



The Hurryin' Hoosiers freshman class comes with smiles, attitude, and a whole lotta talent. (from left) Bawa Muniru, Jordan Hulls, Derek Elston, Christian Watford, Bobby Capobianco, Maurice Creek.

# The Pressure Is On

IU looks to its 6 freshmen to help resurrect a proud basketball tradition.

By Ron Eid Photography by Jeffrey Hammond

## 'Tis the season

IU students paint their faces crimson and scream into national television cameras; bankers, plumbers, and professors crowd the sports bars and neighborhood pubs from Unionville to Oolitic; sports statistician and Bloomingtonian Jeff Sagarin churns his algorithms and feeds his rankings to news outlets across the country; sportswriter emeritus Bob Hammel observes the progress of the team he covered most of his career; and grandmothers pray that Christian Watford doesn't get the flu.

It's college basketball season in Bloomington. Both the men's and women's programs are in rebuilding years, but the hype (as always) has gone to the men, with six stand-out, first-year freshmen. A preseason ranking by rivals.com called them the best recruiting class in the Big Ten Conference, seventh best in the nation. IU's own website calls it "one of the most important recruiting classes in the history of the program."

After several non-conference games, the team heads into Big Ten Conference play at the end of December. Expectations—and Hoosier Hysteria—are high. For Coach Tom Crean's first recruited freshman class, which many fans hope will resurrect the troubled program, the pressure is on.

## Six extraordinary young men

The six freshmen are Bobby Capobianco, Maurice Creek, Derek Elston, Jordan Hulls, Bawa Muniru, and Christian Watford. From day one, these players say, Coach Crean and his staff have prepared them for Big Ten play by making them mentally and physically tougher. “That’s his main goal,” Creek says with emphasis, “because in the Big Ten there ain’t nothing easy.”

But coaches aren’t the only ones pushing them. Ten of their teammates return from last year, and while they are coming off a disappointing season (6-25)—and are still among the least experienced players in the conference—they bring a determined, hardened, competitive mentality. “Going through what they had to go through last year,” Hulls says, “they have to be mentally tough.”

The upperclassmen have been conveying the importance of toughness to their younger teammates the easy way—“Their biggest quote so far has been ‘Be prepared for anything,’” Capobianco says—and the hard way: “Every time we go up against one of them in a drill, they’re fighting,” Elston says. “Whether it be clean or dirty, they’re getting the job done, because they know they’re not going through [last season’s disappointments] again.”

Or, as Creek puts it, “They convey that to us in any given possible way they can. Just let that be known. From the weight room, to the court, in drills, wherever.”

## A season of growth

After the first exhibition game, Coach Crean said of his newcomers, “I love their mind-set, I love their attitude, I love their desire to get better,” and that the mistakes they make “are all part of the growth process.” Playing college basketball in his program requires commitment, focus, and sacrifice. There isn’t much free time. The freshmen all live on campus in McNutt Quad, which makes them closer, they say. They attend movies together, eat together, and hang out on Kirkwood (“Village Deli rocks,” Capobianco says). As with any band of brothers, there’s a lot of competition among them, whether it’s in practice, video games, or grades.

Here’s a closer look at the freshmen on the IU men’s basketball team—where they come from, their expectations, and how they’ve prepared for the most intense competition of their lives.



Bawa Muniru electrified the crowd with his dunks in early season games. Can he do it against Big Ten teams?

### BAWA MUNIRU

**Hometown:** Tumu, Ghana

**Position:** Center | **Height:** 6’ 10”

**Weight:** 260

Some may say Bawa Muniru is the nicest guy in an IU uniform—maybe in all of college basketball. He seems the most grateful, anyway. In interviews he often thanks his coaches, teammates, fans, and anyone who has helped him, has faith in him, or supports him. After a recent game in which Muniru (pronounced muh-knee-roo) made a crowd-thrilling slam dunk, he said, “I have to give credit to my teammate...who passed me the ball, because he believed I could do it.”

Even before becoming eligible to play for IU in early November, Muniru was highly respected on campus. When he says “I have a lot of goals I want to accomplish,” many believe he will, even if he isn’t necessarily talking about basketball goals.

“When I graduate, I will be an entrepreneur,” says Muniru, who is interested in international business. “I want to go back to Africa and help kids that were in my same situation that I was in until I found the opportunity to come to America.”

Muniru arrived in the U.S. from his native Ghana when he was 13, which is when he began playing basketball. Attending

high school in North Carolina and then in Alabama, about all he knew of IU before he was recruited is that it’s “big-time basketball.”

“Then I started to learn a little bit about the history of it,” he says, “how much the fans love basketball. And that was the kind of environment where I wanted to be. I want to be somewhere where the fans appreciate and enjoy what I like to do.”

Muniru is well aware of the expectations many basketball fans have for him. “I like to think positive most of the time,” he says, “because being a little bit behind in the sport of basketball and not playing it growing up in Africa and the expectations with my stature, it is kind of like a weight on me. But at the same time I’ve learned, with time, it comes to me. No matter how much the expectations of the fans, all I can do is to give it my best. And that’s all I have.”

### MAURICE CREEK

**Hometown:** Oxon Hill, Maryland

**Position:** Guard | **Height:** 6’ 5”

**Weight:** 200

When Maurice Creek was growing up, he was a fan of IU player A.J. Guyton because, he says, “My dad used to love watching him, even though he was a big Georgetown fan.”

But Creek didn’t expect to play for IU. He was first recruited by Crean when Crean was still coaching at Marquette University, and that’s where Creek assumed he would go. “I’ll always remember the day I was watching ESPN and I saw that Coach Crean was moving to Indiana,” he says. “I thought everything was falling apart. But he called me right after that, and said, ‘Nothing’s changed. We’re still loyal to you.’ And that’s when I knew I was coming [to Indiana] and would be loyal to him, just like he’d been loyal to me since my tenth-grade year.”

Because Creek didn’t arrive on campus until the fall semester,

he has had to work harder every day, “trying to catch up with these guys who were here all summer.” Late arrival or not, he is expected to be a leader, eventually, not just of the freshmen but of the entire team. To accomplish that, he says, means he has to “build a relationship with these guys—talking with these guys every day and hanging out with them. You need chemistry for the season.”

Creek hasn’t felt any pressure to perform, and he doesn’t believe others on the team should, either. “There shouldn’t be any pressure to play basketball. There shouldn’t be any pressure for people to step up and do their jobs. You do what

you got to do.” Creek says that, even before he arrived in town, he expected his 7th-ranked freshman class to get a lot of attention, locally and nationally. But it didn’t bother him. “We got a great group of guys here.... We look at it as going out there and working even harder. We want to be the number-one freshman recruiting class.”

With all the extra work, one would think that finding time for his girlfriend, an IU student, would be tough. “It *has* been tough,” he says. “She’s a busy woman. We’re both busy, but we’re making it through.”

Despite not arriving until the fall semester, Maurice Creek played well in early season games.



## JORDAN HULLS

**Hometown:** Bloomington, Indiana  
**Position:** Guard | **Height:** 6' 0"  
**Weight:** 170

Before the school year started, no freshman was as familiar with his teammates as Jordan Hulls. "I played with all these guys a lot before we even got on campus," he says. He and Bobby Capobianco were on the same AAU team since 8th grade; he played with Maurice Creek and Christian Watford in the Kentucky Derby Festival All-Star game; and he played against Derek Elston in the Indiana North/South All-Star game and with him in the Indiana/Kentucky All-Star series.

Hulls is also the most familiar among Hoosier fans. His Bloomington High School South Panthers were ranked #3 in the nation last year, finishing with a



Jordan Hulls on defense against St. Joseph's.

26-0 record and the state championship, and Hulls was named the 2009 Indiana Mr. Basketball. This year, he says, there has been pressure to perform—not only on him but on the entire team. "I don't think it's a bad kind of pressure. I think it's a good kind of pressure. The whole town of Bloomington is not going to support just me but the whole team."

Hulls is grateful for the support he's received, even when fans were "encouraging me to commit to IU by writing on my car.... It was kind of funny."

Hulls had a 3.94 GPA in high school and is frequently touted for his "high basketball IQ." He definitely has the genes. If they had an award for Indiana Basketball Family, his would surely win. His mother, Joni, was an all-state player at Bloomington North. His father, J.C., played high school basketball, and they both played at Vincennes University. His grandfather John Hulls "grew up with Coach Knight and coached with him at Army," Jordan says. "Then they moved to IU and he coached here." His maternal grandmother played college basketball at Iowa, as did his maternal grandfather. His older brother, Jay, played college basketball for one year, and his younger sister Kaila, a junior at Bloomington South, "is an up-and-coming player," he says. Hulls sums up his lineage simply: "That's pretty much the life for us. That's all I've ever known."



Bobby Capobianco's personal plan is to be "big and nasty" in games and practice.

## BOBBY CAPOBIANCO

**Hometown:** Loveland, Ohio  
**Position:** Forward | **Height:** 6' 9"  
**Weight:** 230

In Loveland, Ohio, just outside of Cincinnati, Bobby Capobianco became his high school's all-time leading scorer, rebounder, and shot blocker. When asked if he plans to challenge any of those stats at IU, he replies, "All three. I plan on running the table, setting every single record." Joking aside, his actual intention is more pragmatic: "I'm here to contribute in any way that I can.... I'd like to leave here as the player with the most wins under his belt, or the most national championships, or with something that really means something to this program."

Capobianco is one of the more physical players on the team, but he knows his role is defined by Coach Crean. "I'm going to

do whatever he tells me to do, but my personal plan is to be big and nasty—go out and set a lot of hard screens, rebound the ball, score in the paint....I'm going to try and out-work everybody I go up against out on the floor, because it's just naturally how I play."

After all the work and preparation, Capobianco believes his team is ready for Big Ten play. "You're probably not going to run up against six mentally and physically tougher freshmen. We're going out there not to play as freshmen, not to be scared," he says. "By the start of the Big Ten season, we'll have played games in Puerto Rico, in Madison Square Garden, have played Kentucky and Maryland here....By that point, I don't think you can talk about six freshmen any more after those games. You're no longer walking in a complete new guy."



Derek Elston may have been timid in his first few workouts at IU, but his aggressive play has made him a fan favorite.

## DEREK ELSTON

**Hometown:** Tipton, Indiana  
**Position:** Forward | **Height:** 6' 9"  
**Weight:** 220

Derek Elston grew up in Tipton, Indiana, less than 50 miles from Purdue University. But because his father Darrell played basketball at the University of North Carolina (and later in the NBA), North Carolina was his team "from the get-go," he says. "I'd been following them my whole life, and everything about them I just loved."

Coming out of high school, Elston was ranked one of the top 25 power forwards in the nation. Which, he says, means very little. "Your high school ranking only goes so far. Once you get into college, everybody forgets that and you're just another player."

And yet Elston says that playing high school basketball in Indiana—even for a school the size of Tipton High School (fewer than 150 in its 2009 graduating class)—helped him become more competitive. "The smallest teams you play in high school here are some of the toughest teams you'll go up against, because no one around here likes to lose," he says.

Did he feel compelled to tell his out-of-state teammates about the state of Hoosier Hysteria? "I didn't have to," he says. "They've come up to me and told me how Indiana basketball is so competi-

tive—and how everybody around this area is in love with the game and treat it with so much respect."

Moving from a town of 6,000 to a campus of nearly 40,000 was an adjustment for Elston. Off the court, he says, "I just put my headphones in and walk to class." And he admits to being "timid" in the first few practices. After the first exhibition game, though, Crean called the 220-pounder "fearless" and was impressed with his on-court awareness and hustle.

The all star from Tipton even sounds ready to play his new intra-state rival, Purdue. "A kid from my high school walked on there," he says. "Seeing him [Kyle Coleman] in the warm-ups will be fun. But afterwards, it's game time. We'll be friends for about ten minutes. After that...."



## CHRISTIAN WATFORD

**Hometown:** Birmingham, Alabama | **Position:** Forward  
**Height:** 6' 8" | **Weight:** 215

Christian Watford arrived at IU from his hometown of Birmingham, Alabama, as the highest ranked of his freshman teammates. ESPN placed him #4 of all freshman forwards in the country. He is also considered the most versatile, due to his shooting and rebounding skills and his all-around athletic ability. And having earned a 3.5 GPA in high

school, it's no wonder great things are expected. As the marquee recruit of IU's freshman class, does he feel extra pressure to perform on the court?

"There's no pressure in playing basketball," he says. "I've been doing it my whole life."

His biggest challenge, he says, has been "trying to balance everything between classes and basketball. You really don't have any free time, so you just got to balance it out."

Coach Crean recognized his potential when Watford was a sophomore in high school. But Watford also considered the universities of Arizona, Kentucky, Louisville, and Memphis. He watched IU basketball when he was growing up, he says, "but never thought in a million years I'd be here." In high school, he thought he was heading for Milwaukee, not Bloomington.

"Coach Crean was recruiting me at Marquette," Watford says, "and he fell in a great place. I felt like this was where it was at."

Watford knew nothing about Bloomington before he arrived and soon found it had little in common with Birmingham. "I didn't know anything about it," he says. "It's nice. It's a small town. Coming from the city, it's different, but I'm getting used to it." He also had little experience with the Midwest. "I knew it was cold," he says. "I'm experiencing that right now."

As if a basketball player's schedule isn't challenging enough, Watford has also had to manage a long-distance relationship with his girlfriend. "She's back home," he says. "It's tough, but we're making it." ❄

So far Christian Watford is living up to his billing as ESPN's #4 freshman forward in the country.