my career."

Woodbury has averaged 17.9 minutes per game during his first three seasons. UI head coach Fran McCaffery is anticipating a jump to 30-35 minutes per game in 2015-16.

"He's going to play a lot more," said McCaffery. "You'll see his numbers improve without question. He's a guy that could lead the Big Ten in rebounding. He could be a 10-12 rebound per game guy, and we have the ability to run our offense through him because he's a willing passer."

"You'll see a guy who plays differently than he did last year, knowing he's going to be out there more often."

Playing 30 minutes would be monumental for Woodbury. The only time in his career he hit the 30-minute mark was in the 2014 NCAA Tournament against Tennessee -- a game that went overtime. Woodbury scored a career-high 16 points, connecting on 8-of-11 field goals, and grabbed eight rebounds.

Among his 106 career games, Woodbury has played 25 or more minutes 10 times and 28 or more minutes seven times. He averages 11.3 points and six rebounds, while shooting 57.1 percent (32-of-56) from the field when playing at least 28 minutes.

"With more minutes there are more opportunities," he said. "Anytime a coach has that much confidence in you to play 30-35 minutes, that gives the player the utmost confidence. I am excited about my expanded role, any player would be."

Woodbury began playing basketball as a 4-5 year old, following his brother, Aaron, who is older by 17 months, to the gym. Older brother, who now stands at 6-foot-6, beat up on younger brother until early in Woodbury's high school career.

"I was 14 or 15 when I out-grew him, and I continued to go," said Woodbury. "(Aaron) took it to me a lot. He beat me up and beat me in everything. That is what made me who I am today, always getting knocked down, but always having to pick myself up."

"He taught me a lot, and I am grateful for it."

Woodbury played basketball and baseball as a high school freshman before turning his focus solely to the hardwood. His rise in height corresponded with a rise in stature. He was tabbed as a top-50 recruit by ESPN.com, Rivals.com, and Scout.com. Woodbury selected Iowa over North Carolina.

"I looked at everybody and gave everybody an equal chance," said Woodbury. "It came down to Iowa out-weighting everybody else. I felt a good connection when I was on my (official recruiting) visit and created good connections with coach McCaffery and all of the other assistants."

"It felt like home, the right place to be, and the right place for my family to come see me play."

Woodbury's arrival corresponded with the resurgence of Iowa basketball. The Hawkeyes won 25 games and advanced to the championship game of the National Invitation Tournament as a freshman. Iowa won 20 and 22 games in years two and three, making back-to-back NCAA Tournament appearances.

Iowa's NCAA Tournament victory over Davidson -- an 83-52 drubbing -- goes down as Woodbury's top memory as a Hawkeye to date.

"We set the record for the largest margin of victory in a No. 7 versus No. 10 game, and we posted the program's first NCAA win in 14 years," said Woodbury. "It is special to get back to the tournament and win a game. This year we're going to try to expand on that and move further."

Woodbury is one of four team captains along with Mike Gesell, Jarrod Uthoff, and Anthony Clemmons. The quartet has banded together to provide a unified voice in a locker room littered with 10 newcomers.

"The first three years we've had great senior leadership with great guys that led our team to a lot of wins before I got here," said Woodbury. "My role has expanded and I have tried to relish that role and the other three seniors have as well. We've grouped together to find the things we do well and don't do well to try to have one voice in the locker room."

Woodbury's goals for the Hawkeyes are clear. He wants to win early and often.

"I want to go out on top and leave a lasting legacy on this program," he said. "When we got here (the program) was on its rise and our class has been one of the key catalysts."

"(This experience) has gone by fast. I have had a great journey and couldn't ask for more. I've learned a lot about myself and my game and am hoping for my final year to be as special as my first three."

Gesell Named Candidate for Senior CLASS Award

Senior point guard is one of 30 candidates for award

Hawkeyesports.com, January 19, 2016

IOWA CITY, Iowa -- University of Iowa men's basketball senior Mike Gesell is one of 30 NCAA men's basketball student-athletes to be selected as candidates for the 2015-16 Senior CLASS Award in collegiate basketball.

An acronym for Celebrating Loyalty and Achievement for Staying in School, the Senior CLASS Award focuses on the total student-athlete and encourages students to use their platform in athletics to make a positive impact as leaders in their communities.

To be eligible for the award, student-athletes must be classified as an NCAA Division I senior and have notable achievements in four areas of excellence: community, classroom, character, and competition.

The Senior CLASS Award winner will be announced during the 2016 NCAA Men's Final Four.

Mike Gesell, who earned his finance degree in three years and is currently taking graduate courses, is having a career season leading the team at point guard. The native of South Sioux City, Nebraska, is averaging career bests in scoring (9.5), rebounds (3.6), assists (6.9), field goal percentage (.470), 3-point accuracy (.435), and assist-to-turnover ratio (3.5).

Gesell was named Big Ten Player of the Week on Jan. 11 after posting his first career double-double (22 points and 10 assists) in a 77-66 victory over Nebraska (Jan. 5). Gesell matched career highs in free throws made (11) and attempted (13). He scored 19 of his 22 points and dished out seven of his 10 assists in the second half.

After netting a career-best 25 points (7-of-10 FG, 11-of-13 FT) to lift Iowa to an 83-70 win over No. 1 Michigan State, the senior had seven points, seven rebounds, and seven assists in Iowa's victory at No. 14 Purdue on Jan. 2. His efforts earned him national and Big Ten Player of the Week honors on Jan. 4, by the website College Sports Madness.

Gesell and the Hawkeyes (14-3, 5-0), winners of seven straight, travel to Piscataway, New Jersey, on Thursday to face Rutgers (6-13, 0-6) in the only regular season meeting between the two teams. Tipoff is set for 6:01 p.m. (CT) at the Rutgers Athletic Center.

Gesell completely in control as Hawkeyes' floor leader

By Don Doxsie, Quad-City Times, December 8, 2015

IOWA CITY — Mike Gesell had the whole thing set up perfectly only this time he wasn't orchestrating Iowa's halfcourt attack.

He was proposing to his girlfriend.

He had enlisted the help of some of the managers on the Iowa basketball team and he was going to pop the question to Pleasant Valley graduate Kennedy Bradley right there in the middle of Carver-Hawkeye Arena. There was going to be rose petals and candles and everything.

On the night it was supposed to happen — Nov. 9, his birthday — he took Kennedy out for dinner but then found there was some sort of band concert at the arena that was going to delay his plans. He had to stall. He took her out for ice cream, they took a walk around the Pentacrest, they went to Wal-Mart, then finally arrived at a finally empty arena.

"I was really stretching there," Gesell said. "She had no idea, though, so I think I did a pretty good job."

The proposal came off "perfectly," according to Gesell. She said yes.

In a way, it was a microcosm of the way Gesell has played in the first month of this season. No matter what happens on the court, the Hawkeyes' senior guard handles it with aplomb. Every game hasn't been flawless but he's totally in control.

After three years of ups and downs, he has settled in as the steady floor general the Hawkeyes need if they are going to make another run at the NCAA Tournament.

"I think what you're seeing is a guy who's played predominantly the point guard position since he got here and has really studied the game and thought the game differently," Iowa coach Fran McCaffery said. "I think he's more of a point guard now than he ever has been."

McCaffery said Gesell is still fully capable of scoring bunches of points, something he did in high school and in AAU ball when he spent much of his time playing the off-guard position. And he is in a better position to do that than he was at the end of last season when a strained ligament in his right elbow limited his shooting range.

But that's not really his primary job. He distributes the ball, gets all the other players on the court involved and he's doing that better than ever.

The 6-foot-2 senior is 15th in the nation with an average of 6.9 assists per game. Of the six best single-game assist totals of his career, four have come in the first month of this season. He has had three or more assists in every game.

"I think that's something I've really improved on every year I've been at Iowa and that's my court awareness and my vision," Gesell said. "I think I've improved on that a lot."

"A lot of it comes with chemistry, too. Some of us have been playing together for a long time so you know where guys are going to be and we've got a lot of shooters. I just try to get into the lane as much as I can and that disrupts the defense."

With Aaron White gone on to the pro ranks, Gesell has become much more vocal as a leader and a mentor to younger players. He's the unquestioned leader on the court and he knows exactly what sort of personality he wants the Hawkeyes to exude.

"A team that just doesn't get rattled, the way an experienced team should be," he said. "A team that even if the other team goes on a 10-0 run, we're still going to play hard, we're going to play our game."

That trait will be especially important Thursday night when the Hawkeyes (7-2) face their toughest test of the season to date in one of the toughest environments in all of college basketball. They visit No. 4-ranked Iowa State (7-0) in raucous Hilton Coliseum.

There's no need to tell Gesell about Hilton. He's been there.

He had a decent game there two years ago, collecting 11 points and six assists, but Iowa squandered a five-point lead in the final minute and lost.

Gesell missed two crucial free throws with 13 seconds remaining. He remembers that the crowd was so deafening as he stood at the line that the rim seemed to be quivering as he shot.

"That place was really loud," Gesell said. "But that's so much fun. That's why you sign up to play college basketball, to get to play in environments like that. It's a fun place to play. It's just a great opportunity for us."

It's definitely a chance for the Hawkeyes to add to their NCAA resume. It's also a chance to get back at the Cyclones for that 85-82 loss two years ago and a more lopsided 90-75 defeat in Iowa City last season, which Gesell said left "a pretty bad taste in our mouths."

He said it helps that all five of Iowa's starters have played in Hilton before.

"We have a lot of experience," he said. "We have experience in that gym. We have experience playing in hostile environments, tough road arenas. We know what it's going to be like. We know what to expect. Nothing is going to catch us by surprise that way. We've just got to go out there and execute the game plan."

Just the way he did with Kennedy amid the rose petals and candles last month.

McCaffery has no doubt that Gesell will handle the situation better than he did two years ago. He said the senior guard has improved steadily throughout his college career.

"Mike is one of the hardest workers I've ever been around, so he was not going to relax after last year," McCaffery said. "He played great, was on a really good team, but he wants to go out the right way, and he worked unbelievably hard in spring, summer, fall. He's in phenomenal shape. He knows I trust him completely, and it's his team."

GESELL ENJOYING BREAKOUT SEASON

Senior point guard has Iowa off to a hot start in B1G play

By Sam Stych, hawkeyesports.com, January 12, 2016

IOWA CITY, Iowa -- Knock off top-ranked Michigan State at home in front of your own fans -- check. Overcome a 19-point deficit to defeat 14th-ranked Purdue on the road -- check. Remain unbeaten in Big Ten Play (3-0) -- check.



Ranked 16th in the latest Associated Press Poll, the University of Iowa men's basketball team has matched its best start under head coach Fran McCaffery in six seasons (12-3) and is off to its best start in conference play since 2003.

A big reason for the Hawkeyes' impressive start can be attributed to the play of senior Mike Gesell. The four-year starting point guard is in the midst of a breakout year, averaging career bests in nearly every stat line -- scoring (9.9), rebounds (3.5), assists (6.9), field goal percentage (48.5), 3-point accuracy (50.0), and assist-to-turnover ratio (3.3).

So what's the difference between this year and Gesell's first three years?

"A lot of it has to do with roles," said Gesell, who is averaging 18 points and 6.7 assists during Iowa's 3-0 start in league play. "I feel like this year I have stepped up more as a scorer and also as a facilitator.

"I'm seeing the court a lot better and that comes with experience. My feel for the game is a lot better this year and that's why my assist numbers have gone up. I've been more aggressive in trying to score more."

Gesell's increased role has seen him produce 10 or more assists in three games this season. He also tallied a career-high 25 points in Iowa's upset victory over then No. 1 Michigan State.

However, no performance was more notable than when he recorded his first career double-double (22 points, 10 assists) in last week's victory over Nebraska. That performance earned him Big Ten Player of the Week honors.

"It's my job to get the ball to my teammates and find different ways to help get them open," said Gesell. "My job as the point guard is to do whatever it takes to win. Different games are going to flow in different ways. That is what is fun about being a point guard."

Gesell continues to out-do himself nearly every other game and this breakout year has come by no surprise to McCaffery or his teammates.

"He's a terrific player, an incredibly hard worker, is smart, has experience, and he wants it badly," said McCaffery. "He's doing exactly what I thought he would do."

"I feel like this is the best year he has had because he has changed his game -- he's looking to get everyone involved, but at the same time, when he has the chance, he goes and scores," said junior Peter Jok.

While the Hawkeyes may be in a solid position at the season's halfway point, Gesell knows there are still a lot of games to be played.

"We're sitting in a pretty good spot right now, but you never know what's going to happen," said Gesell. "It's a long season and for us to keep winning we have to focus on getting better every day.

"We can't worry about rankings or who we have next on the schedule. We just have to worry about getting better each and every day, and if we do that the rest will take care of itself."

Iowa travels to East Lansing on Thursday for a rematch against No. 4 Michigan State (16-1, 3-1). The is set to begin at 6 p.m. (CT), and it will be televised nationally on ESPN.

The Shutdown Sheriff

Anthony Clemmons has silenced some of the Big Ten's best guards.

By Kyle Mann, Daily Iowan, February 10, 2016

There is a popular belief going around this year's college basketball season that states there is no "great team" to be anointed the favorite to win the NCAA Tournament. While that may be true, there is only one team that sits in top 15 of both offensive and defensive efficiency.

Iowa's offense has been remarkable in the 2015-16 season, coming in as the sixth-most efficient team in the country. Almost as impressive, however, has been the 11th-best defense.

Plenty is said about Jarrod Uthoff and his lanky arms with his Big Ten-leading 2.9 blocks per game, and we all know about the 7-foot Adam Woodbury has been hogging rebounds in recent weeks. What doesn't get as much attention is that Anthony Clemmons has routinely put the clamps down on some of the conference's most lethal guards.

Clemmons began the year not necessarily as a forgotten man but as the point guard who wasn't quite the real point guard. Still, the two-point system has worked splendidly on the offensive end, and Clemmons has made a significant impact as a defender. All season long, he has played a large role in quieting very prolific scorers. Wichita State's NBA-hopeful Ron Baker was held to only 7 points in an 84-61 victory, and similar results have abounded in Big Ten play.

Clemmons held Michigan State's Bryn Forbes (14.3 points per game) to 3 and 2 points in a pair of huge victories, Maryland's Melo Trimble (14.8) to only 11, and Illinois' Kendrick Nunn (16.7) to a season-low 6.

Mike Gesell, after sparring with Clemmons for four years, knows better than anybody how tough Clemmons can be.

"I think he's, if not the best, one of the best on-ball defenders in the Big Ten, no doubt about it," Gesell said. "He's a guy that's really an anchor for our defense; if there's ever a guy we need to really shut down, we put him on [the guy] and tell him to go to work."

Gesell plays the role of your typical floor-leading point guard, and Peter Jok has developed into a defensive playmaker in his own right. Clemmons, however, is the lockdown defender leading one of the top perimeter defenses in the league.

Iowa holds opponents to 29 percent from beyond the arc, second in the Big Ten, and while Clemmons can take a lot of credit for that, head coach Fran McCaffery doesn't want to leave anybody out.

"[Clemmons] has been terrific," McCaffery said. "But I think Mike gets underestimated in terms of his ability to defend the point of attack. Mike and Anthony, they're able to do that. Pete has taken his game to a whole other level at the defensive end ... so the starting five is very good."

As offensively oriented as the Hawkeyes appear, defense is stressed to a high degree in the Carver-Hawkeye walls, and the players share McCaffery's appreciation for defense. Perhaps none more, however, than Clemmons.

Since the day the Michigan-native stepped on campus, he had a chip on his shoulder. Perhaps he felt the sting of being spurned by the in-state Spartans and Wolverines, but regardless, he plays and defends like a player with something to prove.

"I've always been confident at the highest level," Clemmons said. "I know I'm able to guard just about anybody that I'm put up against, so I'm pretty confident at all times. Because that's what I do. I prided myself since I stepped on campus."

Clemmons will have another tough assignment on Thursday with Indiana's Yogi Ferrell, but Clemmons won't shy away. He's just another Hawkeye playing his role and playing it well.

Clemmons has 'great shot' at Big Ten defensive goal

By Chad Leistikow, Des Moines Register, February 5, 2016

Anthony Clemmons has never been a big numbers guy, but he's building a strong resume on reputation alone to achieve his only preseason individual goal: Make the Big Ten Conference's all-defensive team.

The 6-foot-2, 200-pound Iowa senior famously shut down explosive Michigan State guard Bryn Forbes, his high school teammate, *twice* earlier this season — something immortalized on a half-hour TV special recently on the Big Ten Network.

Forbes was held to 1-for-10 shooting and five points (2.5 average) going against Clemmons, a key factor in the Hawkeyes' season sweep of the Spartans. In Forbes' last nine games *not* playing against Clemmons, he's averaging 17.3 points a night.

The Big Ten's 14 coaches will vote on the five-player all-defensive team in about a month.

"I think he's got a great shot at it," Iowa coach Fran McCaffery said Friday. "He's really locked in defensively. He's done a terrific job on a lot of really good players. I think everybody remembers the job he did on Forbes, but it's not just that. Because we'll put him on the point, we'll put him on the '2,' we'll put him on the 3. He'll guard a 6-6 guy, he'll guard a 5-10 guy. The value of that skill on your team is so incredible."

Clemmons' all-defense goal reinforces that team-first mentality that McCaffery saw from Gabe Olaseni a year ago, when he stated he wanted to be the Big Ten's Sixth Man of the Year — and was.

Where does that selfless attitude come from? It starts at home, and with his successful team at Sexton High School in Lansing, Mich., where he also played with Michigan State's Denzel Valentine (and was coached by Carlton Valentine, Denzel's father). Clemmons embraced his role at Sexton, which the Lansing State Journal recently called mid-Michigan's greatest high school team ever.

"Great family, great high school coach, great AAU program, always played on teams that won," McCaffery said. "So what's changed when he got here? Nothing."

Clemmons will need to continue his reputation as a defensive stopper in Iowa's final eight Big Ten games. Spots will be tough to come by with Purdue returning two defensive stalwarts from last year's all-defensive team in A.J. Hammons and Rapheal Davis.

And then there's his teammates. Clemmons is averaging just over one steal a game, fewer than Hawkeye guards Mike Gesell and Peter Jok. Center Adam Woodbury has been a physical defensive force inside (8.7 rebounds a game in Big Ten play) and Iowa's Jarrod Uthoff leads the conference in blocked shots (3.0 per game).

"Any one of those guys could be on that team," McCaffery said.

Clemmons will likely draw 6-3 guard Kendrick Nunn in No. 7 Iowa's game Sunday at Illinois (noon, BTN). Nunn is averaging 17.3 points, including 3.0 made 3-pointers a game.

"He's explosive," McCaffery said. "Guys that are really quick off the floor with a quick burst that can get to the rim but also make 3s, those are tough guys to cover."

No doubt Clemmons is geared up for the challenge.

Surreal and sweet victory for Iowa's Clemmons

Hawkeye senior returns home for big victory

By Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette, January 14, 2016

EAST LANSING, Mich. — Iowa guard Anthony Clemmons was neither cheered nor booed as he was introduced as the opponent to his hometown fans one final time in his college basketball career.

Clemmons, a Lansing Sexton High School graduate, was stoic and in control, neither excited nor disappointed. But his outward emotions belied the excitement he had in facing Michigan State at the Breslin Center. But when the final horn sounded and his Hawkeyes blasted the Spartans 76-59, Clemmons couldn't contain himself.

He went through postgame handshakes and was embraced by all. Clemmons' two best friends and former high school teammates Denzel Valentine and Bryn Forbes play for the Spartans. Clemmons works out at Michigan State during the summer. He knows everyone on a nickname basis and they all talked smack on the court, which made Thursday night's victory so sweet for the Iowa senior.

"It's a surreal feeling," Clemmons said. "This is a moment I've been waiting on for my entire life, since I've been in college.

"I felt like I was back in my state championship days. There were a lot of people rooting for me. There were a lot of people rooting against me. At those types of moments, you've got to really flush everything and stick in the group with your guys and go to war with the guys that are behind you, the ones with Iowa on their jersey."

Clemmons was a major reason why Iowa won in East Lansing for the first time since 1993. He ran the point for most of the first half with Mike Gesell in foul trouble. Clemmons scored 13 points in 31 minutes. He played lockdown defense on Forbes, who scored just two points. It was his finest hour as a Hawkeye.

"His ability to play the point with Mike out for 15, 16 minutes was amazing," Iowa Coach Fran McCaffery said. "I almost didn't take him out at all, but I felt like I needed to. But to engineer a 22-point lead the way he did and mix some scoring and phenomenal defense, I think, speaks to his character."

"I give Clemmons credit again," said Michigan State Coach Tom Izzo. "Not a very good shooter, hit two big 3s in the first half."

Izzo walked up to Clemmons after the game and said, 'You deserve it.' That meant a lot to Clemmons, who grew up a Spartans fan.

"Who knew that I'd be going against Michigan State when I was younger?" Clemmons said. "I didn't know, but I did. And I got the 'W.'"

Clemmons and pals never get used to facing each other

By Don Doxsie, Quad-City Times, December 29, 2015

It still feels sort of odd for Anthony Clemmons, Denzel Valentine and Bryn Forbes.

Very odd. Always has. Probably always will.

The three of them played so much basketball together and did so many other things together, starting when they were just seven years old back in Lansing, Mich. They became closer than brothers both on and off the basketball court.

So now, when they occasionally play against one another in the Big Ten, it's just very different.

"It's kind of weird, especially my first year, because you always want to see your friends succeed," said Valentine, now a star forward and national player of the year candidate at Michigan State. "When (Clemmons) is going against us, you kind of have to throw that out the window. It's kind of weird but now we're seniors so we're kind of used to it."

Forbes, who also starts for the No. 1-ranked Spartans, actually sort of likes playing against his pal, Clemmons.

"It's always a good matchup," he said. "It's kind of fun to see one of your best friends looking at you from the other side."

Two of them will be out there again tonight in the opening game of the Big Ten season as Michigan State visits Iowa in an 8 p.m. game at Carver-Hawkeye Arena. Valentine has been sidelined by a minor knee surgery, but Clemmons and Forbes will go head-to-head once again.

Clemmons, now a starter at Iowa, will be trying to beat Michigan State for the first time in his career.

"They're the only (Big Ten) team I've never beaten," he said. "To have that X on my back from being there and knowing the guys and not beating them before, that gives you that extra burst."

Iowa coach Fran McCaffery admitted he sees a little extra jump in Clemmons' step when Michigan State comes to town.

"There's bound to be a different feeling for him," McCaffery said. "But the one thing I've always noticed about him is he's one of those guys even from the minute he got here who is incredibly professional in his approach and he'll be the same way on Tuesday."

Hanging out

Clemmons, Forbes and Valentine began playing together as elementary school kids on the streets of Lansing, about five miles across town from the Michigan State campus.

While Valentine and Forbes focused mostly on basketball, Clemmons dabbled in other sports, especially football.

As a little kid, he wore No. 99 and played the defensive line, and after a series of sacks in a game one day, his teammates began calling him "Baby Sapp" after NFL star Warren Sapp. The Baby part eventually fell by the wayside but almost everyone who knows Clemmons still calls him Sapp.

The three youngsters were pretty much inseparable through the years.

"Every day, every day, since we were seven years old," Forbes said. "We were always laughing, always together, in high school especially. Before practice we'd be hanging out. After practice we'd be hanging out."

When the three players all represented their schools at the Big Ten's preseason media day in Chicago last fall, they spent almost the whole time in each other's hotel rooms.

"When we see each other, it's like we were hanging out yesterday even if we haven't seen each other in a couple of months," Valentine said. "It's always good seeing him."

Getting better

When they got to Lansing's Sexton High School, where their head coach was Valentine's father, Carlton, they helped turn the Big Reds into a powerhouse program. They went to the Michigan Class B state championship game in their sophomore season, then won the title in their junior and senior years.

Valentine, who ranks in the top three in the Big Ten in scoring, rebounding and assists, said it was between their sophomore and junior years when they really began getting serious about basketball.

He said he and Clemmons started getting up at 5:30 every morning to train and lift weights. Then they would go to the gym to shoot and play pickup games, take a break, then go back to the gym for more.

"We did that for the whole month of June," Valentine said. "That month was definitely crazy, but that was the summer when (Clemmons) started getting scholarship offers and stuff like that."

Valentine seemed destined to play for Michigan State from the very beginning because his father had been a star there. Forbes, who was Sexton's leading scorer in high school, signed with Cleveland State but transferred to Michigan State two years ago.

The Spartans didn't seem all that interested in Clemmons so when he got an offer from another Big Ten school, he jumped at it.

Finding success

While Valentine and Forbes never have had any trouble finding playing time at the college level, it hasn't been as smooth a ride for Sapp at Iowa.

He started 13 games as a freshman in the 2012-13 season but saw his playing time cut drastically the following year. He contemplated transferring to another school and spent much of the summer of 2014 back home in Lansing, commiserating with his old pals, trying to figure out what to do.

He finally decided to return to Iowa and rededicate himself to making it work. He started 12 games last season and played much more extensively.

He's now a starter, a hard-nosed defender who can play either guard position and who is capable of scoring points when the opportunity presents itself. His current average of 8.8 points per game is more than double his career average.

"I know this is going to be the season," he told reporters at that Big Ten media day back in October. "I haven't really had a consistent season. Everybody has seen flashes of what I can do. I'm ready to put that whole season together."

The admiration for their old friend and for the perseverance he has displayed just oozes out of his boyhood buddies.

"He never quits," Valentine said. "He's had an up and down career but he's on his way up in his senior year. Hopefully, he can end it with a bang. I'm hoping Sapp can have a great senior year."

Forbes said that when "playing against Sapp, you know you've always got to bring it.

"I'd say he's one of the toughest, most solid players I ever played with," he added. "He's all about winning. I'd say his toughness is what sticks out the most. He's a competitor."

Clemmons' perseverance inspires Iowa, MSU
Struggling guard refocuses, improves, becomes an example

By Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette, July 17, 2015

IOWA CITY — One day, basketball coaches from two Big Ten schools will hold up Anthony Clemmons as an example of perseverance and dedication.

When that day comes, who knows? But when the chips are down for a player who's thinking about transferring, Iowa and Michigan State coaches will invoke Clemmons' name as a reminder that the past doesn't always determine the future.

"I have a story to tell," Clemmons said. Yes, he does.

Clemmons, a 20-year-old incoming senior, arrived on Iowa's campus in summer 2012 fresh from a state title at Lansing (Mich.) Sexton High School. His best friends Denzel Valentine and Bryn Forbes also had basketball scholarships. Valentine, the son of Sexton coach and former Michigan State player Carlton Valentine, stayed home with the Spartans. Forbes went to Cleveland State for two years before transferring to Michigan State last year.

The trio were inseparable growing up and Clemmons looked to Valentine's older brother Drew as a mentor. Clemmons received his nickname "Sapp" — as a tribute to his play on the youth football field — from Carlton Valentine.

The players left for college to chase their basketball dreams. For Clemmons, success came quickly. He moved into Iowa's starting lineup early his freshman year. At point guard, he guided the Hawkeyes to a win against in-state rival Iowa State with 14 points, eight assists and only one turnover. That performance showed Clemmons' abilities, but it didn't take long for his mind to waver off the court. It caught up with him the next year.

Clemmons' sophomore season was nothing short of a slump. His minutes dwindled in Big Ten play, and he reached double digits just three times. He totaled 14 points in league action and averaged 7.1 minutes a game. After playing only one minute in the Big Ten Tournament and just four minutes in Iowa's NCAA tournament overtime loss to Tennessee, Clemmons knew he had a decision to make.

Most players in his position would bolt. Clemmons' potential was obvious, and another school might appreciate his talents more than Iowa. But Clemmons avoided a rash, emotional decision about his future. Basketball was one component, but so was life, school, his word and relationships. A transfer would mean fitting in with a new group on the court in a different location.

"That was probably one of the most difficult decisions I had in my life, so far," Clemmons said. "I think that's even harder than picking a school to go to.

"Since the end of the Tennessee game — people don't know — I took time by myself. I took about a week and no one saw me outside the arena and workouts. I was by myself a lot. I was thinking a lot. I prayed a lot. That's what helped me really think and what questions I had for (Coach Fran) McCaffery."

The pluses for staying were many. Clemmons liked Iowa City, the school and his teammates. There's playing in the Big Ten, considered the nation's foremost basketball conference, and against his hometown Spartans. Along with McCaffery, Clemmons sought input from his friends and family.

"He was pretty confident," Forbes said. "He was happy there already. I just encouraged him to go after what he wanted."

"Even if I did transfer, who said the situation would be better?" Clemmons said. "It might be better for me basketball-wise, but what about life? That's what I sat down and thought to myself, 'How is this going to help you in life?' People are going to say you're a quitter. You still had that flesh in your body that said, 'Dang, I quit on them.' I wasn't raised that way. I wasn't raised to quit. My dad always told me once you start something, finish it out."

Clemmons said his conversation with McCaffery cemented his decision.

"What am I going to get out of the rest of my career if I stayed here?" Clemmons recalled asking. "That's something I had to ask Coach McCaffery. He told me I'm in a different situation than a lot of other guys. I can really contribute to this team. If you do what you're supposed to do and play the way confidently like I know you can play, you can really contribute to this team and do something special with this team. I took that to heart as, 'OK, let me rededicate myself.' I kind of lost vision of what the Lord had for me. I just got on the right path and told myself, 'Nothing's going to stop me from getting where I want to go.'"

Part of Clemmons' rededication included a trip home to Lansing after the 2014 spring semester to work out with old friends and former Spartans he had admired. He received encouraging words from Lansing native Magic Johnson and had McCaffery's blessing.

Drew Valentine worked as a Michigan State graduate assistant that summer. He immediately heard from Clemmons, and they began workouts at Michigan State. Valentine could sense Clemmons was committed.

"He was hungry," said Valentine, now an assistant coach at Oakland (Mich.). "I was the one he worked out with most of the time. He was hungry, always texting me, 'Drew are

you at the gym, can you work out?’ Not only with Denzel and Bryn but on his own. He was just super hungry to get back and didn’t want a repeat of last season.”

Few schools are secure enough to allow a player from a conference rival stroll into their sanctuary for off-season workouts. At Michigan State, though, it was different. Clemmons grew up attending MSU camps and knew everyone involved. An exception was made. He needed motivation, and he also motivated his friends and competitors.

“He comes over to our place quite a bit. We let him wear his Iowa gear,” Michigan State assistant coach Dwayne Stephens said, drawing out the Iowa gear. “We cheer for Sapp when he’s not playing us. He’s a great kid. He has an unbelievable work ethic. When he was struggling a little bit, we tried to encourage him when we’d see him. He’s a good kid.”

Stephens compares Clemmons to Travis Walton, a three-year MSU captain, a three-time all-league defender and perhaps the most hard-nosed Big Ten player in recent memory.

“(Walton) didn’t get recruited by a ton of Big Ten teams, but we saw something in him that we liked and he went on to lead us to a Final Four,” Stephens said. “I think Sapp has that kind of toughness where he can push his teammates and he can get some things done. He’s not an offensive player that’s going to blow you away, but he’s going to continue to get better because of his work ethic and he’s always going to be able to defend. I think he’s a great leader.”

Clemmons, who watched Walton play through 2009, was humbled by the comparison.

“It means a lot to be compared with him, that’s a blessing, too,” Clemmons said. “Because he’s a winner. He’s a scrapper. It’s really good to be put in that category because there’s not a lot of Travis Waltons to come out of the basketball world to do anything and sacrifice anything to win a game.”

Clemmons’ strides were obvious last season. He started 12 games, averaged 4.8 points and delivered 64 assists to 38 turnovers. He also became Iowa’s top defensive guard and averaged just shy of 20 minutes a game. Over the final six regular-season games, he put up 24 assists and only six turnovers. He was named Iowa’s Most Improved Player after the season.

In Iowa’s NCAA tournament loss to Gonzaga, Clemmons scored 10 points with three 3-pointers. He and the Hawkeyes didn’t qualify for the Final Four, but he still attended with tickets supplied by Denzel Valentine after the Spartans qualified.

But for all the backslaps between Clemmons and the Spartans, it hardly means they are soft toward one another, either. Just the opposite, in fact.

“I think our guys may take it more personal with him than Mike (Gesell), just because they know they’ve got to listen to him talking trash when he comes home over the summer,” Stephens said.

Iowa has lost nine straight to Michigan State, including all five during Clemmons’ career. Last year, Iowa led 39-28 at halftime only to see the Spartans’ second-half barrage lead to a 75-61 MSU victory. Clemmons, who didn’t score, talked with Forbes (eight points) and Valentine (18 points) before and after the game, but not during it.

“That was exciting, that was fun,” Forbes said. “Not many people get the chance to play with one of your best friends and against one of your best friends in the same game.”

“They throw it my face, still,” Clemmons said, “because I beat every team in the Big Ten besides them. Getting a win versus them my senior year will outmatch any other losses that I had throughout my career.”

But just getting this far was a testament to Clemmons’ perseverance. Instead of heading to a mid-major to become a star, Clemmons stayed at Iowa to contribute. He redoubled his efforts to maximize his potential. In college basketball, where more than 600 players transferred this off-season, Clemmons’ dedication was rare and inspiring.

“It shows you’re a loyal person,” Drew Valentine said. “The fact that he came back and he was so hungry shows he was willing to work hard to get what he wants.”

“I wish there were more kids like him,” Stephens said. “Because here’s a kid that maybe didn’t get recruited at a high level, came here with a chip on his shoulder, things didn’t go right. So it would be very easy for him to transfer back to one of the MAC schools in Michigan that all wanted him in the beginning. But he came back and worked his butt off, and I think he had a heck of a year for (Iowa).

“There’s always room for improvement. but I would say he’s the model for how things should go. You stay there, you work your butt off and you get what’s coming to you.”

Clemmons said he had a story to tell. The last chapter in his Iowa career has yet to be written. But he likes where the story is going.

“Every guy on this team has goals,” Clemmons said. “If we stick them all together and worry about the team first and accomplishing our goals, it’s going to go really far. We’re going to go really far with this season.”

Uhl's versatility a weapon for Iowa

Hawkeyes forward has hit 9 of 11 3-pointers

By Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette, January 19, 2016

IOWA CITY — Dom Uhl first picked up a basketball when he was 11 years old in Frankfurt, Germany.

"I just tried it out one day and I liked it," the Iowa sophomore forward said. "I just fell in love with it, I guess."

A decade later, Uhl has become one of the Big Ten's top bench players for the No. 9 Hawkeyes (14-3, 5-0). He averages 7.6 points and 4.2 rebounds a game, but his contributions stretch well beyond his stats.

Uhl's versatility is rare for a player still learning the game. Officially, Uhl stands 6-foot-9, weighs 215 pounds and plays forward. But Uhl shifts to multiple positions on the floor, from center to small forward. He's most dangerous along the perimeter.

This season Uhl has knocked down 18 of 33 3-point attempts (54.5 percent). But in Big Ten play, he's become a weapon with nine 3-pointers in 11 attempts. He rarely misses from the top of the key, and he's hit his last six 3-pointers.

"I just let it fly when I'm open," Uhl said.

It's quite a change year-over-year for Uhl, who knocked down just 5 of 27 3-point attempts last year.

"He's really worked on it," Iowa Coach Fran McCaffery said. "I think he's always been a good shooter. He's always had great confidence in his 3-point shooting. You look at him, and he's playing relaxed. He knows he's going to play a lot. He knows I'm going to go to him. And he knows he's going to have the opportunity to play through his mistakes. You don't always get that sometimes when you're a freshman."

Like most Germans, Uhl grew up a soccer fan but found basketball exciting as he approached his teens. He watched YouTube highlights of NBA players and idolized former all-star Tracy McGrady. Uhl tried out for a German club team but had to work on ball handling and other skills before he could take part in practice.

As Uhl reached high school age, he had a friend who moved to the U.S. for basketball. When his friend returned a much-improved player, Uhl realized he could make similar strides if he moved to the U.S.

"I always wanted to go," Uhl said. "But he came one summer, and he improved a lot so that's when I decided to go."

Uhl left his family and moved to New Jersey and played for two seasons at Point Pleasant Beach High School. Along with learning the game at an accelerated rate, Uhl had to

converse exclusively in English. He had to adjust to food and the culture, which was challenging. But he quickly became a better basketball player.

Recruiting picked up for Uhl throughout his final AAU season, and he settled on Iowa over Boston College and Temple in October 2013. As a freshman, Uhl averaged 10 minutes a game but he was stuck playing behind all-Big Ten forward Aaron White and current Big Ten scoring leader Jarrod Uthoff. Uhl played well in spurts but rarely saw extended action.

"He didn't make a ton of mistakes last year," McCaffery said. "But a lot of times I would take him out, not necessarily because of anything he did, but because I wanted to get White or Uthoff back in the game."

This year, Uhl had a sluggish start in fall camp but broke out with 18 points against Coppin State and a 4-for-4 shooting performance at Marquette. By early December he became a major contributor. In his last three games, Uhl has scored 10 points each time out. Often he spells Adam Woodbury at center. Other times, Uhl is on the wing. Uhl said he's most comfortable at small forward, while McCaffery called him a "stretch four."

"He's got a lot of three-man skills, and he's a mismatch nightmare for fives," McCaffery said. "He can play some five now because he's added weight, and we kind of use him in all those different ways."

Uhl is reserved and talks little, but he shows personality through multiple hair styles. On Sunday, he wore braids but he took them out after a rubber band was missing. By Tuesday, his hair was wavy and long.

When asked about Uhl bulking up, Woodbury joked, "His hair has got to be half that weight." After a laugh, Woodbury evaluated Uhl's game more seriously.

"The confidence he's playing with is pretty remarkable," Woodbury said. "He's improved on his game. He's a hardworking guy. So it's good to see him have more security and confidence in his game, and it's able to shine through."

Bulked-up Dom Uhl an interesting puzzle piece for Iowa, McCaffery

By Chad Leistikow, Iowa City Press-Citizen, July 29, 2015

What to make of Dom Uhl?

The 6-foot-8 sophomore is one of the most intriguing pieces to Iowa basketball 2015-16 puzzle.

He's got the size, the athleticism and the versatility to play on the wing or interior.

But the native of Frankfurt, Germany, is still learning the game, in just this third year playing in the United States. And there's urgency for him to perform: Six newcomers could be wrestling with him for precious playing time.

"He's not a freshman anymore, so we'll expect him to do a little bit more on this team," fourth-year starting point guard Mike Gesell said, "be a little more of a leader."

Uhl was listed at 195 pounds as a freshman. Word has it he'll get an official listing around 215 this season. The man has put on some legit muscle entering Year 2.

"I just ate a lot and lifted," he grinned after a recent 27-point, 10-rebound night at the Prime Time League. "It just happened."

Uhl knows he's in an opportunistic spot this season. Iowa lost big-man seniors Aaron White (6-9) and Gabe Olaseni (6-10) from a team that recorded the program's first NCAA Tournament victory since 2001. To help keep the momentum going, guys like Uhl need to step to the forefront.

Uhl was the ninth man in Fran McCaffery's nine-man rotation last season. Now, he'll be competing for a starting spot, and could slide anywhere from small forward to Adam Woodbury's backup center.

"You're probably going to see some unconventional lineups. You'll probably see (Uhl playing the) 3 to 5," Gesell said. "He's a versatile player, and he can guard all those positions. So that'll help him get on the floor."

Uhl found success in pockets last season. He sank a clutch 3-pointer in what became a 77-75 road win at Minnesota on Jan. 13, and flashed a memorable reverse layup in an electric win over Ohio State four days later.

Like many freshman, though, there was inconsistency in his performance and playing time. McCaffery criticized himself a few times in postgame news conferences that he didn't give Uhl more minutes.

Uhl wound up scoring just two baskets in Iowa's final eight games.

"I have to step up," he said. "I'm definitely trying to do that."

Uhl hasn't been home to Germany since before last basketball season. That'll change in the coming days, as he heads to France as part of the USA East Coast basketball team, which plays against teams from Europe and Africa Aug. 1-9. Iowa has had players on this team five years in a row — Gesell and Woodbury made the trip last summer.

After the trip, Uhl will be reunited with his mother in Frankfurt. He'll stay there for a while before the returning for UI's fall semester.

"My mom definitely misses me," he said, "and wants me to come home more often."

Uhl and 6-9 forward Jarrod Uthoff played together in the PTL this summer, leading their team to Thursday night's championship game against a team led by Woodbury. Uhl averaged 21.5 points and 9.1 rebounds, including scoring outputs of 35, 19, 22, 27 and 26 in his last five games.

Uhl agrees his playing style is part Uthoff, part White — but with a lot of work ahead.

"I feel like I'm a mix of those two," Uhl said. "Jarrod can shoot better than I can. Whitey, he's an awesome player. I kind of want to do both — the best of both worlds."

THE RISE OF NICHOLAS BAER

Redshirt freshman has become a reliable reserve for Hawkeyes

By Matt Weitzel, hawkeyesports.com, January 11, 2016

IOWA CITY, Iowa -- The University of Iowa men's basketball team's depth took a hit in early December when junior forward Dale Jones suffered a season-ending knee injury. Jones was averaging 13 minutes and 5.5 points per game.



With the loss of Jones, other Hawkeye reserves have been asked by head coach Fran McCaffery to increase their production. One of those players is redshirt freshman walk-on Nicholas Baer.

Entering the month of January, Baer had the best offensive rating on the roster -- according to KenPom.com -- and the best shooting percentage of anyone who has played at least 35 percent of available minutes.

"Nicholas has a complete game," said McCaffery. "He scores inside, can hit 3s, moves the ball, can put it on the deck, hustles, and understands how to play. He's going to impact the game when he's on the floor."

And impact the game he has. The native of Bettendorf, Iowa, has scored in double figures five times this season. Baer shoots the basketball at a high percentage inside and outside, while also grabbing rebounds, collecting steals, and blocking shots.

Baer was named Big Ten Freshman of the Week on Dec. 21 following his performance against Drake (Dec. 19). He scored 13 points, corralled seven rebounds, and blocked a personal best six shots in Iowa's 70-64 victory over Drake at the Hy-Vee Big Four Classic in Des Moines. The six blocks broke the Wells Fargo Arena record in a college basketball game.

Baer said that his confidence grows with each game, thanks in large part to his teammates.

"Our starters do a terrific job of making sure all the players coming off the bench feel comfortable and it's a testament to them," Baer said.

The 6-foot-7, 200-pound forward played a large role in Iowa's Big Ten wins over top-ranked Michigan State and No. 14 Purdue to start conference play. Baer netted 11 points, snagged five rebounds, and denied two shots against the Spartans. At Purdue, he scored seven crucial points, making all three shot attempts, in the final 6:30 of the contest, while also registering four rebounds and two blocks.

"I'm not worried about making a big play at a big moment, it's making the play as it comes," said Baer. "(For me) it's keeping the game as simple as possible."

During Iowa's current five-game winning streak, Baer is fourth on the team in scoring (10.4) and rebounding (4.8), and second in blocks (2.4). He is shooting the ball at a blistering percentage from long distance (61.5, 6-of-11) and inside the 3-point arc (73.7, 14-of-19).

McCaffery said he's happy for Baer because all he wanted was an opportunity.

"He believed in himself and we believe in him," McCaffery said. "He has worked hard from the minute he said he was coming here. I couldn't be prouder of him. Everybody on the team loves him."

Baer and the Hawkeyes return to the court Thursday when they travel to East Lansing, Michigan, to face nationally-ranked Michigan State for a second time in as many weeks. Tipoff is set for 6 p.m. (CT) from the Breslin Center.

Iowa's Baer lives up to Big Ten stage

Hawkeyes' walk-on continues his standout red-shirt freshman season with strong efforts vs No. 1 Michigan State, No. 14 Purdue

By Jeremiah Davis, Cedar Rapids Gazette, January 3, 2016

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. — Nicholas Baer is quickly becoming — if he isn't already — Iowa men's basketball fans' favorite Hawkeye.

As he's shown throughout his red-shirt freshman campaign, he's much more than a walk-on from Bettendorf. He's proved on several occasions he belongs, and Coach Fran McCaffery has already said he'll get a scholarship at some point.

But before this week, no one knew if what Baer's done would transfer to Big Ten play — especially on the road in a hostile environment.

Asked, and answered.

"What's great about that is he played the way he's been playing in the second half, but he didn't play that way in the first half (against Purdue)," McCaffery said. "You're talking about a guy without a lot of experience, on the road in this kind of environment. He turned it over, we put him in and he fumbled it a couple times, but he did get on the glass and he did block a shot. He got a little bit involved. But in the second half he was what he usually is — an impact player."

Baer finished the Hawkeyes' 70-63 comeback win on Saturday with seven points on 3 of 3 shooting, four rebounds and two blocks. But almost all of that came after two early turnovers in the first half that saw him look like a walk-on for the first time this season.

The biggest testament to what he's been able to bring to Iowa (11-3, 2-0 Big Ten) in these two upset wins to begin Big Ten play has been his short memory.

Baer has shrugged it all off — good and bad — for the most part.

His tunnel vision in both Big Ten games has served him well. Baer missed a wild layup in the first half against the Spartans, but as soon as he gathered himself up, he raced to the other end and blocked MSU guard Matt McQuaid's 3-point attempt into the second row.

"I missed the layup and ran down because McQuaid is a great 3-point shooter and we didn't want to give him any open looks. I just tried to make a play," Baer said after that game. "You can't control which shots go in, but you can control your effort, and that's what I was trying to do."

He echoed that exact sentiment Saturday when asked about shaking off the early turnovers.

"You can't worry about turnovers. It's over and done with," Baer said. "You've got to get back and get a stop; try to make a play some other way. It's always good to have a short term memory."

Not being effected by the stage nor the environment against both the No. 1 Spartans and No. 14 Boilermakers has put him on the floor in some of the biggest situations, and has helped him come through. He had 11 points (4 of 7 shooting), five rebounds and two blocks against Michigan State before Saturday's effort.

His 3-pointer from the corner with 6:30 to go Saturday gave Iowa a lead they wouldn't relinquish again. Then he had a turnaround jumper with 2:43 to go and a wide open layup with 1:11 to go that went a long way to icing the victory.

Those plays and the confidence with which he made them have made his teammates — and everyone else, for that matter — take notice.

"He got it back together. It's hard. When you have a couple early turnovers, you get a little sideways," said Jarrod Uthoff. "It's hard to come back, especially on the road when you're a younger guy. To his credit, he hit a couple big shots down the stretch. That corner 3 and that turnaround were huge shots. Those were big time plays."

Bettendorf's Nicholas Baer doing big things for Hawkeyes

By Don Doxie, Quad-City Times, December 21, 2015

IOWA CITY — Before Fran McCaffery ever saw Nicholas Baer play basketball for the first time, he got a sales pitch. It came from Baer's older sister, Elizabeth.

She told McCaffery that she had this not-so-little brother who was a really good player who wasn't being recruited as much as he should and she thought the Hawkeyes really should take a look at him. McCaffery checked Nicholas out when he played for Bettendorf in the 2014 state tournament at Wells Fargo Arena in Des Moines and he decided to let him join the Iowa team as a walk-on.

He's never regretted it and he definitely was happy about the decision Saturday when the Hawkeyes returned to the arena in which he first saw Baer in action.

The 6-foot-7 redshirt freshman had the best game of his still young college career, logging 30 minutes, scoring 13 points and collecting seven rebounds, six blocked shots and two assists in a 70-64 victory over Drake in the Big Four Classic. That resulted in Baer being named the Big Ten freshman of the week on Monday.

"I am not surprised at all," McCaffery said of the performance. "When I first saw him play, I was kind of shocked he didn't have more recruiting activity."

Baer, who helped Bettendorf to back-to-back appearances in the final four of the Iowa Class 4A tournament, not only didn't have any Division I offers, he wasn't even getting much attention from Division II schools. When he was offered a chance to play for the Hawkeyes, albeit without a scholarship, he leaped at it.

"I always wanted to come to Iowa and Coach McCaffery gave me an opportunity to walk on," Baer said. "I always envisioned myself as a player, not just as a practice player."

Walk-ons play their way into scholarships all the time in Division I college football, but it rarely happens in basketball. As McCaffery pointed out, three times as many schools field D-I teams in basketball so there are very few players who slip through the cracks on the recruiting trail. But he said Baer has earned a scholarship now. He hopes to make that happen "sooner rather than later."

Credit an assist to Elizabeth, who was a freshman at Iowa when she chatted with McCaffery in the fall of 2013.

"His sister came in and advocated for him long before we ever offered him an opportunity," McCaffery said. "That's the kind of family he comes from. She said 'You know, my brother can play and I think he can play here.'"

Nicholas had only one stipulation when he decided to walk on with the Hawkeyes. He wanted to redshirt his first season to become more prepared physically for the rigors of the Big Ten.

It's a decision McCaffery occasionally regretted last season. He saw Baer doing enough good things in practice that he felt he could have helped the Hawkeyes on the court right away.

His new teammates felt the same way.

"I noticed it last year when he was redshirting how hard he works," senior guard Mike Gesell said. "He's just a guy that's going to go out there and give you his all. He's not going to try to do too much. He's going to play his game ... He just does a tremendous job of playing the right way and doing what you need him to do and playing his role."

Senior Anthony Clemmons recalled one practice last season when the Hawkeyes were getting ready to play Michigan. Baer, as a member of the Iowa scout team, was giving the regulars more fits than the Wolverines did in the game itself.

"He was just unbelievable," Clemmons said. "He probably had one of the best practices anybody's ever had just in the run-through."

Baer did add some muscle to his frame since last year although he still is on the thin side. But he also expanded his skill set in several other ways, most noticeably as a shooter.

He attempted just one 3-point field goal in his entire high school career — at the very end of the last game — but he is shooting 45.8 percent (11 for 24) from 3-point range this season. He was three for five against Drake and hit four threes in an earlier game against UMKC.

"Coach (Kirk) Speraw is our shot doctor," Baer said. "I didn't need major surgery but he gave me a few tweaks. Just to get more arc on my shot."

McCaffery said Baer spent more time in his redshirt year working on his game than on his body. He raves about his versatility, his ability to play almost any position in any type of game and his basketball IQ.

"When it's all said and done, you can be athletic, you can be big and strong, you can be a great shooter but you really have to understand how to play this game," McCaffery said. "When you watch him play, it's a beautiful thing."

What is all the more amazing is that Baer is still on Iowa's scout team. He spends most of his time in practice helping to simulate the offense of the upcoming opponent.

"And then he comes in and has a game like this," McCaffery said after the Drake win. "He's just going to keep getting better. He's still only a freshman. He's got unbelievable character and a great mind for this game. And that's really important. You've got to understand that every game is different."

The biggest thing Baer contributes when he comes off the bench is energy. It has become infectious.

"He's the ultimate hustle guy, just bringing energy everywhere," senior Jarrod Uthoff said. "We joke around that in the first pickup game he was diving on loose balls. And we all looked at him like he was crazy. That's Baer for you."

"It's very important for us that we have that kind of hustle."

Iowa walk-on bears down on the details

Forward's versatility, determination pays off for Hawkeyes

By Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette, December 20, 2015

DES MOINES — Nicholas Baer arrived at Iowa last year as an under-recruited, 6-foot-7 center from Bettendorf High School. That designation sends most walk-on players to the scout team with few chances to play meaningful minutes.

But after a red-shirt year of growing and competing against Iowa's starters, Baer, a red-shirt freshman, has become a valuable and versatile member of Iowa's roster. He remained a solid rebounder, which he showed by grabbing seven boards against Drake on Saturday. He became an outside shooting threat, as determined by his three 3-pointers. He's also a shot blocker after setting a Wells Fargo Arena college basketball record with six.

In all, Baer scored 13 points in 30 minutes. He added two assists and a steal without a turnover in Iowa's 70-64 win. Those are numbers that key contributors make, not overlooked practice players.

"Obviously, we're going to have to give him a scholarship at some point," Iowa Coach Fran McCaffery said. "That's safe to say. I don't know when it's going to be.

"What was interesting for me was the only thing he asked for was he wanted to red-shirt his first year. He said, 'Coach, I'm not ready physically.' So as the season wore on, he was so good in practice. I remember saying, 'Boy, I wish we didn't red-shirt him.' But what he did figure out was, 'If I'm going to be a good player at this level and if I can sit back and watch it, then I've got to expand my game.'"

Baer did that last year with assistant coach Kirk Speraw, who is the program's primary voice when it comes to jump shots. Speraw praised Baer's work habits and intelligence, along with how quickly Baer picks up concepts on both ends of the floor. Baer spent countless hours improving his shot and increasing his range.

"As far as shooting it, we just talked with him about making it a smooth, rhythmic shot," Speraw said. "Get the ball high and shoot it with confidence. I told him a year ago, I said, 'Nicholas, if you get on the floor with everything else you bring, you've got to be a knockdown 3-point shooter.' He just took that, took a couple little things that we talked about and worked on it. He's developed tremendous confidence in it."

Baer has hit 11 of 24 3-point shots this year, a 45.8 percentage. Some walk-ons would be too timid to fire up 3-pointers in clutch situations. Baer seems to thrive in it, and his teammates have noticed.

"He's always going to play hard, he's going to crash the boards," Iowa senior guard Anthony Clemmons. "He's fearless of any type of moment. He took a few shots where I'm like, 'Geez, Baer.' But he'd make them. How he practices, that's how he plays. It's nothing surprising for us besides being in big moments and knocking down shots."

Against Drake, Baer buried a 3-pointer midway through the second half to break up a 45-45 tie. Two possessions later, he hit another 3-pointer to put Iowa ahead by eight. On Iowa's next offensive trip, Baer saved a ball from going out of bounds and tipped it to forward Dominique Uhl. Point guard Mike Gesell scored on a three-point play on that series.

Later, when Drake went on a 9-2 run, Baer drilled another 3-pointer with 4:23 left in the game.

"He's the ultimate hustle guy," forward Jarrod Uthoff said. "He's always bringing energy and being everywhere. We joked around in the first pickup game. He's diving for loose balls. We all look at him like he's crazy. That's Baer for you."

Through 11 games, Baer averages 4.3 points and 3.3 rebounds in 14.2 minutes a game. Based on Saturday's performance, it's likely he'll see those numbers increase.

"When it's all said and done, you can be athletic, you can be big and strong, and you can be a great shooter, but you really have to understand how to play this game to be good," McCaffery said. "I think when you watch him play, it's a beautiful thing."

Freshman Wagner has provided another piece for the puzzle

By Don Doxsie, Quad-City Times, February 6, 2016

IOWA CITY — As the Iowa basketball team has made its way through what the Hawkeyes refer to as their “journey,” they seemingly have added little pieces to the puzzle every step of the way.

In the nonconference part of the schedule, Nicholas Baer and Dom Uhl emerged to give the team some much-needed depth. Peter Jok stepped up his game early in the Big Ten season to enhance the offense. Seniors Anthony Clemmons and Adam Woodbury have played the best basketball of their lives lately.

Now, freshman Ahmad Wagner has become a force to be reckoned with.

Wagner has been the only true freshman in the Hawkeyes’ nine-man rotation for most of the season but he clearly was No. 9 coming into the Big Ten season. In the first four conference games, he played just 23 minutes and scored one point.

In the past two games, he has played 33 minutes, collected 14 points and nine rebounds, and has injected energy into the lineup every time he has stepped on the court.

“Just from experience and playing more, I’m getting a lot more comfortable being out there and just in flow of the game with the other guys,” Wagner admitted as the Hawkeyes prepared to take on Illinois today in a noon game.

The 6-foot-7 forward from Huber Heights, Ohio, clearly is ahead of the other four freshmen who were brought in this season. Christian Williams and Andrew Fleming have played sparingly and Brandon Hutton and Isaiah Moss are redshirting.

Only Wagner is making major contributions.

“He’s a different player,” Iowa coach Fran McCaffery said. “He’s a terrific athlete. He has a very clear understanding of how he can come in and affect the game. He does not try to go beyond that, and he’s really smart. So he really understands what’s necessary and how he can impact the game. He’s not sitting on the bench not thinking. He’s thinking about ‘OK, when I come in, what can I do?’”

Wagner said the Iowa coaches have made it easy by clearly defining his job.

“Just go in there and get as many rebounds as possible, score if I need to, play defense and just bring energy,” he said. “Bring energy every single time.”

It still has taken him some time to settle in. Wagner played for a state championship team in Ohio and one of the best teams in the country at Wayne High School, where his coach was Travis Trice Sr., father of the former Michigan State player of the same name.

But he quickly found that the Big Ten was a whole new ballgame.

“I think in the very beginning when I first got here, the adjustment was the transition from high school to college with plays and pace and everything,” Wagner said. “I feel like I picked it up pretty early and have been able to play well ever since then.”

He said the rapid pace of the college game was the toughest adjustment.

“It’s just a lot faster in college than in high school,” he said. “One thing, you can’t take off a play. You can’t walk back on defense. You can’t mosey around on offense either. If you do that, you’re going to make a mistake.”

He hasn’t made many of those lately.

His playing time increased a little in victories over Michigan and Rutgers. He made 5 of 5 shots from the field in those two games and in McCaffery’s words, “played like a veteran.”

He played 15 minutes last Sunday against Northwestern and finished with six points, four rebounds and two steals. On Wednesday, against Penn State, he matched a career high with 18 minutes played and collected eight points and five rebounds.

In the middle of the first half, he got the ball in the right corner, saw the defender in front of him leaning slightly and didn’t hesitate a bit, streaking up the baseline for a dunk that brought the home crowd to its feet.

“He’s definitely hitting his stride,” Baer said. “The energy always has been there for him but now he’s really getting a feel for how to play at this level and how to fulfill his role.”

Wagner wasn’t really a big scorer in high school and he may not be one in college either although he has made 10 of 12 shots from the field in the past six games.

“He’d score a lot more if I played him more minutes, and little by little, I will,” McCaffery said.

The consensus is that he’s only scratching the surface of his capabilities. Wagner is so gifted athletically that as a senior in high school he decided to go out for football for the first time. He became an all-state wide receiver and attracted some Division I offers even though he only had played the sport for a few months.

He decided to stick with basketball. McCaffery is sort of glad he did.

“He’s just a guy that really understands how to play, knows what to do, and he’s a spectacular athlete and he impacts the game ...” McCaffery said. “Every game, he gets better.”

Iowa's Wagner makes immediate impact

Freshman forward grabs 8 rebounds, 6 on offense

By Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette, November 14, 2015

IOWA CITY — Iowa forward Ahmad Wagner did a double-take Friday night when he was informed about his statistics.

Wagner, a 6-foot-7 freshman, played just nine minutes in the second half of Iowa's 76-59 season-opening win against Gardner-Webb at Carver-Hawkeye Arena. But he scored six points, grabbed eight rebounds — including six on offense — and blocked two shots. Still, when he heard his final tally, he appeared surprised.

"I didn't know any type of stats," he said. "I had no idea."

It was almost surprising Wagner even played on Friday. He missed two practices with an injured shoulder and attempted to work out with a brace when he returned. After practicing Wednesday and Thursday, Wagner rode the bench for most of the game until he was thrown in midway through the second half. Then he instantly became the most aggressive player on the floor.

Iowa Coach Fran McCaffery said the only reason Wagner didn't play until late was because of his shoulder injury.

"He's just a guy that really understands how to play," McCaffery said. "He understands what his strengths are, and he's just a phenomenal athlete with tremendous strength."

"He came from a great high school program, a terrific high school coach, he knows exactly how to come in and impact a game. So when he's sitting on the bench, he's going to figure it out, he's going to come in and help us."

A former all-state wide receiver in Ohio, Wagner shows toughness when fighting for rebounds. Wagner grabbed two offensive boards on one possession and finished it off with a put-back. On another sequence, Wagner blocked a shot, ran the floor and followed up a miss for another score.

"He's crazy strong," Iowa senior forward Jarrod Uthoff said. "He hustles, he goes to the boards, he's very good on the offensive and defensive boards. I think he brings a lot to the team."

McCaffery emphasized rebounding after last week's exhibition loss to Augustana. Not only did he go over positioning, but also aggressiveness. That's one area in which Wagner takes pride.

"Just do what I can to bring energy, be a hustle guy, just do what I can when the other guy's open, give the other guys more shots and everything, rebounding and make effort plays," he said.

ELLINGSON DISPLAYS ALL-AROUND GAME

UI redshirt freshman returns home tonight to face Marquette

By James Allan, hawkeyesports.com, November 19, 2015

IOWA CITY, Iowa -- Brady Ellingson returns to his home state Thursday for the inaugural Gavitt Games fresh off his coming out party.



The University of Iowa redshirt freshman scored a career-high 20 points in a 103-68 Hawkeye rout of Coppin State on Nov. 15. Ellingson made 7-of-8 field goals, went 5-of-6 from the free throw line, and pulled in three rebounds in 17 minutes.

"Brady's performance didn't surprise me at all," said senior guard Mike Gesell. "Brady is one of the best shooters I have ever played with. He's a hard worker and has a great feel for the game. He knows where to be at on the court."

Ellingson spent his freshman season on-and-off the court after coming to Iowa City in the summer of 2014 with a stress fracture in his foot, and it hampered him all season. He appeared in seven games, logging 32 minutes and scoring 13 points, before his season was shut down.

"Brady never got any traction, and it took him a long time for him to be on the floor," said UI head coach Fran McCaffery. "When he was able to, he did it without any pressure and could figure everything out without having to worry about playing time. That was a big boost for his confidence and understanding how we play and how he fits."

Once Ellingson found his way back to the court, it helped him grow leaps and bounds.

"Going up against Peter (Jok) and Jarrod (Uthoff) every day helped me get better defensively," said Ellingson. "Offensively, it was working every day with the scout team."

This season a healthy Ellingson has been the first guard off the bench for the 2-0 Hawkeyes. He is averaging 12 points on 64.3 percent shooting in 20 minutes per game. He's showing he is an all-around player.

"Brady is a great basketball player that can shoot the ball," said Gesell. "He's not just a shooter that is looking to shoot 3s. He can put it on the deck, get to the basket, and does a great job of reading screens. When they're chasing him, he curls, and maybe gets someone else open, too."

Ellingson is comfortable with his role early in the season.

"I am moving better without the ball," he said. "My teammates are setting good screens and looking for me coming off of them. That is setting me up for good shots. I know my role. I need to take shots I am capable of making and play good defense."

Ellingson has taken on a new role this week as a ticket broker. Thursday's game will be played 15 minutes from his hometown of Sussex, Wisconsin, in an arena -- the BMO Harris Bradley Center -- that he frequented as a kid.

"Everybody is asking for tickets," he said. "It will be cool playing at back home against Marquette."

Thursday's game begins a challenging four-game road stretch for the Hawkeyes. After facing the Golden Eagles in the Gavitt Games, Iowa heads to Orlando for three games in the Advocare Invitational, opening against Dayton on Thanksgiving Day.

"It's going to be fun," said Gesell. "That's why you play college basketball; you want to play the best teams. The game against Marquette will be the first big test for us."

Thursday's game will tipoff at 8:15 p.m. (CT), and it will be televised on FS1 with Brian Anderson and Stephen Bardo on the call.

Iowa's Ellingson to take center stage in Milwaukee

Freshman guard grew up playing, watching games at the Bradley Center

By Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette, November 18, 2015

IOWA CITY — Brady Ellingson took the Bradley Center floor in fifth-grade as part of a Small Fries exhibition before a Milwaukee Bucks' game.

Ellingson, a red-shirt freshman guard at Iowa, returned to the famed arena several times after that basketball experience to watch his beloved Bucks as well as Marquette. Thursday, the Sussex, Wis., native will have a supersized experience on that same floor as the Hawkeyes (2-0) face Marquette (1-1) as part of the inaugural Gavitt Games.

The 6-foot-4 Ellingson was one of the better Milwaukee-area preps at Sussex Hamilton High School. Twice he was named his conference's player of the year. He scored 24.8 points a game as a senior and 21.3 points as a junior. He drilled 48 percent of his 3-point attempts as a junior — 86 of 179 — and guided his squad to their first league title since 1979.

So this is a big reunion game for 19-year-old who grew up 15 minutes from the Bradley Center.

"Everybody's asking me for tickets," he said. "It will be really cool playing back home against Marquette."

Ellingson's first year at Iowa was nothing to write home about, however. He arrived on campus in a walking boot with a stress fracture. He had treatments, then surgery and still tried to play. Ellingson played in seven non-conference games but pain remained in his foot. Iowa then shut him down and applied for a medical red-shirt, which he received last spring.

"He never got any traction starting back in June (of 2014) when he showed up here in a boot," Iowa Coach Fran McCaffery said. "We tried to get him through and he tried to play and then he broke it. ... It took a long time for him to really be out there on the floor."

Ellingson contributed on Iowa's scout team last year and earned praise from his veteran teammates. Fully healthy this year, Ellingson already has made an impact.

Against Coppin State, Ellingson hit seven of his eight shots to score 20 points in 17 minutes. Although he's known as an outside shooter, only one basket was a 3-pointer. He also had three rebounds and an assist. Ellingson's all-around game is what people have noticed.

"I don't usually recruit a guy that would be just a shooter," McCaffery said. "I want a player who happens to be a shooter. When we evaluated Brady, we needed to know that he could break his man down off a dribble, that he could guard somebody. Yeah, he could make open shots but if that's all you do, then teams will take that away from you."

But Ellingson's shooting prowess against Coppin State didn't surprise senior point guard Mike Gesell.

"Not a surprise at all," Gesell said. "Brady's one of the best shooters I've ever played with. He's just a hard worker, really has a great feel for the game. He's just knows where to be at on the court."

"He's a great basketball player that can shoot the ball. He's not just a shooter, a guy that's just looking to shoot 3s the whole time. He can put it on the deck, he can get to the basket, he does a great job of reading screens when they're chasing him, curling him."

Ellingson has become Iowa's first guard off the bench, a role that he enjoys.

"I do," he said. "I know my role. I'm just trying to shoot shots I'm capable of taking and playing good defense."

Williams Earns Playing Time

Hawkeyes wrap up the regular season Saturday at Michigan

By Darren Miller, hawkeyesports.com, March 4, 2016

IOWA CITY, Iowa -- Christian Williams didn't play the first time the University of Iowa and Michigan tangled in men's basketball on Jan. 17 in Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

There's a good chance the 6-foot-6 Hawkeye freshman from Decatur, Illinois, will see the court Saturday in a regular-season rematch between two 20-win teams.



"Without question he has earned that," UI head coach Fran McCaffery said during a teleconference Friday. "He was close a couple weeks ago and I was going back and forth whether to stay with Brady (Ellingson) or go with Christian.

"Christian keeps playing really well in practice. As time has gone by, Christian has it all figured out and he is playing really well. He will definitely get quality playing time."

Williams saw 12 minutes of playing time Monday against Indiana with senior guards Anthony Clemmons and Mike Gesell winded and in foul trouble. He made 2-of-6 field goals, 4-of-5 free throws, pulled down three rebounds, and blocked two shots. Prior to Monday, Williams had played a total of 21 minutes against Big Ten Conference competition.

Versatility is one attribute that makes Williams so valuable. McCaffery expects to use him at either the 1, 2, or 3 positions.

"That's what we saw in him when we recruited him, that he could play the point, but he could play the 2 and he could play the 3," McCaffery said. "When you're talking about a guy who is almost 6-7 with a 6-11 wing span, it behooves you to utilize him in a variety of ways and not pigeon hole him in one spot."

While Williams was a bright spot during an 81-78 loss to the 11th-ranked Hoosiers, McCaffery was also impressed with the Hawkeyes' execution. Once down by 14 in the second half, Iowa rallied to take a brief lead.

"You can still miss shots, but you have to get yourself in position where you have those shots and then you have a chance to win," McCaffery said. "We did that perfectly in the Indiana game. I feel we have improved in that area, which is critical."

You can throw losses to Wisconsin and Ohio State into that category as well.

"I think we did a lot good things in the last three games," McCaffery said. "Unfortunately we didn't close any of them out. That is frustrating because we had opportunities to win all three -- the last three in particular I thought we competed harder, better, and made fewer mistakes. In the last game we had way more assists than turnovers (16 to 9), we out-rebounded them (42 to 39)."

McCaffery and the Hawkeyes (20-9 overall, 11-6 Big Ten) turn their attention to the final regular-season game of the season against Michigan (20-10, 10-7). Tip-off is set for 7:06 p.m. (CT) with the game being broadcast by BTN.

"We will try to figure out how we're going to beat Michigan," McCaffery said. "I have a ton of respect for (Michigan head coach) John Beilein and the year they have had and the players they have. We're going to be on the road, we need to be locked in on what we need to do."

Iowa won the first meeting against the Wolverines, 82-71, behind 23 points from Jarrod Uthoff and 16 from Peter Jok.

On Saturday, the Hawkeyes might get an assist from Williams as well.

Iowa's Dale Jones sidelined indefinitely

By Rick Brown, Des Moines Register, December 4, 2015

Iowa basketball coach Fran McCaffery used a nine-man rotation in Wednesday's ACC/Big Ten Challenge victory over Florida State. Part of that was by design, part out of necessity.

Junior guard Dale Jones didn't play after suffering a knee injury in practice Tuesday. McCaffery said Friday that Jones is "sidelined indefinitely." That includes Saturday's 2 p.m. game against Missouri-Kansas City at Carver-Hawkeye Arena in Iowa City.

Jones is averaging 5.5 points and 3.0 rebounds off the bench this season. He is shooting 45 percent from 3-point range (9-for-20), and also has shown an ability to rebound from the guard spot. He scored a career-high 16 points against Coppin State.

Jones, who is from Waterloo, redshirted the 2013-14 season at Tyler Junior College in Texas after a knee injury.

"I know the doctor is talking to him and he's talking to his mom right now," McCaffery said after Wednesday's game. "He'll have some decisions to make."

Without Jones in the 78-75 overtime victory over Florida State, McCaffery brought just four players off the bench – Dom Uhl, Ahmad Wagner, Brady Ellingson and Nicholas Baer. All five starters logged at least 33 minutes.

"We're a little bit a lighter without Dale," McCaffery said. "Obviously I have confidence in the four guys I played (Jarrod Uthoff, Mike Gesell, Anthony Clemmons and Peter Jok). I thought Dom was spectacular. I thought Ahmad was really good and Nicholas and Brady were solid."

Iowa, 5-2, has five nonconference games remaining before its Big Ten opener against Michigan State on Dec. 29. Missouri-Kansas City is the first of those five. The Kangaroos, coached by former Drake assistant coach Kareem Richardson, are 5-2. One of Missouri-Kansas City's victories this season came at Drake, 79-73, on Nov. 21. The Kangaroos opened the season with a 76-58 loss at Minnesota.

ANDRE, JARROD, & MIKE

It's been a long time since Hawkeyes have put up Woolridge-like numbers

By Darren Miller, hawkeyesports.com, March 9, 2016

IOWA CITY, Iowa -- Folks are talking about Andre Woolridge again, and that's a good thing.

Woolridge starred for the University of Iowa men's basketball team from 1995-97, scoring 1,525 points and distributing 575 assists.



His 193 assists in 1996 is a Hawkeye record...for now.

With 186 assists in 30 games (6.2 per game), UI senior point guard Mike Gesell is closing in on Woolridge's season mark. Gesell said life is easier with teammates like senior Jarrod Uthoff and junior Peter Jok, who have combined to score more than 1,000 points this season.

"(The season assist record) is not something I'm focused on, but it means I'm playing the point guard position the right way and loading my teammates up," Gesell said. "A lot of that has to do with playing with Jarrod and Pete -- they are two of the best scorers in the country. When they get going, it is easy to get a lot of assists."

UI head coach Fran McCaffery credits Gesell's vision and the fact he is constantly in attack mode as exceptional components of a good assist man.

"He wants to give the ball up," McCaffery said. "He's a willing passer and he can score, so you've got to play it straight. He just wants to win. (On March 5 during a 71-61 victory at Michigan), he only had six points, but he had 11 assists and one turnover. We're a lot better when he does that."

Gesell has had 12 assists twice this season -- Nov. 15 during a 103-68 win over Coppin State and Feb. 14 during a 75-71 win over Minnesota. He handed out double-digit assists on five occasions this season and not surprisingly, Iowa won all five games.

While Gesell is passing, other Hawkeyes are scoring. Uthoff (first team) and Jok (second team) were recognized Monday as All-Big Ten Conference performers.

"As a point guard, I take pride in having an All-Big Ten player on my team," said Gesell, who was named honorable mention all-conference. "I take pride in getting Jarrod and Pete going in games and making sure our offense is flowing efficiently."

Gesell has 538 career assists; the school record is 610 by Jeff Horner from 2003-06.

Gesell isn't the only current Hawkeye who has recently had his name mentioned in the same breath as Woolridge. Uthoff was named third-team All-American by USA Today, the highest national honor for a Hawkeye since Woolridge was named first-team All-America by Basketball Times and third-team All-America by The Associated Press in 1997.

"(Jarrod) has been somebody that no matter whether you're watching ESPN or CBS, any of the stations are talking to him about the national Player of the Year race and Big Ten Player of the Year race," McCaffery said. "He's a third-team All-American and it's wonderful. I'm thrilled for him and it's obviously great for the program."

Uthoff isn't hung up on individual honors. He emphasized that again Tuesday during media availability inside Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

"Winning an NCAA Tournament," said Uthoff, when asked which award is his favorite. "Nice accomplishments, but at the end of the day I'm looking for our team to win."

Because Gesell and Uthoff were toddlers when Woolridge was ruling Big Ten courts in the mid-1990s, neither of the current Hawkeyes are familiar with his accomplishments.

Like Gesell, Woolridge was a native of Nebraska who knew how to involve teammates in the offense. Like Uthoff, Woolridge could score and turned a lot heads at the national level.

It's a good thing that people are talking about Andre Woolridge again.

4 Hawkeyes Earn All-Big Ten Recognition

Jarrold Uthoff unanimous first team all-conference selection

Hawkeyesports.com, March 7, 2016

IOWA CITY, Iowa -- Senior Jarrod Uthoff and junior Peter Jok highlight the University of Iowa All-Big Ten honorees, which were announced Monday evening by the Big Ten Conference.

Uthoff was named a unanimous selection to the first team by both conference head coaches and media, while also being named to the five-player All-Defensive Team by the coaches. Uthoff becomes the first Hawkeye since Andre Woolridge in 1997 to be named a unanimous first team selection. Jok earned second team recognition by both the media and coaches, while seniors Mike Gesell and Adam Woodbury earned honorable mention laurels by the media. Gesell also was also named Iowa's men's basketball Sportsmanship Award recipient for the third consecutive season.

Uthoff, a native of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, ranks second in the Big Ten in scoring (18.8), first in blocked shots (2.7), and tied for 10th in rebounding (6.5). The forward ranks 20th in Iowa career scoring (1,238) and fourth in blocked shots (172). Uthoff (6-foot-9, 221 pounds) has scored in double figures in all but one game this season, including netting 20 points or more a team-best 14 times. The team co-captain is one of only three Hawkeyes in program history to amass 1,000 points and 150 blocks in a career (Acie Earl and Greg Stokes). He currently is one of only two players nationally to total more than 550 points, 190 rebounds, and 80 blocked shots (Stony Brook's Jameel Warney). Additionally, Uthoff is only the second player nationally the last 20 years to average two blocks and two 3-pointers per game (Duke's Shane Battier in 1999-00 and 2000-01).

This marks the third consecutive season an Iowa player has been picked on the All-Big Ten first team; Roy Devyn Marble was honored in 2014 and Aaron White in 2015. The last time the Hawkeyes had first-team all-league honorees in back-to-back-to-back seasons was 1946-48 (Herb Wilkinson in 1946 and 1947, and Murray Wier in 1948). Additionally, Uthoff becomes Iowa's 26th different men's basketball player to earn all-conference first team laurels and the first Hawkeye since Erik Hansen in 2006 to be named to the all-defensive squad.



Uthoff, who was named third team All-America earlier Monday by USA Today, helped the Hawkeyes win 12 conference games for the second consecutive season - something that has happened only twice before in program history (1981-82 and 1987-88). Uthoff and

the Hawkeyes have been nationally ranked the past 10 weeks, including ascending as high as No. 3 on Jan. 25 -- their highest national ranking since 1987. Uthoff is also an outstanding student as well, being named the Division I Men's Basketball Academic All-American of the Year last week.

Jok (6-foot-6, 205 pounds) is Iowa's fifth different all-conference honoree under McCaffery. After averaging seven points per game a season ago, Jok surged 8.8 points this year, averaging 15.8 points contest. The 8.8 improvement is tops among Big Ten players. The Hawkeye guard ranks second on the team and 10th in the league in scoring (15.8), and is first on the team in steals

per game (1.4), 3-pointers made (71), and free throw shooting (.856, 83-of-97). Jok enters this week's Big Ten Tournament having made his last 21 consecutive free throws. Jok scored in double figures 22 times as a junior, including tallying 20 points or more 10 times. His 29-point outburst at Rutgers on Jan. 21 ties for the seventh most by a Hawkeye during the Fran McCaffery era.

Gesell has started all 30 games this season and leads the team with 186 assists, seven shy of the single season record of 193 set by Andre Woolridge in 1996. The native of South Sioux City, Nebraska, is having a career season directing the Hawkeye offense posting career bests in scoring (8.5), rebounds (3.2), assists (6.2), field goal percentage (.412), and 3-point percentage (.375). The four-year starter is one of only three Hawkeyes to ever total 1,000 points, 525 assists, and 150 steals (Dean Oliver and Jeff Horner). Gesell is believed to be the first Hawkeye ever to be credited with 10 or more assists five times in a single season. The 6-foot-2, 190-pound guard is also a scholar in the classroom, earning second-team Academic All-America laurels last week. Gesell is one of only three Hawkeyes to be tabbed a two-time Academic All-America (Luke Recker and Adam Haluska).

Woodbury has also been a four-year starter for the Hawkeyes, averaging career bests this season in scoring (7.9), rebounding (8.5), free throw accuracy (.714, 60-of-84), field goal percentage (.574, 89-of-155), assists (1.0), and steals (0.5). The native of Sioux City, Iowa, has posted seven double-doubles this season, which ties for seventh among Big Ten players, and has led the squad in rebounding a team-best 18 times. Woodbury (10.0 rpg) became the first Hawkeye since Reggie Evans (10.7 rpg) in 2001-02 to average 10 or more rebounds during conference competition. He cleared a personal-best 18 rebounds against Wisconsin, the most rebounds of any player in Big Ten play this season. The center has totaled more than 800 points, 725 rebounds, and 100 assists over his four-year career.

Joining Uthoff on the first team, by both coaches and media, were Denzel Valentine (Michigan State), Yogi Ferrell (Indiana), A.J. Hammons (Purdue), and Nigel Hayes (Wisconsin); Uthoff, Ferrell and Valentine were all unanimous selections by both the media and coaches. Valentine was also named Player of the Year by the coaches and media. Joining Uthoff on the All-Defensive Team were Ferrell, Wisconsin's Ethan Happ, and Rapheal Davis and Hammons of Purdue.

Both the media and coaches named Tom Crean of the Big Ten champion Indiana Hoosiers as Coach of the Year. The coaches selected Purdue center A.J. Hammons as Defensive Player of the Year. Both groups named Happ of Wisconsin as Freshman of the Year, while the conference head coaches voted Indiana's Max Bielfeldt as Sixth Man of the Year.

Iowa (21-9, 12-6) will open play in the Big Ten Tournament on Thursday against either 12th-seeded Illinois or No. 13 seed Minnesota. Game time is approximately 1:30 p.m. (CT) at Bankers Life Fieldhouse in Indianapolis (BTN). Iowa tied Purdue, Maryland, and Wisconsin for third in the Big Ten standings, but will be the No. 5 seed at the tournament. The Hawkeyes have tied for third place each of the past two seasons, marking the first time since 1987-88 that Iowa placed third or better in the Big Ten standings in consecutive seasons.

Why Iowa? Seniors had faith and believed

Vital recruiting class ends home campaign against Indiana

By Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette, February 29, 2016

IOWA CITY — The shape of recent Iowa basketball took many forms in Fran McCaffery's early coaching tenure, but one could argue the program molded into its present state at a gym in Lansing, Mich., nearly five years ago.

"I just remember the day that Adam Woodbury committed," Iowa senior guard Anthony Clemmons said. "(McCaffery) was in my gym. He came up to me and said, 'We just got a big recruit, Adam Woodbury 7-foot.'"

"(High school teammate) Denzel (Valentine) played at a camp with him and said, 'He's a great player.' I was like, 'Why not? Why not go to the highest level and play with the highest level of players?'"

Clemmons picked Iowa 11 days after Woodbury, a top-50 recruit. Iowa point guard Mike Gesell, who also was ranked in the top 100, committed to the Hawkeyes the previous month. Together, those three provided Iowa with name recognition, direction and winning. Along with forward Jarrod Uthoff, who transferred to Iowa that year as well, Iowa's senior class ends their home careers Tuesday against Indiana. They're responsible for 87 wins, an NIT title berth, two NCAA tourney bids and a third likely in two weeks. They've experienced public highs and lows on the floor and off the court. But their significance — even in the face of a bitter late-season slide — cannot be understated.

Iowa finished 11-20 in 2010-11, McCaffery's first season. It was a slight improvement over a 10-22 debacle in 2010. The program was mired in a five-year postseason absence and four straight losing seasons.

While many fans easily recall the glory years of the 1980s and the consistent winning of the 1990s, high schoolers knew nothing about Iowa but turmoil and mediocrity. Iowa didn't renew the contract of Tom Davis — Iowa's all-time winningest coach — in 1999. Steve Alford's eight-year era was marked with inconsistency and polarization. Alford left for New Mexico in 2007 and was replaced by Todd Lickliter, who promptly drove the program into a 38-58 three-year canyon. McCaffery was Iowa's fourth coach in a 13-year period.

So McCaffery sold a vision for a program. He had a few holdover pieces like Iowa City native Matt Gatens, but he had to persuade top-notch players that Iowa was going to the NCAA tournament. That Iowa could compete for championships. That together they could change and elevate a culture. That they would buy in to the history and write their own pages.

McCaffery relentlessly sought Woodbury and Gesell. He spent the summers of 2010 and 2011 scouting Woodbury and Gesell of the All-Iowa Attack, an AAU squad. As Woodbury's value skyrocketed, McCaffery attended every one of their AAU games. Even as Ohio State's Thad Matta and North Carolina's Roy Williams drove for Woodbury, the Iowa coach's tenacity stood out.

"That kind of commitment, to be able travel around the country and follow us wherever we went, that really showed a lot about who he is as a recruiter and as a coach and a person," Woodbury said. "I just believed that he'd always be there for me."

Woodbury and Gesell played alongside guard and Marion native Marcus Paige, who picked North Carolina. Gesell also had offers to major schools like Stanford, but there was something about Iowa and McCaffery that stood out.

"I looked at the coaching staff; we have so much experience as a coaching staff," Gesell said. "I wanted that experience to help me develop, and then I looked at the guys who were already here ahead of me, the guys we had coming in with me, and I knew we had a chance to do something special."

Growing up a Michigan State fan, Clemmons knew little about Iowa, except that he and Valentine visited the campus when Lickliter was coach. When McCaffery recruited him, he spoke with the Marble family to get a better feel for the program.

"I didn't know a lot," Clemmons said. "I just trusted my instinct, listened to the Lord and my followed my heart."

Iowa's losing ways didn't impact Clemmons' decision; it was the prospect of turning it around.

"What happened in the past doesn't mean what happens now," Clemmons said. "So I really trusted and looked at the players who were coming in. I knew there were going to be battles between me and Mike, another point guard. I just took on the challenge. I looked him up to see if he's a good player. He was. I took that as a challenge. He's going to make me better, and I'm going to make him better."

In a topsy-turvy year where Iowa was ranked as high as No. 3 and now has lost four of five games, the way this class came together was more important than any outcome. Collectively, they elevated Iowa from the Big Ten basement to league title contender. In the process, they made Iowa relevant.

"I believed," Woodbury said. "I believed in what (McCaffery) was telling me. I believed in the guys who were already here to kind of help me get to where I wanted to go. I believed in the guys who were here with me. We had a lot of guys who were about winning in my class, we really did. Obviously Jarrod joined a little later, but he's about winning as well. I just believed we could do some of the things that I've always wanted to do in my life."

McCaffery acknowledges the players took a leap of faith on him and the program. He's thankful for the opportunity to coach them.

"What I appreciate is when our players make a decision to come here, maybe when it wasn't as fashionable, believing in themselves that they're going to make something happen when they get here, and it will be great," McCaffery said. "I think you love that about any competitor that you recruit."

3 Takeaways: Iowa's bench minutes soar, huge year for Iowa sports, previous D-II exhibition losses

A look inside Iowa's basketball program after Wednesday's 73-49 win against Penn State

By Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette, February 4, 2016

IOWA CITY — It took some time for Iowa Coach Fran McCaffery to trust his bench players in key moments, especially when junior-college transfer Dale Jones suffered a season-ending knee injury.

In an overtime win against Florida State, Iowa reserves scored just eight points and totaled only 43 minutes of action. A week later at Iowa State, the Hawkeyes bench played 28 minutes, scored only four points and freshman forward Ahmad Wagner didn't even play.

McCaffery calls not turning to his bench in early-season action "a mistake for me and for them." His reserves had to learn the game at the double-quick. It took time, something McCaffery wasn't sure he had at that moment.

"I didn't know where our bench was. We weren't ready," McCaffery said. "It would have been a hard fight with five guys, six, maybe. Dom (Uhl) was fine, but the other guys were not ready. ... A lot of freshmen have time. They didn't have any time.

"Right off the bat we were playing the No. 1 Division II team in the country. And then we played a good Gardner-Webb team, we're down in Orlando and playing top 20 teams, Dayton, Notre Dame and Wichita State, and come back and play Florida State, Marquette on the road. There was no time for those guys to kind of kick it off their foot and miss a shot and kind of play through their mistakes. They didn't have that luxury."

But McCaffery eventually had to relent. Against Drake in Des Moines, red-shirt freshman Nicholas Baer registered 13 points, seven rebounds and six blocked shots in 30 minutes to earn Big Ten Freshman of the Week honors. In a key sequence against Michigan on Jan. 17, Baer, Uhl and Wagner played nearly six consecutive minutes together and vaulted a tie game into an 11-point advantage. They joined guards Peter Jok and Mike Gesell (who was replaced by Anthony Clemmons) to score on five consecutive possessions and hold Michigan to a single 3-pointer.

In Big Ten play, Iowa's bench players average 56 minutes of game action. Their lowest point output was nine at Rutgers and they average 17 a game. Iowa (18-4, 9-1 Big Ten), which is ranked fifth by the Associated Press, received similar production Wednesday in a 73-49 win against Penn State. Reserves totaled 78 minutes and scored 28 points.

Wagner provided the game's highlight play with a baseline dunk and ensuing free throw to put Iowa ahead 17-7 with 11:44 left in the first half.

"We spread them out," Wagner said. "We put five on the outside, and we knew that we could beat them off the dribble. When I had them on the lane, (Jordan Dickerson)

came in closing in with his high foot up. I took him off the dribble, and I had a whole lane. I took it down and dunked it."

Wagner, Baer and Uhl all scored eight points and played between 18 and 20 minutes apiece against Penn State. They often provide instant energy when they enter the game.

"What I try to do is stay engaged in the game with my mind and always being ready to go," Baer said. "What do I need to do on the court when I come in, what's the time, what's the score and how can I impact the game ...?"

"You've got to be able to go to your bench," McCaffery said. "You've got to be able to rest your guys. You've got to be able to get productivity off the bench. We are getting points, rebounds, assists, and not a lot of mistakes. So whether we're home or away, we need that."

It's an important step for the program, which has come a long way from distrust to harmony between McCaffery, his starters and his bench players.

"At the beginning of the year, we were struggling a little bit," Wagner said. "It was difficult to get the young guys and the older guys to click. I don't know exactly when it was, but we've been putting it all together, and we've been playing really well."

2. Department on a high. In Iowa's rich athletic history, there's never been a sports year like this one.

The football program finished the regular season 12-0 and competed in the Rose Bowl for the first time in 25 years. The men's basketball program has been ranked in the top five in each of the last two weeks. The only calendar year — not single sports year — that matches or potentially exceeds this one is 1956. That year the Hawkeyes men's basketball team won the Big Ten title and advanced to the NCAA title game and the football program won the Big Ten title and the Rose Bowl.

"I'm so proud of the entire program, football, men's basketball, January 2015, the momentum there going forward," Iowa Athletics Director Gary Barta said. "Fran's team last year, Lisa's (Bluder) teams last year, wrestling, baseball and, of course, football. You can feel it building through the whole department. Women's gymnastics, they beat Maryland the other day. They beat Ohio State. So you can feel it through the whole program."

In 2015, the men's basketball program won an NCAA tournament game for the first time in 14 years, and the women's basketball program advanced to the Sweet Sixteen for the first time in 19 years. The wrestling program finished second at the NCAA tournament, and

Iowa's baseball program won 41 games and earned its first postseason win in 43 years.

3. Exhibition memories. Nearly every day I hear from an Iowa fan who touts the progress this basketball team has made from a last-second 76-74 exhibition loss to Division II Augustana (S.D.) to a top-five national program. It's true, the progress is palpable, especially the almost seamless transition between the starters and reserves. But it's not unprecedented for a top program to lose an exhibition to a lower-division school and then have a great season.

On Nov. 4, 2009, Division II Le Moyne beat No. 25 Syracuse 82-79 after sinking a 3-pointer with 8.3 seconds left. Syracuse rallied quite nicely to finish 30-5 overall, advance to the Sweet Sixteen and claim the old Big East by two games with a 15-3 record. Le Moyne ended its season 18-10.

On Nov. 8, 2007, Michigan State dropped an 85-82 double-overtime exhibition to Grand Valley State. The Spartans ended the year 27-9 and won two NCAA tournament games. Grand Valley State qualified for the Division II quarterfinals and finished its season 36-1.

This year Iowa (18-4, 9-1 Big Ten) is ranked No. 5 by the Associated Press. Augustana (S.D.) is 20-1 overall and ranked No. 1 in Division II.

From covering Division II for six years (2001-06), there's little difference between the nation's top D-II teams and good mid-major programs. Iowa playing Augustana or Michigan State facing Grand Valley State isn't much different from the Hawkeyes playing Northern Iowa or the Spartans competing against Oakland. When those lower-division teams combine talent with experience, they are dangerous. And the losses aren't necessarily a negative, either.

'It's really, really great to be a Hawkeye right now'

Iowa basketball players react to Sports Illustrated cover

By Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette, February 2, 2016

IOWA CITY — Jarrod Uthoff saw the image earlier in the day. Adam Woodbury had not. Mike Gesell saw the back of his head. Anthony Clemmons didn't see anything until a reporter showed him.

"Holy Buckets," Clemmons said, reading the "Sports Illustrated" headline. "Good thing we're defending somebody."

The Iowa basketball program, which tumbled to a school-worst 10-22 season in 2010 before Iowa Coach Fran McCaffery arrived on campus, now adorns the regional cover of the nation's foremost sporting magazine. It's the first time since 1966 the Hawkeyes landed on the cover. As expected, players and coaches had different reactions to the publicity.

The cover photo and story, which is written by Brian Hamilton, features Uthoff, who leads the Big Ten in scoring at 18.6 points per game. Uthoff has ignited a basketball program on the verge of a third straight NCAA berth, something the program hasn't done since the 1991 through 1993 seasons.

An Iowa coach informed Uthoff via text that he is on the cover. But you'd never know it based on his response.

"It was pretty neat," Uthoff said with little inflection in his voice.

But when asked about what he thought about being on the cover, Uthoff perked up.

"To me it's about us," Uthoff said. "It's about the Hawkeyes and what we've accomplished as a team. It's nothing about what I've done as an individual. I think we've come a long ways with this program, this year. People predicted us at the bottom of the Big Ten, and we've proven we can play with anyone."

That's the kind of response Woodbury figured Uthoff would give.

"I'm sure when you guys asked him about it, he didn't care," Woodbury said. "That's a part of his deal."

Iowa (17-4, 8-1 Big Ten) entered Thursday tied with Indiana atop the league standings and ranked fifth by the Associated Press and seventh by the USA Today/Coaches poll.

It's been a gradual climb upward for the program under McCaffery. In his first season, Iowa finished 11-20. Following two consecutive NIT berths, the Hawkeyes have reached the last two NCAA tournaments. Last year Iowa won its first NCAA tournament game since 2001.

The surge from irrelevance to NCAA title contender is not lost on McCaffery. He remains focused on Iowa's next game — 6 p.m. Wednesday against Penn State (11-11, 2-7) — but he appreciates the recognition.

"It's a reflection of what they've accomplished," McCaffery said. "I think you always want that to be the case for your guys. When you see them working as hard as our guys work, you want to see them recognized properly, so I think it's a terrific honor. Great respect for that publication, and we're happy to be on it."

It's the second time in barely two months Iowa athletics has graced Sports Illustrated. In late November, Iowa tight end George Kittle was featured on the cover as the football program finished the regular season unbeaten. The school previously never had both sports on SI covers in one athletic school year.

"It shows that we've continued to get better and better every year," Gesell said. "I think that we've done a tremendous job of not letting that get to any of our heads and just staying level and getting better every day. It's cool to have that national recognition, especially with the season football had and now the season we're having."

"It's really, really great to be a Hawkeye right now."

BENCH PLAYING KEY ROLE

Hawkeye reserves averaging 21 points, 15 rebounds

By Matt Weitzel, hawkeyesports.com, February 2, 2016

IOWA CITY, Iowa -- The University of Iowa men's basketball team has reached the halfway point of its Big Ten Conference schedule with a mark of 8-1, which ties Indiana for first place in the standings. The 8-1 mark is the program's best start in Big Ten play since going 10-1 to start conference play during the 1981-82 season.



Five of Iowa's first nine games have come against ranked opponents, including three of four road games.

The Hawkeye starting lineup is loaded with upperclassmen -- 19 years of combined collegiate experience to be exact. Iowa would not be where it is without its reserves.

UI head coach Fran McCaffery feels good where the underclassmen are at the midway point of league play.

"They've been consistent," said McCaffery. "You can't survive a grueling Big Ten schedule with five or six guys. I'm thrilled with how those guys have performed because even on days where they haven't scored as much, they've been solid defensively. They have taken care of the ball and are not mistake guys."

Through 21 games, Iowa's bench is averaging 21.2 points, 15.3 rebounds, 3.3 assists, 2.1 steals, and two blocks.

Freshman Ahmad Wagner had one of his best overall collegiate outings Sunday in Iowa's double-digit win over Northwestern. The 6-foot-7, 225-pound forward scored six points, grabbed four rebounds, and rejected a personal-best three shots.

"I'm feeling more confident with the team," Wagner said. "We're working hard and getting better every day in practice."

McCaffery didn't know where the bench was back in September, but the group has grown leaps and bounds in the months since.

"We weren't ready," said McCaffery. "It would have been a hard fight with five or six guys. Dom (Uhl) was fine, but the other guys were not ready. We recruited them because we thought they were good, but you often times can't determine how quickly a guy's going to get ready.

"A lot of freshmen have time. They didn't have any time to kick it off their foot, miss a shot, or play through their mistakes because of the schedule we had. They didn't have that luxury, but to their credit, they've been terrific."

Recent home games against Michigan and Purdue saw second-half runs that created separation. The spurts were sparked by a lineup consisting mainly of the reserves.

"In the Michigan game, we had Uhl, Wagner, and Baer on the front line when we made our run. That speaks volumes about what I think of those guys. They've produced in a very difficult situation, so I wouldn't be afraid to do it again."

Wagner says he and the other freshmen are like sponges in practice, learning from the upperclassmen.

"Our upperclassmen are great teachers and leaders," said Wagner. "They're always telling us little tips that can help us on the court. I appreciate that."

Iowa hosts Penn State on Wednesday at 6 p.m. (CT) on Mediacom Court at Carver-Hawkeye Arena. Tickets are available for the game by contacting the UI Athletic Ticket Office.

Iowa's basketball bond grows from edgy exhibition
Hawkeyes' starters and reserves form cohesive unit

By Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette, January 22, 2016

IOWA CITY — For the better part of three seasons, Iowa had a depth chart where opening roles were almost ceremonial and the backups played nearly as often as the starters.

Last year, Iowa had eight players average at least 18 minutes a game but only two put up more than 26 minutes. At times many key players became interchangeable parts. That changed significantly entering this season.

The Hawkeyes (15-3, 6-0 Big Ten) brought back four starters and another who opened 12 games last year. But only one other returning player — sophomore Dom Uhl — saw even a modicum of action last year. With five incoming freshmen, two red-shirt freshmen and a junior-college transfer, the Hawkeyes quickly had to bridge the knowledge and cohesiveness gap. It wasn't easy.

In the team's exhibition opener against Division II Sioux Falls, there appeared to be little on-court trust between the veterans and newcomers. Iowa won decisively, but the frustration was palpable after the game. Senior Jarrod Uthoff met reporters with a look of concern and said, "It's a learning curve, and it's a slow process" when he talked about how the groups were meshing.

The disparity became more obvious in the team's second exhibition, which the Hawkeyes lost to Division II Augustana 76-74. Only two backups played more than five minutes, and the challenges appeared daunting. But instead of dividing the team, the difficulties galvanized it.

The exhibition defeat served as a wake-up call to the veterans. The group endured a two-day early fall workout from the Navy Seals that required team building and mental application, as well as physical demand. If they were to have a successful season, they needed to become better mentors to their younger teammates. Iowa Coach Fran McCaffery never delivered a rah-rah speech to his seniors, but he encouraged better communication and leadership. The seniors listened and took their roles seriously.

"Obviously at practice he'd get on us for not helping the young guys out enough, but he never really had to sit down with us," Iowa center Adam Woodbury said. "I think we understood that we kind of had to let those guys take their bumps and bruises and then we're able to pick them back up. Everything's not going to come easy for them, and we've got to let them take the trials and tribulations and help them along the way."

"I think the upperclassmen did a pretty good job mentoring them," McCaffery said. "Maybe not so much in the very beginning, but as we got closer to playing games, they recognized there's only so much those five guys can do. They need these other guys to step up, and they've

been very helpful there in terms of leadership, communication, encouragement.

"There was a stretch there where I was really tough on those guys because I knew we weren't going to make the deadline, which was the beginning of the season. They weren't ready to contribute right off the bat. We saw that in the Augustana game, which is why we played that game, which ended up, I think, being something that benefitted our team because those guys were experienced and they played that way."

There's a natural disconnect between upperclassmen and newcomers in all college sports, but it's most obvious in basketball. Physical limitations prevent many players from competing early in football, but basketball is a skill sport where some athletes achieve immediate success. Iowa had several skill players entering their prime of their college careers. What the team needed the most were role players who could impact a game in small doses.

"I definitely think it was a process," Iowa senior point guard Mike Gesell said. "When everybody gets to college, they want to be the man. Everyone wants to put up points. I think you kind of form roles as the season goes along; everyone's not going to hop into a role instantly. There's a lot of figuring that out and figuring out how you can help the team."

"Look at a guy like Nicholas Baer. The guy just works hard all the time and didn't necessarily have a role right away. But he continually worked hard every day in practice and fit into that role. He's a guy that's coming off the bench and just working hard making the right plays."

Baer and Uhl have shown versatility, from working in the post to hitting 3-pointers. Ahmad Wagner has become a key contributor in spurts. Iowa's reserves average 33 percent of the playing time this year, down from 36.6 percent last year. But this team is ranked No. 9 in both polls and is off to its best Big Ten start in 29 years. Its bench players are contributing, and the team appears undivided three months after its first exhibition.

Against Michigan last Sunday, an odd mix of veterans with three bench players pushed Iowa's lead from one point to 11. That led McCaffery to say after the game, "it's great that we have four seniors and a junior, but I said from the beginning, we would not have success this year unless those young guys came through for us."

"I think one of the beauties of this team is that everybody has embraced their roles and even down to the bench with the guys who don't play they play minimal minutes, they're cheering us on the whole game," Gesell said. "I think everybody has really understood their roles, and we're just a very close team on and off the court and it allows us to gel."

Center of the college hoops world? It feels like it lately in Iowa

By Tommy Birch, USA TODAY Sports, January 19, 2016

Shortly after another top-ranked team had fallen in Iowa, ESPN SportsCenter anchor John Buccigross came on air.

"Is this hell?" Buccigross asked Monday, playing off the famous "Field of Dreams" line. "No, it's Iowa."

Well, it's certainly been hell on top-ranked college basketball teams visiting Iowa.

Five top-ranked teams have lost this season. Three of those defeats have occurred within Iowa state lines.

The state's undefeated record over No. 1 teams started with Northern Iowa's 71-67 upset of North Carolina on Nov. 21, 2015. Iowa followed by beating Michigan State 83-70 on Dec. 29, 2015. And Iowa State capped off the three-peat by overcoming this week's No. 1, Oklahoma, 82-77 in Ames.

"No. 1 gets beat every year, just about," ESPN's Jay Bilas said. "But the fact that it's happened three times in one state is pretty neat."

Neat? Yep. But it's also downright historic. According to Iowa State, the last time three teams from the same state all knocked off a No. 1 in the same season was 1997-98, when Duke beat Arizona, North Carolina State beat North Carolina and North Carolina topped Duke.

But Iowa's success this year extends beyond this notable factoid above. In fact, the college basketball spotlight has rarely shone brighter on this relatively rural state of 3.1 million people.

As it stands now, Iowa is home of the nation's No. 9 team and Big Ten standings leader entering play Monday (Iowa), the No. 19-ranked team (Iowa State), two bona fide All-American candidates in Iowa's Jarrod Uthoff (the Big Ten's best scorer at 18.6 points per game) and Iowa State's Georges Niang (19.7 points) and an NCAA Tournament regional round. That regional, the first Des Moines was awarded after three bids, will be held March 17 and 19 at Wells Fargo Arena.

But what's buoyed much of the attention is the wins over the nation's No. 1s.

"It's a combination of chance and luck and the skill level and talent of the three Iowa teams," said ESPN's Fran Fraschilla. "All three wins were wins over very, very good basketball teams who happened at that point in the season to be No. 1."

Success for all three teams in the state is nothing new. Northern Iowa has been to the NCAA Tournament seven times. Iowa State has been there 17 times, including an appearance in the Final Four. Iowa has booked 24 trips to the tournament, including three Final Four finishes.

The three made more history together this season. Bobby Hansen, a radio analyst for Iowa basketball, is one who isn't surprised. Hansen, who played his high school basketball in Iowa, went to Iowa and eventually played in the NBA, has witnessed his share of all three teams in the past.

In fact, earlier this season, he watched all three play in one day during the state's Big Four Classic at Wells Fargo Arena in Des

Moines. That pitted Iowa, Iowa State, Northern Iowa and Drake all under one roof for two basketball games.

At that time, Northern Iowa had already taken down North Carolina, but Iowa and Iowa State were still weeks away from their hallmark wins. But Hansen saw enough of the three over the years to know that these wins could come.

"Maybe not predicted but it didn't surprise me," Hansen said of the three victories.

Every win has had its own impact.

For Iowa (14-3), the win was the third of seven straight victories. But this was the one that put the Hawkeyes squarely in the national radar — vaulting them to No. 19 in the next AP poll after the Michigan State upset. Iowa, which lost to Division II Augustana (S.D.) in the exhibition season, has soared in the rankings since, rising to No. 9 in this week's USA TODAY Coaches and AP polls.

"It got them off to a good start (in conference play) is what it did," Hansen said of the win over MSU. "It gave them some confidence."

Northern Iowa is the most perplexing of the three. The Panthers, which also knocked off then-No. 5 Iowa State in the Big Four Classic, have stumbled since, going 10-9 overall and 2-4 in a Missouri Valley Conference in which they usually contend.

"It does feel like that (upset over North Carolina) took place a long time ago and I know even some of the fan base is wondering, 'Where did that team go,'" said Gary Rima, Northern Iowa's radio play-by-play voice.

Iowa State (14-4) appears to have regained its footing after early Big 12 issues. The No. 19 Cyclones, which rose to as high as a program-best No. 2 ranking in the USA TODAY poll, suffered back-to-back conference losses (against Baylor and Texas) before downing Kansas State and Oklahoma in the last two games.

This week, the state of Iowa seems like the toast of the college basketball world. Texas, a state of 27 million people, and North Carolina, home of basketball blue bloods Duke and North Carolina, are the only other states, along with Iowa, that boast a team in the top 10 and top 20 of the latest AP poll. (Iowa State is No. 21 in the USA TODAY poll).

"Here, this is as big as it gets," said John Walters, Iowa State's play-by-play analyst. "So, when you get that kind of spotlight on you, it attracts good players and I think that's what all those programs have taken advantage of in the last few years. And it pays off in the win columns when these No. 1 teams come in."

Next week features another big matchup when No. 3 Kansas, which is likely to slip after being blown out Tuesday by Oklahoma State, visits Hilton Coliseum for another Big Monday matchup.

"Basketball is alive and well here," Niang said. "The basketball is at an elite level in Iowa and I'm proud to be a part of it."

Fran McCaffery in midst of his finest coaching hour at Iowa

By Chad Leistikow, Des Moines Register, January 15, 2016

EAST LANSING, Mich. — Before this season, even Fran McCaffery wondered aloud about how he would coach this Iowa basketball team.

“One of the most unique teams I’ve had in in all my years in coaching,” he opened at Big Ten Conference media days in Chicago back in October.

A group of battle-tested veterans were joining six newcomers plus two more redshirt freshmen. How would McCaffery get them to mix?

So far, McCaffery’s 20th season as a head coach at the Division I level is shaping up to be his finest.

Raise your hand if you ever thought that’d be written after Iowa lost to Division II Augustana of South Dakota in a November exhibition.

McCaffery may have delivered the biggest of his 109 wins in six years at Iowa with a 76-59 beatdown of No. 4 Michigan State on Thursday night. And he did it at the Breslin Center, site of one of his most infamous moments as the Hawkeyes’ head coach. In 2012, he slammed a chair here and drew national headlines. Thursday, he broke an 18-game program drought in East Lansing.

In doing so, Iowa — which last year won its first NCAA Tournament game in 14 seasons — is poised to take yet another step forward.

Asked afterward about his role in contributing to Iowa’s 13-3 record — including a 4-0 start in Big Ten Conference play, which last happened three coaches and 16 years ago — McCaffery didn’t take the opportunity to boast. He certainly could have, given that Iowa minutes earlier completed a sweep of nemesis Michigan State by a combined margin of 30 points in two games over 17 days.

“I don’t think of the game that way. We’re just constantly trying to push the right buttons with who we have,” McCaffery said. “I think we have a good feel for what we have on our team in terms of talent, versatility, character, toughness. Who’s going to perform under pressure in this environment and be able to play through a mistake and remember the game plan?”

The consensus before the season was that Iowa was an NCAA Tournament bubble team. Now the 16th-ranked Hawkeyes are poised for another jump in the polls, especially if they can dispatch a challenging Sunday game against Michigan at Carver-Hawkeye Arena (3:30 p.m., Big Ten Network).

Iowa’s entire coaching staff deserves credit. After the game, Peter Jok praised the hands-on work of lead assistant Kirk Speraw. It was Speraw who orchestrated the game plan for both Michigan State wins.

Jok said he spent extra time with Speraw studying film, looking for ways he could break free to deliver his smooth jump shot. It paid off. The junior scored a game-high 23 points, including 19 in the dominating first half, to help Iowa keep the Breslin crowd subdued throughout Thursday’s game.

“I watched film with Coach Kirk. I just tried to figure out other ways I could score. They were on me like crazy in the first game,” Jok said. “I just played with my pace. I didn’t try to force anything or let them get in my skin.”

That, in a nutshell, is why this Iowa team has been so good of late during a six-game winning streak. Everyone stays within their roles. Even the star, Jarrod Uthoff, is a team-first guy. A dependable bench has emerged.

What a brilliant move by McCaffery to put sophomore Dom Uhl at the “5” position before the season. Iowa needed a backup to Adam Woodbury after the graduation of Gabe Olaseni, and Uhl has gone from swingman forward to versatile big man.

He’s deftly distributed the minutes between senior guards Mike Gesell and Anthony Clemmons at the point. Uthoff has been nearly unstoppable in playing mostly the “4” after Iowa’s No. 2 all-time leading scorer Aaron White held that role last year.

The discovery and development of redshirt freshman walk-on Nicholas Baer as the team’s No. 2 guy off the bench is a testament to sound coaching across the board from McCaffery, Speraw, Sherm Dillard and Andrew Francis.

McCaffery also showed personal in-season growth Thursday, giving true freshmen Ahmad Wagner and Christian Williams some key minutes. McCaffery regretted not playing Wagner during a second-half meltdown loss against Iowa State on Dec. 10. Iowa hasn’t lost since.

There’s a long way to go. We’re only 22 percent through the Big Ten gauntlet.

But this team is built in the right way — with defined roles, selflessness, character and experience — to avoid the pratfalls of the 2013-14 squad that fell apart after reaching No. 10 in the national rankings.

“We trust our guys. We put them in positions where they can be successful. We don’t ask them to do more than that,” McCaffery said. “Typically they come through for us. We have, I think, a collective desire to win as opposed to anything personal. As a coach, that’s all you ever want.”

3 Takeaways: Gesell performance, Uhl Tide, 3-point prowess *Iowa point guard has career night against Nebraska*

By Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette, January 6, 2016

IOWA CITY — Iowa didn't go to the bullpen when it needed a closer on Tuesday. The Hawkeyes instead asked do-it-all point guard Mike Gesell to engineer victory against Nebraska.

Gesell, a senior, did just that in the Hawkeyes' 77-66 win at Carver-Hawkeye Arena. He finished with 22 points and 10 assists for his first career double-double. He hit five of seven shots and sank 11 of 13 free throws in 35 minutes. Perhaps most impressive, all but one of those free throws took place in the second half. He made six of eight in the final 1 minute, 23 seconds.

"He essentially controlled the game is what he did," Iowa Coach Fran McCaffery said.

Gesell has flashed in his previous years with a few peak games followed with some valley-like performances. But this year, he's playing his best basketball when the team needs it the most.

Against top-ranked Michigan State, Gesell scored a career-high 25 points. Like Nebraska, the Spartans repeatedly fouled Gesell, who knocked down 11 of 13 free throws. He had three assists and two steals to only one turnover in 33 minutes to pace the Hawkeyes to an 83-70 win.

Gesell was equally effective at Purdue last Saturday. He scored seven points, but he added seven assists and a career-best seven rebounds. The Hawkeyes rallied from a 19-point deficit to win 70-63 for the first time at Mackey Arena since 2006. Tuesday, Gesell became the first Iowa player since Jeff Horner to record 10 or more assists in three games during a season.

"He just played great," Iowa senior forward Jarrod Uthoff said. "The way he moved the ball, the way he attacked, penetrated, kicked out and scored for himself, it was fantastic."

Gesell has played in 116 games with 112 starts. McCaffery has stuck with him through both Gesell's growing pains and success. The coach identified Gesell as a program-defining talent when he played at South Sioux City, Neb. McCaffery famously watched every AAU game involving Gesell, center Adam Woodbury and current North Carolina point guard Marcus Paige during the summer of 2011. McCaffery recruited Gesell to become his all-everything point guard, of which he has developed this year.

"Nobody saw him more than I did, so I knew exactly what he was going to be," McCaffery said. "He was terrific for us when he first got here and the more he's really studied it because he was a big time scorer in high school. And I pretty much asked him to be the point guard and to get us into our stuff and understand time and score. And think of the guys he goes against night in and night out since he's been here, and what you're seeing is his development. He's in great shape physically, he's in a great place mentally, and everybody feels better when he's got the ball."

More was required from Gesell on Tuesday because fellow senior guard Anthony Clemmons was hampered with a hip injury. Clemmons (also known as Sapp) was a gametime decision and fought through pain for 17 minutes but lacked his usual burst. That left nearly all of the point guard responsibilities to Gesell.

"I felt like Sapp's a guy that when he's out there, he helps me control the tempo," Gesell said. "As guards you really want to control the pace of the game. It makes it easy for me when Sapp's

out there, too, because you've got two guards on the court, two extra coaches on the court. He just wasn't quite himself at times. He showed some tremendous toughness playing through his injury. I felt like I had to be a little bit more aggressive and control the pace."

No. 23 Iowa (12-3) has earned its first 3-0 start in Big Ten play since 2002-03. Gesell has been a catalyst for that success.

"He reminds me of (Northwestern's) Tre Demps, only a point guard instead of a scorer," Nebraska Coach Tim Miles said. "He'll create for himself like he did (Tuesday). He got fouled, made shots, tough shots, too. Made two tough ones at the end, then he goes out and gets 10 assists, too. Mike's a really good player."

2. UHL TIDE. After a rough start in exhibition play, Iowa sophomore Dominique Uhl has become a major contributor to the Hawkeyes' success.

Uhl, who stands 6-foot-9, played primarily forward last year but has added center responsibilities. He bulked up, which has helped him bang in the post, but it hasn't inhibited his perimeter prowess. Uhl has knocked down 14 of 29 3-point attempts this season (48.3 percent). In three Big Ten games, Uhl has drilled five of seven.

"He seems to be able to make really key 3s when we need them," McCaffery said.

With his team trailing Nebraska 10-0, Uhl scored the Hawkeyes' first basket on a turnaround jumper. He tied the game later in the sequence on a 3-pointer from the top of the key. In all, Uhl scored 10 points and grabbed eight rebounds in 24 minutes.

"I'm just trying to do whatever they need me to do, whether it's a rebound or a made 3," said Uhl, who grew up in Frankfurt, Germany. "I'm definitely comfortable. I feel like I'm more comfortable playing outside. I'll play wherever the team needs me to play."

3. 3-POINT PROWESS. Iowa's 3-point shooting under McCaffery has waned at times from decent to poor. Three times the Hawkeyes finished 11th among Big Ten schools in 3-point shooting. But this year ain't one of them.

Iowa currently ranks third in Big Ten 3-point shooting at 39.9 percent. That's the highest number for the Hawkeyes since 1997-98, when the team ended the season at 40.1 percent. That year, Iowa had J.R. Koch (47.1 percent) and Kent McCausland (46.0) drilling everything from the perimeter. This year, Iowa's success comes from its forwards.

Uthoff leads the team with 30 3-pointers with a percentage of 45.5. Freshman Nicholas Baer has hit 16 of 32 (50 percent). Uhl has knocked down 14 of 29. Guards Peter Jok (29 of 82, 35.4) and Gesell (10 of 20, 50.0) also are prolific. Last year's leader was Clemmons (37.3 percent), and he's struggled this year (29.7).

Iowa's best 3-point year under McCaffery was in 2011-12, when the Hawkeyes shot 37.3 percent. Guard Matt Gatens was the primary reason for the shooting success that year.

Iowa upgrades non-conference schedule, RPI improves

Hawkeyes enter non-league finale Tuesday against Tennessee Tech

By Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette, December 21, 2015

IOWA CITY — Non-conference basketball scheduling is neither art nor science. Basically, it's math, especially if you want to make the NCAA tournament.

Iowa Coach Fran McCaffery discovered that the hard way three years ago. The Hawkeyes finished the regular season 21-12, including 9-9 in Big Ten play. Their average margin-of-victory in league play was 11.3 points. Only two of their Big Ten losses came by double digits. Iowa's 11-2 non-conference record appeared strong enough to loft it into the NCAA tournament — until you looked more closely at those victories.

The average RPI (Ratings Performance Index) of Iowa's non-conference opponents was 216.5. Only three teams had an RPI better than 118. RPI — a strength-of-schedule component — calculates your wins and losses, your opponents' wins and losses and your opponents' opponents wins and losses. When Iowa suffered perhaps its most difficult defeat in McCaffery's six years with the program — a 59-56 Big Ten Tournament quarterfinal loss to Michigan State — its non-conference RPI cost them an NCAA tournament berth.

McCaffery since has learned from that season. The Big Ten qualified seven teams for the NCAA tournament. Illinois and Minnesota ended league play 8-10, and Iowa finished 2-1 against those teams. But those teams' RPI was much better than the Hawkeyes, and something had to change.

"I think we made a concerted effort to improve the quality of our schedule top to bottom," McCaffery said. "Typically, if you're in the Big Ten, it didn't seem to ever matter who you played in the non-conference. You played enough power teams that if you went 9-9, you were in. But that team was 9-9, and we didn't get in. That team finished sixth; they took seven and eight. So maybe that's a one-in-a-million deal. But when you sit down and you listen to intelligent people explain to you that 'OK, you've got to be a little more cognizant of who you're playing,' then you've got to be open-minded and say that's risky, too."

Iowa has strengthened its non-conference schedule over the last three years. Iowa played eight opponents with an RPI of 275 or worse entering that season. This year, Iowa has only two, and one of them was Drake. In fact, only Drake and Coppin State currently have RPIs worse than 200.

More than half of Iowa's non-conference scheduling is out of McCaffery's hands. The Hawkeyes compete annually in the Big Four Classic (Northern Iowa or Drake), the Big Ten-ACC Challenge (Florida State this year), an exempt tournament (this year the AdvoCare Invitational in Orlando) and against Iowa State. The inaugural Gavitt Games matched Big Ten and Big East opponents for an early-season game, and Iowa participated this year at Marquette.

That left only five home games for Iowa, including Tuesday's opponent, Tennessee Tech. Those five teams are a combined 29-28 and three have winning records. Tennessee Tech is 8-4, while UMKC is 7-4. Western Illinois (7-3) owns a win at Wisconsin. Gardner-Webb (5-7) has lost to Iowa, LSU, Vanderbilt and Tennessee. Coppin State (2-10) was the other opponent.

"Everybody looks at the monster games that you schedule," McCaffery said. "If you look at those games, and you can schedule down if you want to, but that's going to hurt your RPI. So I think you recognize the difficulty of your schedule is not only in the power teams but in all the other teams that we faced. What that does is it challenges your team in preparation. It challenges your team. 'OK, their three best players are all perimeter guys. This team's best players are their point guard and two bigs. ...'"

How Iowa contends in Big Ten play will affect its bid for a third straight NCAA tournament berth. But its RPI now sits at 35, a solid number approaching Big Ten play. It's also quite a change from three years ago when Iowa's RPI was at 81 and barely missed the NCAA tournament.

"It can be risky, but ultimately it benefits you in two ways," McCaffery said of upgrading non-conference opponents. "It's going to help your RPI, and it's going to better prepare you for league play."

Hawkeye hoops notes: Gesell's engagement had a hitch

By Chad Leistikow, Des Moines Register, November 23, 2015

IOWA CITY, Ia. — Even when it came to his engagement, Mike Gesell had to think like a point guard.

The Iowa basketball player went into a four-corners offense when he realized his planned proposal site — center court at Carver-Hawkeye Arena — was tied up with a band concert on the night of Nov. 9, his 22nd birthday.

Team managers, who were enlisted to help with the staging, got messages to Gesell that he needed to stall. So a guy who has started 100 career Division I games at point guard reacted accordingly.

“Went to ice cream, walked around the Pentacrest, went to Wal-Mart,” he said. “I was really stretching it.”

But the concert eventually ended, and Gesell arrived at Carver-Hawkeye — with music playing on speakers and rose petals and candles on the basketball floor. Kennedy Bradley said yes.

“She had no idea,” Gesell said, “so I think I did a pretty good job.”

Gesell and Bradley have dated for a little over six months. They met each other at The Salt Company, a Christian campus ministry that meets on Thursday nights at the Englert Theatre in downtown Iowa City.

Gesell, a senior who earned his finance degree in three years, said they're looking at a wedding date in August. Who knew the nation's fifth-leading assist man (at 8.3 per game) was such a romantic?

“That's my other side people don't see,” he said with a grin.

Football's influence

At Iowa, like all Power 5 schools, football leads the way in paying athletic-department bills. So the 11-0, third-ranked Hawkeye football team benefits all 24 sports teams, even the No. 2 money-generator, men's basketball.

“It helps every program here, there's no question about that,” Iowa coach Fran McCaffery said. “We probably had 16 or 17 recruits on the field before the Minnesota game (Nov. 14).”

“The publicity they are getting every night is great publicity for our school, for our athletic department, and everybody is talking about the Hawkeyes. So that's something we're very proud of, we take great pride in, and we're just thrilled for Kirk (Ferentz) and his staff and players.”

If the 3-0 basketball team can win Thursday's 8 p.m. opener vs. Dayton (3-0) in the Advocare Invitational in Orlando, Fla., they wouldn't play until 8:30 Friday night — which means they could watch some of the 2:30 p.m. football game between Iowa and Nebraska. Gesell, who grew up a Cornhuskers fan in South Sioux City, Neb., said he'll be pulling for the Hawkeyes.

“They're doing something right over there,” center Adam Woodbury said. “They continue to win, whoever's in front of them.”

More from Dale Jones

Through three games, the Hawkeyes are scoring 34.7 percent of their points from 3-point range — compared with 24.3 percent a year ago. It helps that Iowa has rained in 12 3-pointers the last two games and is shooting 41.9 percent from deep (vs. 33.3 percent last year).

Dale Jones, a 6-foot-7 junior college transfer, has helped provide instant offense with six 3-pointers on 14 attempts. He's also earned more trust with McCaffery with his improving defense.

“He's a lot better,” McCaffery said. “I mean, he's really trying to complete the picture. ... He's not afraid to shoot it at any time, but the defensive component was where he had to work.”

Knowing that Iowa has less inside bulk than last year's NCAA Tournament round-of-32 team, McCaffery has given Jones the green light.

“He gives us confidence in our shot,” Jones said. “I think that's helping us right now.”

Iowa takeaways: Wagner's the real deal; Uhl, Baer pitch in

By Chad Leistikow, Des Moines Register, November 14, 2015

IOWA CITY, Ia. — Ahmad Wagner was the 12th player Iowa coach Fran McCaffery tapped for playing time in Friday's season opener against Gardner-Webb.

But he certainly wasn't an afterthought in the Hawkeyes' 76-59 win at Carver-Hawkeye Arena.

Wagner, a 6-foot-7 freshman playing his first college game, didn't enter until there were 9 minutes, 22 seconds left. He played the rest of the way, collecting a team-high eight rebounds (six offensive) and six points, all on putbacks.

"I just want to go in and give it everything I've got every time I go in," said Wagner, who missed two practices with a shoulder injury but looked great Friday.

Teammate Jarrod Uthoff called him "crazy strong." McCaffery said Friday's performance was why Wagner was his first freshman off the bench in the first exhibition game of the season.

"He's just a guy that really understands how to play," McCaffery said. "He understands what his strengths are and he's just a phenomenal athlete with tremendous strength."

Wagner is believed to be the first Hawkeye since Melsahn Basabe to wear a headband during a game.

"Didn't wear a headband in high school (in Ohio). Thought I would try it out in college," Wagner said. "I guess it's working out well for me right now. ... It's coming back, for sure."

Shooting guard Andrew Fleming was the first true freshman to play Friday; he scored one point in 4 minutes, but ceded more time to Brady Ellingson (four points, 23 minutes).

Uthoff's amazing pace

Iowa unveiled its 2015 NCAA Tournament banner before Friday's game. If it wants to get back to the Big Dance in 2016, it'll take Uthoff being as good as he was in the opener.

Uthoff's 21 points, all in the first half, carried the Hawkeyes when the rest of the team was struggling to score. Iowa will miss Aaron White, the school's No. 2 all-time scorer, but Uthoff is off to a good start replacing that frontcourt punch.

"That guy, he did everything in the first half," teammate Adam Woodbury said. "There's not much more I could have done. I'll let him take over, do what he does. 21 in one half?"

"If he's averaging 42 a game, I think we'd be a pretty damn good team."

Peter's prognosis

If Peter Jok can't go Sunday against Coppin State, McCaffery at first said he'd likely start Ellingson, but left the option open to "go big" with someone like Dom Uhl.

Jok's right ankle was in a boot after the game. The junior guard went down with 17 minutes, 22 seconds left, shortly after canning two 3-pointers. McCaffery didn't think the injury was too serious.

"Right now, it's hurting. See how he feels tomorrow," McCaffery said. "And then we'll make a decision on Sunday whether he's going to go."

"I don't think it's going to keep him out for three weeks or anything like that, no."

It's more important that Jok be healthy to play Thursday at Marquette, which, by the way, lost its season opener Friday against Belmont, 83-80.

Uhl playing bigger, better

McCaffery issued a public challenge to Uhl this past week, noting that after the 6-foot-9 sophomore played just 2 minutes in an exhibition loss to Augustana, "I don't think he has fully comprehended how hard we need him to play."

Uhl came off the bench in Friday's game with lots of energy, scoring all six of his points in the first half. He even played more first-half minutes (11) than starter Adam Woodbury (10).

Uhl has been tapped as Woodbury's main backup at the center position, where he's gradually getting more comfortable.

"He wants me to play more like Gabe (Olaseni) did last year," Uhl said. "It's different. But you've got to do what helps you get on the floor."

Quick strikes from Baer

On the first offensive possession of his college career, redshirt freshman Nicholas Baer came up the floor on a fast break — and received a chest pass from Anthony Clemmons on the left wing. Baer, a walk-on from Bettendorf, squared up and banged in a 3-pointer to put Iowa ahead 54-42.

Baer played 13 minutes, all in the second half, and finished with six points.

"He was really, really special," McCaffery said. "He comes in and hits a 3 right away, hits another 3 to put us up 17. He makes a big defensive play. He's on the glass. He missed some shots, but he's going to keep shooting."

Baer was the 10th Hawkeye to see action.

"I'm not too worried about minutes as long as we're winning," Baer said. "That's all that really matters to me."

Brown: Time flies for Iowa hoops' veteran core

By Rick Brown, Des Moines Register, October 7, 2015

IOWA CITY, Ia. — Adam Woodbury was a big catch for Iowa basketball coach Fran McCaffery, a top-100 recruit who said no to North Carolina and took a chance on the home-state program trying to find its way again.

When Woodbury arrived for his freshman season in the fall of 2012, senior Eric May pulled the 7-footer aside.

“He said, ‘This time goes by really fast,’ ” Woodbury said. “I said, ‘Yeah, you’re an old guy now, you don’t know what you’re talking about.’ But he knew what he was talking about. These years go by so fast.”

Woodbury is now a senior. Can that really be possible? True story.

Woodbury, Mike Gesell and Anthony Clemmons arrived with promise. They will leave with results.

“They stood up and said, ‘We’re going to make a difference,’ ” McCaffery said at the Hawkeyes’ annual media day Wednesday at Carver-Hawkeye Arena. “That takes courage and that takes confidence.”

So here we are, three-fourths of a career over, a senior swan song to go. With this trio in uniform, Iowa has run off three straight 20-win seasons, made back-to-back trips to the NCAA Tournament and recorded the school’s first victory in the Big Dance since 2001.

And instead of getting advice from underclassmen, they’re passing it on. McCaffery enters his sixth season at Iowa with an eclectic roster. It’s loaded with experience at the top and packed with potential in a six-player recruiting class at the bottom.

“I’ve got to figure that sometime in 30-plus years I’ve had something like this,” McCaffery said. “But I don’t remember.”

Isaiah Moss, Ahmad Wagner, Brandon Hutton, Andrew Fleming and Christian Williams are the freshmen. Get to know them, Hawkeye fans. They’ll make up the foundation of Iowa basketball going forward. Joined by junior college transfer Dale Jones, an Iowa native, they’ve left an impression with their old-school teammates.

“Extremely athletic,” Gesell said. “Guys who fit perfect in Fran’s system, guys that can run, block shots and play multiple positions. Guys who can score, too. I think it will be a very special class.”

If youth and experience mesh, this could be a real good team. An NCAA team. But this journey will get out of the blocks with four returning starters and five guys who have starting experience.

Woodbury has started 104 of 105 games at Iowa. Gesell has started 97 of 101, and Clemmons 25 of 104. There’s also a fourth senior, Jarrod Uthoff, who transferred in from Wisconsin and looks to be Iowa’s go-to guy like Aaron White and Devyn Marble before him.

And don’t sleep on junior Peter Jok, who started 21 games last season and is, in my book, poised for a breakout season. You read it here first.

Dom Uhl, a sophomore, also got a taste last season and needs to play some quality minutes for this team to succeed. But there will be minutes for the new faces, too. That includes walk-on forward Nicholas Baer and redshirt freshman shooting guard Brady Ellingson.

“I’m confident in my skill set, and my teammates,” Fleming said. “The guys really mesh well together. I think we can pick up the load and keep it going in a bigger and better direction.”

It worked in 2012-13. Iowa won 25 games and reached the NIT title game. Gesell started 34 games that season, Woodbury 33 and Clemmons 13. Egos were left at the door.

“Our guys that were here did a great job of recruiting them, mentoring them and welcoming them,” McCaffery said. “All three were in the starting lineup. Sometimes, that stuff doesn’t go well in the locker room. But it was never an issue.”

Starting minutes aren’t as readily available now as they were in 2012-13. But new and old will have to play as one for this playing rotation, likely at least 10 bodies deep, to work.

“It’s not just about this year, it’s about the future,” Gesell said. “We want this program to succeed. Obviously, it’s this year first. At the same time, it’s our job to bring the freshmen along and teach them as much as we can so that next year they can continue to have success.”

And that is an admirable legacy to leave, beyond wins and losses.

“The senior leadership is unbelievable,” Wagner said.

Embrace the moment, kiddos, because time flies by.

“That’s something they keep telling us,” Wagner said.

McCaffery's biggest win at Iowa: Landing Gesell and Woodbury

Senior duo changed program's perception, helped turn around culture

By Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette, October 7, 2015

IOWA CITY — One could make a strong case that Fran McCaffery's biggest win at Iowa took place over the phone in 2011 rather than on the basketball court last March.

McCaffery spent more than a year recruiting guard Mike Gesell and center Adam Woodbury. McCaffery sat every single one of four-star duo's AAU games for two years. Finally, McCaffery's diligence paid off when they committed within one month of each other in 2011.

Four years later, Woodbury and Gesell are seniors together with the Hawkeyes. They've combined to start 201 games. Before they arrived, Iowa squeaked into the NIT and finished 18-17. Since their arrival, Iowa has posted a 67-38 record with two NCAA appearances, including last year's 22-12 performance.

The program's perception changed when both arrived on campus. As the record suggests, Iowa has shifted from Big Ten afterthought to contender both on the court and the recruiting trail. Nobody would suggest either one was the catalyst for Iowa's success. There were other players — all-Big Ten stars Devyn Marble and Aaron White among them — who were instrumental in the team's success. But McCaffery concedes, "I do think that we felt like that was a major step" when he landed Gesell and Woodbury. They immediately became starters.

"They had been previously winning players," McCaffery said. "So we had every expectation that we would win with those guys in the starting lineup. We won 67 games in three years with those guys in the starting lineup. So that was not a major surprise. It wasn't only because of them. They had a lot of help. A couple of draft picks in there and so forth.

"But they understood and could fill the roles that we defined for them. They competed, they prepared, they worked in the summertime, they worked hard to get better. So now what you're expecting is them to have the kind of senior year that we all hope that the great ones have, and that is to play the best that they possibly can."

Gesell and Woodbury grew up in the Sioux City area; Gesell was raised in Nebraska and Woodbury in Iowa. They both competed together on the same AAU squad at a young age and traveled the country with the All-Iowa Attack. McCaffery's relentless pursuit won them over. Gesell was the first to commit in August 2011, and Woodbury picked Iowa in September.

"It's crazy, it seems like yesterday we were talking on a bus in an AAU trip deciding to come together," Gesell said. "Now we're seniors ready to make some noise in our last year. We've pushed each other each and every step of the way and it's been fun."

They've dealt with lows along with the highs together. Woodbury averaged career highs with 6.6 points and 5.2 rebounds last year. Gesell put up 7.4 points and 4.0 assists. Both are solid numbers but expectations were so high for both that anything short of all-Big Ten status was a letdown.

But more than numbers, they want to be known for is winning. That's their legacy. They get one more chance to enhance it, and they're confident they can.

"We've won a lot of games in my career here," Woodbury said. "We still have a year left to win a lot more. I think it's all about winning."

"It's the last go-round. We don't get another shot after this," Gesell said. "We're just looking to make the best of it. You don't do that by looking at the season as whole; you do that by getting better each and every day. We have tons of experience, we've played in big games, we know what it's like to play on the road, we've got all the makings of being a great team. It's just putting it all together. Just playing confident and playing to our potential."

Iowa has taken another step each year in its tenure. As freshmen, they advanced to the NIT title game. As sophomores, they played in the NCAA's first round. Last year, Iowa won an NCAA game. To take the next step requires urgency, and Woodbury knows it.

"I think if you don't play every game with some urgency, you shouldn't be playing," he said. "Last year we were playing for the seniors that were with us. The year before we were playing Dev and those guys. So we're always playing for the seniors. Every time we step on the court there's a level of urgency to win the game, and so I think this year won't be any different. Hopefully, subconsciously, I hope. We'll see what the future holds."