

Iowa position breakdowns: Guards (premium)

In the second of a two-part series previewing the upcoming Iowa basketball season, we examine what the team has to offer at the guard position. We previously discussed [the team's forwards in Part One](#).

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For as physical as the Big Ten is, a strong backcourt is needed in order to win the conference.

If there is one strength on this Iowa men's basketball team that has spent the past few seasons in the Big Ten cellar, it's that there are some quality guards in place, both now and for the foreseeable future.

When the Hawkeyes lost in the Big Ten Tournament last March to Michigan, one of the lone bright spots from an otherwise depressing afternoon in Indianapolis was point guard Cully Payne. The Schaumburg, Ill., native put up a career-high 25 points in the 59-52 loss that wound up being the final game coached by Todd Lickliter at Iowa.

Since the moment Fran McCaffery was introduced as the team's new head coach, one area Payne has been attempting to make strides in this past offseason is becoming more aggressive like he was in that Big Ten Tournament game.

"I want him to look more for his shot than he did last year," McCaffery said at the team's Media Day on Oct. 14. "He wants to run the offense, he wants to set his teammates up, he wants to engineer victory, which is I think what you want from any point guard. But I need him to score."

"I need him to look for a shot when he puts it on the deck so that teams will respect the fact that when he drives, he could take it himself."

Now as Payne is about to start his sophomore season, he has taken notice of the elevated role cast upon him this season.

"I think with me looking to score, that will open up everyone else," Payne said. "It will give Matt [Gatens] open shots, Eric [May] open shots. Overall, I think it will definitely be helpful."

The Hawkeyes were also fortunate back in the summer to add another point guard to the roster in Bryce Cartwright, a transfer from Paris Junior College in Texas. The 6-1 junior also spent his freshman season playing at Fresno State.

"He really handled himself well in his visit, and I like his attitude," McCaffery said. "He's very upbeat. He's very confident in himself."

Another important player in this team's backcourt is Iowa City's own Matt Gatens. The 6-5 junior was asked to cut his weight down to 208 pounds after playing close to 225 last season.

There is also a little bit less pressure on Gatens this season. Unlike his first two years as a Hawkeye where he found himself playing multiple positions on the court, McCaffery made clear he only wants Gatens playing one position this season – the 2-guard.

Gatens returns as Iowa's leading scorer from last season with Aaron Fuller leaving for USC, and is poised for a breakout season given his role and the trust the coaching staff has in him.

"It's an honor that [McCaffery] has that kind of confidence in me, and it's just a matter of working hard and preparing to be

in those situations,” Gatens said. “I think I’ve done that throughout my career, but now it’s just taking it to the next level with this squad and being that guy for this team.

“Hopefully when the time does come, I step to the plate. I’m ready to do that.”

Another player who will be asked to play the 2-guard, and maybe even a little small forward when on the court with Gatens, is freshman Roy Devyn Marble.

Being the son of Iowa’s all-time leading scorer, Marble described it as a dream come true to be donning the Iowa uniform. While he doesn’t view this opportunity as simply following in his father’s footsteps, he has gotten some advice from the elder Marble along the way about what he can expect playing in a marquee Division-I conference.

“He said the difference from high school is just the change of pace and the game speed, and how physical it is,” Roy Devyn said. “You’re going to be physically abused right away. He said you just have to be tough. You got to go through it.

Marble, along with freshman forward Zach McCabe, were the two recruits from the previous regime McCaffery successfully convinced to honor their original commitments to Iowa.

Finally, there is sophomore Eric May, who many – including McCaffery himself – believe will benefit the most from the style of play being implemented by the new coaching staff.

Like Gatens, May also cut his weight down from a season ago, and is excited about the opportunity to play at a faster pace than the team did last year.

“That’s the style that I’m used to playing,” May said. “I never really felt that there was a different way to play but run in the fast break. You can always pull it back out, but if you’re not running the fast break, you’re wasting

opportunities.”

With three young yet proven players that can start in this backcourt, and two reserves who look to play key minutes for this team, McCaffery knows any success the Hawkeyes have this season will probably be based on guard play.

“It’s still got to be our best players with the proper spacing, with good decision making, taking good shots,” he said. “That’s the only way we’re going to win games.”