

Chris Street: Remembering a beloved Hawkeye



By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

The memory remains fresh in Fran McCaffery's mind. During the summer of 1988, the then-Lehigh head coach took part in a Nike-sponsored trip to the Virgin Islands alongside numerous other college basketball coaches.

At their St. Thomas resort, the restaurants supplying them with meals had daily sign-up sheets for each coach to sign. This was so workers knew who was eating where, when coaches were eating and how much food would be needed each day. One night, McCaffery chose a restaurant for dinner and ended up sharing that particular meal with Tom Davis, who had just completed his second season coaching at Iowa.

As the two coaches conversed, Davis began to rave about a high-school sophomore from Indianola, Iowa, who had previously given his oral commitment to the Hawkeye basketball program.

McCaffery: He was like, "We just got this kid to commit to us." Nobody took sophomore commitments then. Nobody offered sophomores. He just did and the kid said yes and he was thrilled. I watched the kid play and thought, "Wow, can he really play."

That kid's name was Chris Street. The assistant designated as the primary contact during Street's recruitment was Gary Close, who followed Davis to Iowa from Stanford. Davis said he and his staff had identified Street as "a key recruit."

He received an invitation to attend one of Iowa's basketball camps. Following that camp's conclusion, Close made the offer.

Close: *We offered him a scholarship and on his way home, he accepted, so our relationship got built from there in terms of recruiting. It was one of the easiest recruiting jobs I had because he, from a very early age, wanted to be an Iowa Hawkeye. As soon as that was available to him, he jumped at it.*

Street arrived on campus in 1990 with a physical make-up sculpted from playing sports like basketball, football and baseball while growing up. Davis said Street was gifted enough to play college football at the Division-I level had he gone that route instead of playing basketball.

What made Street special in the eyes of his coaches though was the person he was both on and off the court. Bruce Pearl, another of Davis' assistants at that time, described Street as having "a great spirit" and as someone who was passionate about family – whether it was his family back home or his coaches and teammates that made up his new Hawkeye family. Davis and Close both had similar reflections.

Davis: *It wasn't hard because he was so likable and had such a great personality. Obviously intelligent and physically gifted. He was the kind of young guy that made you smile and made you enjoy being a coach. A terrific personality and a terrifically talented young guy.*

Close: *I would just describe him as a lover of life. He had a lot of interests, whether it'd be hunting or fishing or playing recreational sports or hanging out or whatever. He enjoyed being around people and being around his teammates. He*

just had this very affectuous outlook and therefore was a lot of fun to be around.

MAKING AN IMMEDIATE IMPACT

Street proved crucial to the Hawkeyes' success right away. He blocked 52 shots as a freshman, a single-season record among Iowa freshmen still existing today. In the 1991 NCAA Tournament, the Hawkeyes defeated East Tennessee State in the first round thanks in part to Street recording five steals, matching the school record for steals in an NCAA tourney game previously set by Steve Carfino.

The following season, Street led Iowa with 247 rebounds – a mark unmatched by any Hawkeye sophomore since. Iowa made the NCAA Tournament again in 1992 and Street finished with 16 points in a first-round win over Texas. But just like his freshman campaign, his sophomore year had the exact same fate – a second-round loss to eventual national champion Duke.

As he got older, the 6-8 forward became what Close described as “a hard guard” for anyone who had to defend him. Whether it was by becoming more physical, making more free throws, or just adding more moves to his repertoire, Street's investment into getting better was something his coaches felt was beginning to pay dividends.

Close: *By the time he was into his junior year, he was a pretty well rounded basketball player. But it wasn't something that happened overnight. It was a lot of work and he enjoyed putting the time in to get better. I mean, he was in the gym a lot and that's what people don't see – all the work that's put into something like that. It was the course of a number of years that enabled him to develop into the type of player that he was. There was a lot of time invested. But for him, it was fun. He enjoyed getting better and enjoyed working at it and therefore, it was fun to be around him and watch him continue to improve.*

During the summer between his sophomore and junior seasons, Street was [one of 12 Big Ten basketball players](#) to represent the conference on an all-star squad that played in Europe. It was the first time the Big Ten had ever conducted its Foreign Tour. This tour consisted of eight games played across three countries – Great Britain, Belgium and The Netherlands.

One of the players who befriended Street during their time overseas together was a Purdue guard named Matt Painter, now in his eighth season coaching at his alma mater.

Painter: *I spent a lot of time with him and I got to be friends with him. Had a lot of the same similarities – blue-collar, hard-working background. A lot better player than I was, obviously. But a guy that laid it on the line and was really good. Just a really good Big Ten player.*

Street returned from Europe and entered his junior season poised to build off his previous success. That didn't necessarily mean an increase in Street's responsibilities on the floor, however. Davis had already viewed Street as "the ultimate team player" that would take the necessary steps to improve his game, so his demands of him as a basketball player remained the same.

Davis: *He improved tremendously already. You just don't set too many specific goals for him. You just try to get him to be as good as he can, as early as he can and have some fun doing it. I think the worst thing you can do in coaching sometimes is you just set such high standards that it becomes a pressure point for the athlete. So you just try to encourage them to be the best they can, as fast as they can and just enjoy the process.*

THE FINAL GAME

Jan. 16, 1993. The Hawkeyes stepped out of Big Ten play and paid a visit to Cameron Indoor Stadium for a tilt with the Duke Blue Devils, the same team that ended Iowa's previous two

seasons en route to winning consecutive national titles.

Both teams were in the top 25 – the Hawkeyes came in ranked 13th, the Blue Devils third. One of the reasons for Iowa's ranking was Street, who to that point, had started every game during the 1992-93 season. If this showdown hadn't possessed enough of a build-up already, it was also being televised nationally on CBS.

Davis: *In those days, nationally televised games were a bigger deal. Today, there are so many nationally televised games. There are so many channels doing televised games that it has kind of lost its impact. But I can remember when we would be going on national TV, everybody knew about it. So to be on national TV as a college basketball player, going into an environment like Duke, was a big deal.*

Iowa jumped out to a 22-15 lead in the first half before Duke stormed back to tie the game 28-28 at halftime. Once again, it would be the Blue Devils emerging victorious with a 65-56 win over Iowa. Street led the Hawkeyes in scoring that day with [14 points on 6-of-11 shooting](#). He also left quite the impression on Duke head coach Mike Krzyzewski.

Krzyzewski: *He was one of my favorite players. You know, he pointed their press. He was just all over the place. He played with the type of attitude that you would want to inject in every player that has ever played for you. He was a warrior and just a terrific player and really a terrific kid. I remember shaking his hand after the game just because coming into the game, I admired him so much watching him on tape. Just to tell him, "It was honor to play against you." He was a very special, very special basketball player.*

Close: *We went down there and we went toe-to-toe for 40 minutes. They knew they were in the game, we knew we were in the game. I think even the commentators, if you watch the broadcast, they mentioned him a number of times. He might have*

been the best player on the court that day, just with how well he played and how hard he played and providing the intensity and the spark that we needed and the confidence to go into a place like that and feel like you have a chance of winning. We were disappointed we didn't win the game. Where a lot of teams would just try to go in there and survive, we felt we had a pretty good team and were proud of the way we competed, but disappointed that we didn't win. He was right there at the forefront of guys who were not happy with the loss.

As the Hawkeyes walked out of Cameron Indoor Stadium, no one could have foreseen that being the last time No. 40 would suit up for Iowa.

TRAGEDY STRIKES

Jan. 19, 1993. Tom Davis was sitting at home when he received the heartbreaking phone call: Chris Street had died.

After a team meal at the Highlander Inn that Tuesday evening, Street was on his way to attend a night class when his car collided with a snowplow along Highway 1. He was the accident's lone casualty.

Street was 20.

Police spoke to Davis about what had happened, then the team met in its locker room at Carver-Hawkeye Arena. Once counselors were on hand to accommodate everyone associated with the basketball program, Davis and his staff immediately turned their attention toward Street's family. Close was among those to return Street's body to Indianola and console his family during the time leading up to that following Friday, when his funeral took place at First Assembly of God.

Davis: *I remember we were all very concerned about Chris' family. I mean, we were all concerned about our own family – the team. But we were also concerned about his family and his parents. So we tried to think about them and what we could do*

in terms of going to the funeral together and things along those lines.

Close: *The days after are what were tough. Words just don't do justice of what you're trying to go through, trying to pick up the pieces and trying to make sense of it. It was a tough time, no doubt about it. It was pretty difficult to get through. You just try to find a way to survive and then get through it, but I think also appreciate how lucky you were to have had him in your life. It's an experience I'm sure all of us will never forget. It had a profound impact on all of our lives and was very, very difficult.*

This tragedy not only left all those across Iowa mourning. It also shook the entire college basketball landscape. Tom Izzo, then an assistant coach at Michigan State, was on the road recruiting when he heard the news and called it "the saddest day" he could remember in the Big Ten.

Meanwhile, Painter and his Purdue squad had just lost a game that same night to Indiana. While attempting to get over that defeat, he learned what happened to the person he bonded with during their Europe trip five months earlier and was left devastated.

Painter: *We were down in the dumps and you think that's the only thing that matters. But then you realize something like this has happened and now, someone's life is taken away and it really makes you see the big picture.*

Pearl, who left Iowa to become the head coach at Division-III Southern Indiana in 1992, was coaching in one of his new team's games the night before Street's funeral. As soon as that game had ended, Pearl, along with everyone else who made the move with him, was determined to make the overnight trek to Indianola for a service [attended by nearly 2,500 people](#).

Pearl: *In order to be there on Friday for his funeral, we were going to have to leave and drive out there for the service.*

There was a donor that overheard us that we were all packed up. My wife. My kids. Everybody. And he actually made arrangements to fly us out there. Everybody came back. Everybody from all four corners came back to be with the family.

ATTEMPTING TO MOVE FORWARD

While Iowa players and coaches continued grieving the loss of someone they all cherished, two games against Northwestern and Penn State were rescheduled for later dates. Davis said he left it entirely up to his players as far as when basketball would become a priority for all of them again.

Davis: *I noticed every day, more and more players were showing up and working out on their own – lifting, shooting, having some fun in the gym. I knew then that it would probably be good to start to practice again. So that was the first step and then everything kind of fell into place.*

The Hawkeyes' first game after Street passed away was the night of Jan. 28, 1993. Iowa traveled up to East Lansing and played Michigan State at the Breslin Center.

Davis: *We didn't know what to expect. We weren't in condition. We hadn't conditioned as hard as we would've normally had. We hadn't worked as hard. We had that time span where we didn't practice. I'm sure our minds were wandering many times during the course of that game.*

Izzo: *I think that was a very hard game for all teams and all parties. We put on a big fundraiser that night. We had an alum that raised a lot of money for them. So you're competing against them, and you're pulling for them.*

Down by 15 points with just over three minutes left, the Hawkeyes made their run. They clawed all the way back to force overtime and eventually defeated the Spartans, 96-90. To this date, it remains Iowa's last victory at Michigan State.

Izzo: *Chris was there, I think. Because we were beating them bad and then they came back. It was an incredible night.*

Davis: *That was an unbelievable comeback, no doubt about it. It was an amazing game.*

After winning that game, the Hawkeyes returned to Iowa City and continued to march on. Playing at home for the first time since his death, Iowa faced Michigan and its “Fab Five.” On an afternoon where [a sellout crowd inside Carver-Hawkeye Arena paid tribute to Street](#), Iowa reeled off another emotional win by beating the Wolverines, 88-80.

Three consecutive losses by a combined 14 points ensued, but the Hawkeyes then managed to win eight of their last 10 games, including both of the rescheduled contests against Northwestern and Penn State. Iowa finished 11-7 in Big Ten play, good enough to tie Illinois for third place. Ten of those 11 victories came after Street died.

For the third consecutive year, the Hawkeyes reached the NCAA Tournament’s second round after defeating Northeast Louisiana. This time however, it was Wake Forest ending Iowa’s run with an 84-78 victory over the Hawkeyes. By season’s end, Iowa’s record was 23-9.

Close: *We got terrific leadership from Coach Davis and we had a great bunch of guys that had a lot of resiliency and a lot of pride. They found a way to play good basketball, even without him, which is pretty remarkable and a great testament to the type of character of kids that we had. I’m sure he appreciated that, in terms of how we played. We had a pretty good year considering what we had lost. I think the coaching staff really appreciated the quality of kids we had in the program and how they responded, helped one another and played pretty good basketball.*

GONE, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Time has passed, but Street's memory still lives on. Davis would coach six more seasons at Iowa, as would Close. Today, Close is in his 10th season serving as an assistant on Bo Ryan's staff at Wisconsin. Ryan was coaching at UW-Platteville when they first met during Close's days at Stanford. They would cross paths again when Ryan brought his sons to Iowa's basketball camps instructed by Close, Pearl and Davis.

Ryan said Street's name had come up in conversations between he and Close over the years "enough" to give him a strong appreciation for Street's impact on the Iowa program.

Ryan: *They did their thing and tried to help every other man that came into the program. When something like that happens, there really aren't words that can change anything. But what you do is you go on by trying to give the best you have to every player you coach. Chris Street was the real deal when it came to practice habits, how he treated people. He was just a solid individual.*

Meanwhile, Iowa has made the concerted effort to ensure that Street continues being remembered. His No. 40 is one of nine jerseys retired by the school. A golf outing in his name is held annually at Finkbine Golf Course. The Chris Michael Street Memorial Foundation was established.

Pearl: *His identity was Iowa basketball. Born and raised. It mattered to him. It still matters. I think it's a great tribute that they continue to keep his spirit alive and well.*

Then there's the Chris Street Award, presented every spring at the Hawkeyes' postseason banquet. Calling it "the most prestigious award" given to anyone within the program is Iowa's current head coach, Fran McCaffery – the same man Street had inadvertently impressed 25 years ago.

McCaffery: *I think what has been awesome is we've kept his memory alive genuinely. People talk about it sometimes, but it doesn't get done, or it is. But this is legit. Everybody knows*

where they were when they found out Chris Street was killed. Everybody remembers him playing like it was yesterday and everybody wants to make sure his family stays engaged as part of the Hawkeye family.

Eric May (current Iowa senior): It's hard to put into words the impact he has had because he's just an iconic figure at Iowa. He symbolizes what I think Iowa basketball is all about, as love for the game, doing whatever you've got to do to win games. I'm just honored to be part of the same thing he was part of.



Walk through the tunnel of Carver-Hawkeye Arena and right next to the Hawkeyes' locker room is a plaque. It features a photo of Street from his playing days at Iowa, along with a poem dedicated in his memory titled "Don't Quit."

May and his current Hawkeye teammates see this plaque every day, yet they're far from the only ones to regularly take notice whenever they walk through that tunnel. Izzo, now in his 18th season as Michigan State's head coach, said he always looks at the Street plaque every time he brings his team to Iowa City.

Izzo: He stands for everything that's right about college basketball. It's hard for me to believe it has been 20 years, but I hope they do it right for him up there. That's a guy you don't want to forget. That's what I think of Chris Street.

BEING REMEMBERED 20 YEARS LATER

Jan. 19, 2013. This Saturday marks the 20th anniversary of Street's death. Before the Big Ten announced its league schedule last August, Iowa submitted a request to the conference about having one of its nine Big Ten home games be specifically scheduled for the exact date so it could, as Izzo said, "do it right."

The Big Ten obliged Iowa with its request to play Saturday at Carver-Hawkeye Arena, but that's as far as the conference went. Television would still dictate what time Iowa played and a computer was to randomly select which Big Ten team would visit Iowa City. The Big Ten Network received TV rights and opted to put the Hawkeyes' game in prime time at 7 p.m. CDT.

And as fate would have it, the opponent randomly chosen by that computer was the Wisconsin Badgers.

Gary Close, the man who played a vital role in Street doing the "unheard of" committing to Iowa as a high-school sophomore, will coach inside Carver-Hawkeye Arena on a night where someone who had – and still has – a heavy influence on him will be honored.

Close: *That's pretty amazing that that would happen. Part of me said, "Hey, that's great, because I'm sure they'll do something to honor him and I'll get a chance to witness it when I probably wouldn't have been able to if we had been playing someone else." So I felt pretty lucky that it had happened. Whatever you want to call it. Fate. It's pretty ironic that our game would fall on that day.*

Street's immediate and extended families are expected to be on hand Saturday, along with a plethora of former players who all played with Street at Iowa. This season, game programs sold at Carver-Hawkeye Arena have included individual posters of current Iowa players. Each program for Saturday's game will feature a poster of Street.

There will also be a tribute video played during halftime,

along with recognition of every Chris Street Award recipient in attendance.

One person who isn't expected to attend though is Davis, who said he'll "be there in spirit" Saturday night. To this day, speaking publicly about Street's death remains a challenge for him. But his growing appreciation for those interested in learning more about Street is what compels Davis to talk about him any chance he's given.

Davis: *I think there will be parts of it that are tough. All of the coaching staff and all of his teammates and the people surrounding the program, I'm sure, will feel the same way about it. It's tough to remember, but it's probably good to remember. It's probably good for all of us to remember back, what he stood for. The celebration of that, I think, is meaningful to me and meaningful to a lot of people. We're grateful for the time that we had with Chris and would appreciate people respecting and honoring him.*

For 40 minutes, Saturday's game between the Hawkeyes and Badgers will have the feel of any other meeting between the two teams. It's the rest of the evening, however, where emotions will reach all-time highs as Iowa pays tribute to No. 40, Chris Street.

McCaffery: *All of us were devastated when it happened, anybody in this sport. This kid's in his prime and he's on his way to what I would think be a 10-15 year NBA career. He sort of epitomized all the qualities that I think you would want in a student-athlete, as a parent, as a fan. I think it was just a very sad day, but one that we have to remember because that's part of who we are.*

Devyn Marble (current Iowa junior): *You don't want to get too overemotional because it hinders your play and judgment on the court. But we're definitely going to be playing for him and his family and hopefully we can get the win that day.*

Ryan: *He was a fellow student-athlete in the Big Ten. It'll be an emotional moment, sure. But then, we're going to play the game that he loved.*