

Schoffel column: Seminoles making most of stretch run

By Ira Schoffel
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Tallahassee Democrat

This isn't where seniors Ian Miller, Okaro White and Robert Gilchrist wanted to be playing right now. Heck, this isn't where anyone on Florida State's roster wanted to be playing.

But you never would have known that Monday night at the Civic Center.

Determined to prove they should have been one of the 68 teams selected for the NCAA Tournament, and motivated to rack up as many wins as possible before this season ends, the Seminoles played perhaps their best game of the year in a 101-90 victory against visiting Georgetown.

The win pushes Leonard Hamilton's team to 21-13 on the season, and gives the 'Noles victories in six of their last eight games. They now need just one more win — Wednesday night against visiting Louisiana Tech — to advance to the NIT Final Four at Madison Square Garden.

And on Monday, they did it in style.

Playing before a spirited crowd of 3,541, Florida State was dynamic on offense, raining 3-pointers and throwing down highlight-reel dunks.

The Seminoles were very good on the boards, out-rebounding the rough-and-tumble Hoyas by three.

And they were just good enough on defense to open a 13-point lead at halftime and never let Georgetown claw any closer than eight points the rest of the way.

The Tallahassee-Leon County Civic Center hasn't rocked very much this season, but Monday's general admission crowd got more than its money's worth.

Sophomore guard Aaron Thomas continued showing why he will be one of the ACC's most feared scorers next season, finishing with 26 points on 8-of-10 shooting.

Sophomore point guard Devon Bookert might have delivered his best performance to date, scoring a career-high 21 points and tying a career high with nine assists.

And Miller and White did everything Hamilton could have asked of his two star seniors. They were efficient, they competed the way seniors should compete when it might be their last collegiate games, and they provided a steadying brand of leadership against a Georgetown team that was pulling out all the stops.

The pesky Hoyas tried a variety of zone defenses and full-court presses to get FSU off-balance. They attempted to be physical on the perimeter and in the paint. They trapped FSU's ballhandlers in every corner of the court. But the Seminoles never faltered.

"They were making 3s no matter what defense we threw at them," Georgetown coach John Thompson III said. "They hit a couple (shots early), then they got their rhythm and their confidence. We tried a little bit of everything ... and nothing was really effective today."

The Seminoles scored 48 points in the first half and 53 in the second. Their 101-point total was 15 more than any opponent had scored against the Hoyas all season; Kansas finished with 86 against them back in early December. And no opponent had cracked 80 points against them in more than a month.

So, yeah, scoring 101 was mighty impressive.

Is that performance diminished because it came in the NIT instead of the NCAA Tournament?

Well, yeah, to some degree. But there's something to be said for making the most of your situation, and this

Seminole squad is doing that and then some.

We all know this season didn't go the way FSU's players, coaches or fans had hoped, but there's nothing the Seminoles can do about that now. What they can do is make the most of the minutes they have left. And what we saw on Monday was a team determined to do just that.

Henry column: FSU's Hamilton not coaching by the book

Seminole coach settling in on player rotations

Jan. 2, 2014 | 0 Comments

Leonard Hamilton is not coaching by the book this season.

For instance, the veteran Florida State men's basketball coach isn't following standard instructional material that suggests a team's starting five should be its five best players.

Or that a coach needs a complicated or intricate system to win games.

As the Seminoles' non-conference schedule gives way to Atlantic Coast Conference play, starting Saturday at home against Virginia, Hamilton's interesting approach on how he uses his personnel is paying dividends.

He enjoys nothing better than working out ways for his team to beat yours.

"Our starters come in after the game starts," Hamilton said following Monday's 67-59 home win over Charleston Southern.

"We don't have a traditional starting five."

Traditions, records and eggs are meant to be broken.

When the basketball is tossed up for the opening tip-off, Hamilton's best offensive player in senior guard Ian Miller and best defender in sophomore guard Aaron Thomas are next to him on the bench.

That's by X-and-O design.

Only Duke and North Carolina have won more ACC games than FSU over the past eight seasons, so it's not like Hamilton is playing a shell game.

There's no guessing here.

Hamilton's strategic decision to rotate Miller and Thomas into games after the opening few minutes gives the Seminoles a nice boost. And sets up further substitutions.

In Monday's victory, the duo combined for 34 points. Miller scored 11 of his 15 points in the first half; Thomas 14 of his game-high 19 points in the second half.

Still, there's plenty more valuable pieces to Hamilton's cool puzzle.

Unlike last season, when the Seminoles missed the NCAA Tournament, this year's team (9-3) has handled adjustments and player rotations.

FSU's versatility has also given it advantages on the perimeter and the block. The lineup can go big or small. Mix in the unique combo of 7-foot-3 Boris Bojanovsky and 7-foot-1 Michael Ojo at center, and whola.

The plan has led to an improved defense, mindset and confidence.

"They are a very difficult team to guard; their size is astounding," Charleston Southern coach Barclay Radebaugh marveled.

"I've never seen size like that on a college team. I thought our guys played with tremendous toughness against a monster of a team."

It remains to be seen if the Seminoles produce fear by their appearance or actions in the ACC, but they have the talent to bounce back from last year's season that still saw the program win 18 games.

Take Monday, for example.

The victory was an important learning experience, not a keepsake for Shutterfly.

The Buccaneers tried to widen the floor and launched treys with NASA ferocity, 29 total.

FSU, on a modest four-game win streak, didn't play particularly well either.

Senior forward Okaro White, one of the team's top players, was 1 of 5 from the floor and finished with two points. Miller was 2 of 7 from beyond the arc. Point guard Devon Bookert, despite finishing with a career-high nine assists and a team-high seven boards, missed all five of his three-point attempts.

Then there were the turnovers.

Even Hamilton smiled and said you can't coach against or make some of these up.

Three consecutive turnovers over a 60-second span late in the game helped the Bucs slice a double-digit deficit into nearly a slice of humble pie for the Seminoles.

"If you can win when your players are not at their very best, that's significant," Hamilton said.

While certainly a sign of progress – FSU, thanks to its strength of schedule, has placed itself in solid position for a return trip to the NCAA Tournament for these resume-building wins – the ACC might not be as forgiving.

That's why Hamilton said his team had to quickly turn its attention to the visiting Cavaliers (9-4).

While UVa, always noted for its suffocating defense, suffered a 35-point defeat (87-52) at Tennessee on Monday, Hamilton believes that's an aberration. He said the Cavs are much improved from last season.

And we all know what happened when FSU visited Charlottesville, Va., a year ago.

"All I have to do is look at last year's film up there, where they gave us our hat and showed us where the door was," Hamilton said of the 56-36 loss.

The door may have hit FSU on the its rump on the way out, but this is a different FSU team.

It's better. It's tougher. It's versatile.

Hamilton might not be coaching by the book in all instances, but his adjustments have put the Seminoles in position to win.

FSU guards carrying a heavier load

Seminoles' perimeter players forced to play major minutes down stretch

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Written by

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Here's how rare it is for one of Leonard Hamilton's players to be on the court for all 40 minutes.

Until Monday night, it had only happened twice in the last six years for the Florida State men's basketball team. Michael Snaer played the entire game against Louisiana Tech in the NIT a season ago, and Derwin Kitchen did the same vs. Baylor in a tournament at Hawaii in November of 2010.

That's the company Aaron Thomas joined on Monday night.

Not even Toney Douglas, during his remarkable All-ACC season in 2009, played all 40 minutes of regulation like the sophomore Thomas did in an 81-75 loss to North Carolina at the Civic Center.

"I thought he held up pretty good," Hamilton said of Thomas, who scored 16 points on 6-of-19 shooting from the floor. "But it takes a toll on you fighting through a screen, contesting a shot, getting back on defense. Sometimes that's the nature of the game.

"But that's who we are this year. We can't make any excuses for it. We've just got to play through it."

Not only did Thomas play all 40, but senior Ian Miller played 37 in his first start and sophomore Montay Brandon was on the court for 36 minutes for the Seminoles (15-11 overall, 6-8 in the ACC). The trio also averaged 35 minutes between them in the win at Wake Forest on Saturday.

The way Hamilton talked on Monday night after the game, the three perimeter players will likely be getting similar minutes from here on out.

"Now they understand the challenge for them will be to get more rest, take care of their bodies, more cold tubs," Hamilton said. "In order for us to be successful against the type of teams we're playing against, we're going to have to make some adjustments in trying to maintain the level of health we need in order to play those major minutes."

With Okaro White being moved to the power forward spot, there simply aren't a lot of options for Hamilton and his staff on the perimeter right now.

Slumping sophomore Devon Bookert, who has started 23 games at point guard this season, played just seven minutes on Monday night — after playing only 17 at Wake Forest. His struggles have compound the lack of depth for the Seminoles, who lost highly rated freshman Xavier Rathan-Mayes to eligibility issues before the season began.

Thomas, for instance, has played 40, 39, 36 and 38 minutes, respectively, the last four games. The Seminoles' leading scorer, who is also their best perimeter defender, admitted he could feel the fatigue late in the game on Monday night.

"You do," said Thomas, who is averaging 13.6 points per game. "It's all a mindset though. I think I did a good job of staying strong mentally even though I knew I was playing a lot of minutes. I was trying to play hard on every possession."

It's not ideal by any means. Hamilton said he would prefer his best players to be on the floor "around 28, 29 minutes," in order for them to play as hard as they possibly can on every possession. On both ends of the court.

Instead, Thomas is practically never coming off the court. And recently, Miller and Brandon haven't been on the bench much either.

"Moving Okaro to the '4' position takes away the rotation," Hamilton said. "This is who we are this particular year. That's the hand that's been dealt to us. We have to play through it and learn from it. As we move on to the future, I think we'll solve that challenge, but this year (they're) going to have to play major minutes. ...

"We have to find a way to finish strong. And most kids like playing a lot anyway."

Florida State plays at Pitt on Sunday night and then gets a week off before hosting Georgia Tech the following Sunday.

FSU defense returns to form as young centers begin to blossom 7-footers Boris Bojanovsky and Michael Ojo have overwhelmed opponents with their length

By Brendan Sonnone, Orlando Sentinel
January 17, 2014

TALLAHASSEE – Before the season started, Florida State coach Leonard Hamilton wrote down a list of key defensive statistics from the previous year on a whiteboard.

The numbers were meant to serve as a not-so-gentle reminder to FSU players about the disappointment of the 2013 campaign and the drastic disintegration of a once great defense.

Hamilton-coaches teams traditionally do well in opponent field-goal percentage, blocked shots, points per game, but the Seminoles suffered a major setback last year.

Quietly, FSU's defense has returned to prominence.

Two sophomore centers are leading the Seminoles' defensive resurgence: Boris Bojanovsky and Michael Ojo.

"Last year, we were bad on defense," Bojanovsky said. "I think all the time we've spent together, down the stretch it helps. ... We're more used to playing together, so that's why we're more confident on defense."

The Seminoles look to avenge their only conference loss Saturday at noon when they play at Virginia.

FSU's is third in opponent field-goal percentage (36.3), 10th in blocked shots per game (6.7) and 25th in points allowed per game (62.4) in the ACC. In four conference games, FSU has held opponents to 33 percent shooting from the field.

While FSU is collectively playing better team defense, Bojanovsky (7-3, 24) and Ojo (7-1, 290) have stepped up in recent weeks and are wreaking havoc on opposing offenses with their length.

"You shoot floaters, you don't try to dunk on them," FSU guard Montay Brandon said. "You hope to shoot floaters and get over them, because they try to block everything."

In turn, the presence inside allows FSU's wing players to be more aggressive on the perimeter.

Bojanovsky is averaging 2.2 blocks per game, 56th in the country. Ojo, coming off the bench, is averaging 1.3 blocks, a full block more than what he averaged last season.

"Last year they did what we told them to do, but they didn't really understand why we were running the type of system that we are," Hamilton said.

As a result, FSU's defense sputtered. The Seminoles gave up 68.6 points per game and allowed opponents to shoot an average of 43.7 percent on field goals, ranked 221st nationally. It was a steep decline from FSU teams that led the country in defensive field goal percentage in both 2010 and 2011.

"We've been here for over a year now, so we've come a long way in learning the defensive system, where we should be on the ball, how we should defend ball screens, defensive rotations," Ojo said.

Last season, Bojanovsky and Ojo were two players trying to find themselves.

Bojanovsky, from Slovakia, was used to playing with more finesse.

"He'll find himself not maybe sprinting back on defense because maybe we fast-break a little more than maybe they do in Europe," Hamilton said. "Sometimes he'll find himself relaxing when the ball goes up."

"Most of his adjustments have been more mental than they have been physical."

Ojo, on the other hand, came from Africa and had very little experience playing basketball.

"He wanted it so bad, he was trying so hard, he was so emotionally involved the game that he was overanxious," Hamilton said.

The centers are far from finished products, but their new-found comfort level in FSU's defensive scheme has changed the Seminoles' outlook.

"Defensively, we may have dug ourselves out of a hole," Hamilton said. "But we still have a long ways to go."

FSU men's basketball defense back among the best

FSU's 'Junkyard D' ranked in top 10 as team approaches ACC play

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Written by

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Leonard Hamilton and his staff made it very clear to their young team over the summer. They had to play better defense — much better defense — if they wanted to have a successful season.

Before the team began summer practices, the Florida State men's basketball staff put defensive statistics on a white dry-erase board in front of the team's meeting room. They pointed out last year's stats from a team that finished 18-16 overall and 9-9 in the Atlantic Coast Conference.

Then they showed the group, which includes seven second-year players and a freshman, the defensive statistics from some of Hamilton's most successful teams.

In his 27th season as a head basketball coach, and 12th year leading FSU, Hamilton's teams have become known for their "Junkyard D" defensive system and long shot-blocking centers.

But after four consecutive seasons of finishing in the top 11 nationally for both field-goal percentage defense and blocked shots per game, the Seminoles' streak came to an abrupt end last season.

FSU fell to 221st in field-goal percentage defense and 26th in blocked shots.

Entering tonight's final non-conference game against Charleston Southern (5-6), the Seminoles (8-3) are back in the top 11 of both categories.

"There was no doubt that we had to improve in those areas in order for us to be successful," Hamilton said. "We pointed that out to them — loud and clear."

The Seminoles, who are holding opponents to 37.4 percent shooting, are currently ranked No. 9 in field goal-percentage defense and No. 11 in blocked shots per game.

"Last year it woke us up for real as far as defense," sophomore guard Aaron Thomas said. "Last year we were like 220-something in the country, and that's not what Florida State's known for on defense."

When the Seminoles won the ACC championship in 2011, their .363 mark in field-goal percentage defense not only led the nation, but was the best in the ACC since 1960 — a span of more than 50 years. This FSU team has held three of its last four opponents below 36 percent shooting. In the team's most recent victory over UMass., the Seminoles held the Minutemen to 33.3 percent shooting and had a season-high 12 blocks.

“Everyone was surprised at the stats, because they kept preaching about last year how bad we were,” senior forward Okaro White said. “We’re taking pride in our defense this year.”

The team credits their summer trip to Greece, during which they practiced and played with the country’s national team, for their improved chemistry on the court.

“Those guys were professionals and we were playing actual team-D against them,” Thomas said. “So we feel like we can do it against them, we can do it against anybody. We’ve just stuck with it from that point on.”

Coming off impressive victories over Charlotte and UMass., prior to the team’s week-long holiday break, the Seminoles say it is important to keep the defensive momentum going as they wrap up their non-conference schedule tonight against the Buccaneers.

“We’re still not where we want to be,” White said. “We want to be No. 1 (defensively). So we’ve got to work to get there.”

FSU opens ACC play Saturday at home against Virginia.

“We were picked to finish ninth (in the conference),” Hamilton said. “We don’t have any plans to be in that position.”

Two Sport Athletes Find Balance Beyond Football

Ben Jones

Warchant.com Staff Writer

There's more to Florida State than just football for many Seminole athletes these days.

For Jameis Winston, there's baseball. For Marquez White there's basketball. For Jalen Ramsey John Franklin, there's track and field. When one season ends, another begins.

"If you're talented in both sports, why not help out the school at both?" Franklin said.

Competing in two sports was a significant factor for all four of those athletes as they made their college decisions. Each chose Florida State in part for the opportunity to pursue opportunities outside of football. Now the entire athletic department is reaping the rewards.

It's a process that begins early in the recruiting process, when prospects first broach the subject of playing more than one sport with head coach Jimbo Fisher. Florida State built a reputation for supporting athletes participating in multiple sports dating back to stars like Deion Sanders and Charlie Ward while Bobby Bowden coached the Seminoles from 1976-2009, and Fisher continued that tradition.

"I just want a young man to have the opportunity to do what he wants to do," FSU baseball coach Mike Martin said. "That's why it's so encouraging to have somebody like Jimbo Fisher and Bobby Bowden doing what they've done with football and baseball ... It's neat that Jimbo played baseball and football and if a guy wants to pursue it, he never gets in the way."

Football First

The process for playing more than one sport begins early in the recruiting cycle. If a football prospect wants to participate in more than one sport, it's discussed with Fisher long before the player ever reaches campus.

If playing two sports is a priority, the athlete makes that clear. For players who are serious about playing two sports, schools that will allow them to do that can often move ahead in the recruiting process.

"I won't say it was a deal-breaker, but being able to continue my track career was important to me," said Ramsey, a defensive back who also competes in the long jump. "I did look at schools that were allowing me to do that a little more closely."

The football coaches can then use coaches from elsewhere in the athletic department to help during their recruitment. Track and field coach Bob Braman will talk with recruits as they visit campus about participating in both sports, and two-sport athletes often host recruits who want to do the same thing on visits. It's an extra voice in the recruiting process for Florida State, which can give the Seminoles an advantage with some high school players. In a few other cases, athletes may be recruited by another sport at FSU before the football program takes an interest. White, a backup point guard and cornerback, first began hearing from FSU basketball coach Leonard Hamilton during his sophomore year of high school in Alabama. Braman has pointed out exceptional track and field athletes in rare circumstances who were also highly-rated football prospects.

But in most cases, the process begins with football. That's in line with how the athletes are treated when they arrive on campus. They're at Florida State on a football scholarship, and football remains the priority.

"They're football-first athletes and we understand that," Braman said. "But they're track guys and that's a big part of their decision. They're like 'I've always done track, I want to keep doing track.'"

Winston didn't join the baseball team full-time until a week after the national championship game, long after his teammates had begun practicing. White spent summer with the football team and arrived at basketball practice after ACC play had already begun. Braman said freshman Levonte Whitfield hasn't joined the track team yet this spring because of some bumps and bruises sustained during football season, and they won't press him to begin practicing until he feels he's ready.

Athletes also maintain the conditioning they need for football season. Franklin has gained 12 pounds since arriving on campus to help prepare his body for football season.

"When football is healthy, the whole athletic department is healthy," Braman said. "We all get a bounce from the highest-profile sport being national champions. There's no question we all get a bounce from that. Florida State becomes a really cool place to be."

Even when football takes priority, other sports receive a dramatic boost from athletes playing both sports. Winston raises the profile of the nationally-ranked baseball team. White becomes an important part of the basketball program behind the scenes. Ramsey recorded a long jump of 24 feet 11 inches in his first collegiate meet, the eighth-best mark in the nation this year at the time. Franklin ran the 60-meter dash in 6.82 seconds at an indoor meet in January and should be competitive at the conference level.

"It's a symbiotic thing," Braman said.

That's especially true for sports like track and field, where resources are limited. Braman has 12.6 scholarships to distribute among his male track and field athletes, which lists 44 athletes on the roster for this year. Ramsey is on a full football scholarship and doesn't count against that limit, but can still help the track and field program compete for a national championship.

The same is true for baseball, which is allocated 11.7 scholarships for the team. Winston is a preseason third-team All-American serving as the Seminoles' full-time closer, and he can also play the outfield and DH. He started 32 games as an offensive player in 2012 and pitched 27 innings in 17 relief appearances - often while splitting time with spring football practice.

White has only played in one game for the basketball team this year as he tries to pick up the nuances of FSU's system, but he's invaluable as a practice player. His athleticism provides a look that the Seminoles' walk-ons can't, and he'll have the ability to contribute as a point guard later in his career as he spends more time with the team.

"(White) is very valuable," Hamilton said. "He helps us tremendously in practice while he's learning. I'm so happy he's with us, and he's doing a wonderful job for us."

Winston, of course, is a special case. The Heisman trophy winner hasn't just helped the football and baseball programs, but has elevated the profile of the athletic department and the university as a whole.

His baseball teammates spent the fall watching his success on the football field and took it as a challenge to win a championship of their own. He pitched three scoreless innings in FSU's first four baseball games.

"After I won the Heisman I think a lot of people were thinking I wouldn't set foot on a baseball field, but I love this game, too," Winston said before baseball season. "That's what some people fail to realize, some people don't understand that after football season I've got to go to baseball."

Balancing Act

Participating in both may have been an easy decision for athletes during the recruiting process, but it can become more complicated once they reach campus. While their teammates have an offseason, they go directly into another season.

They split their time between classes, football conditioning and their second sport. There's no way to ease from one sport into the next. When Winston, Ramsey and Franklin leave the national champion football team, they join a track and field program and baseball team that also have designs on national championships.

"I don't like to sit still," Franklin said. "I get bored real easily. If I had too much downtime, I wouldn't know what to do with it. I'd bore myself to death. Doing two sports and making me go to practice, it keeps me busy and keeps me going. I'm away from football right now, but I'm preparing myself for football while I'm doing track."

There's still a tremendous payoff for those who can do both. Ramsey and Franklin don't have any visions of going pro in track and field, but the benefits of competing in college are clear.

Speed is critical on the football field at their positions, and they've both gotten faster since arriving at FSU. Ramsey and Franklin both just finished their first year with the football team, but that extra speed can make a huge difference down the road when they begin their NFL careers.

"Those tenths of a second at the (NFL) combine can be hundreds of thousands of dollars," Ramsey said. "As long as I keep working with track in my years here, when I get to the NFL combine and run the 40 for professional teams, I can really impress people with my speed."

Winston's goal has been to play both football and baseball professionally all along. He was drafted in the 15th round by the Texas Rangers after his high school career, and reiterated his desire to continue playing both last month. For others, it's simply a matter of trying to take advantage of every opportunity available. Playing football and basketball is a challenge for White, but it's one he's never shied away from.

"I think about it every day, but I only have one shot at college and one chance to do that," White said. "I'm trying to make history. Trying to be different. That's what really pushes me."

Future Stars

Winston, White, Ramsey and Franklin may be following in the footsteps of athletes like Sanders and Ward, but they won't be the last to play multiple sports at Florida State. Running back Jonathan Vicker, who signed with the Seminoles earlier this month, has said he wants to play baseball as well in college. Defensive tackle signee Frederick Jones won the Class 2A state title in shot put in 2012 and 2013 and could join the track and field team.

"We know it's a long-term thing," Braman said. "If we keep working together, along the way we're going to get some benefits and certainly along the way they're going to get some benefits."

Hamilton said it's becoming more difficult for athletes to participate in more than one sport as football takes up more time year-round, but there are still opportunities. That's always been the case at Florida State, and there's no sign of it stopping.

Fisher makes it clear that he's open to players participating in more than one sport. That opens possibilities for football, for the rest of the athletic department and for the athletes themselves.

"I came to Florida State to play football and baseball and getting the amount of support from both sides, it means a lot as a player and as a person," Winston said. "You gain respect for those people and it makes everything easier for you to do, because it's not stressful."

It may not be stressful, but it's also not easy. Playing two sports is part of these athletes' identities, just like a tradition of two-sport athletes is part of Florida State's identity.

"If you want to be great in the long run, it's a great investment," Ramsey said. "If you can do two sports, then do it, but it's not for everybody."

FSU men's basketball: Ready at all times Hamilton confident in walk-ons Hopkins, White and Allen

By Jim Henry
Tallahassee Democrat
March 22, 2014

The only time most walk-ons see the floor after the opening tip is when the game's outcome is well in hand – win or lose.

That hasn't been the case for the Florida State men's basketball team late this season. The Seminoles' depth has been severely tested due to injuries.

In fact, in FSU's 58-53 win over Florida Gulf Coast University last Tuesday at the Civic Center, walk-on Marquez White was inserted into the game at the 14:01 mark in the first half by coach Leonard Hamilton.

Fellow walk-on Joell Hopkins checked in two minutes later. Brandon Allen, another walk-on, entered at the 9:36 mark for Hopkins.

By game's end, the trio combined to give the Seminoles (20-13) 10 quality minutes and helped FSU advance into Monday's NIT second round against visiting Georgetown.

"We are not extremely deep, and we could have to go in at any time," Allen said. "Coach Hamilton encourages us to stay ready at all times."

While Allen, Hopkins and White share a common bond as walk-ons, each traveled different paths to FSU.

Allen, whose father Randy played at FSU (1984-87) and ranks No. 14 on the all-time scoring list, joined the Seminoles this season after three years in minor-league baseball as a pitcher.

Hopkins, who played AAU basketball as a youth in North Carolina with Seminole teammate Ian Miller, played one season at Tallahassee Community College and redshirted last year at FSU.

And White, on football scholarship at FSU, joined the basketball team in mid-January after the freshman defensive back played in 13 of 14 football games and helped the Seminoles capture the program's third national title.

"We all know our names might get called at any time," Hopkins said.

"We've all been playing basketball all of our lives, and we are just happy we are getting the opportunity to contribute."

Hamilton credits the players' work ethic and preparation and says the staff has carefully watched their progress in practice. Allen (6-foot-6) and Hopkins (6-6) are forwards, while White (6-foot) plays guard.

Each player also boasts different strengths.

Allen is known for his keen shooting eye.

Hopkins helps with shot blocking and rebounding.

And White, despite his late arrival to the team, is a tenacious defender on the perimeter. Hamilton, in fact, said White would log significant minutes if he had been with the team over the entire season.

The trio has combined to make 6 of 12 field goals and each has averaged around two minutes of playing time per game. Quality counts.

Against FGCU, the Seminoles were without injured starting guard Ian Miller (foot) and center Michael Ojo (knee) was limited to five minutes.

Hamilton said his team had to "re-invent itself" due to the different player combinations on the floor, but he remained confident when FSU's walk-ons were in the game. The trio helped FSU hold a 24-19 advantage at the half. White also played three minutes in the second half.

"I am comfortable now with those guys giving a spell for the starters if we can find the right moments and flow (of game)," Hamilton said.

"I don't feel that we are going to be hurting, especially with Marquez and Joel on the defensive end. And I really believe any time Brandon gets an open look, I feel like it's going in."

Allen, 22, says he feels more comfortable on the floor after three years away from basketball.

The right-handed pitcher from Milton was an 18th-round selection of the San Francisco Giants in 2010. He reached Low-A in the Giants organization, throwing 101 career innings in 19 starts with three wins.

"I was probably impatient but I wanted to play basketball," said Allen, a freshman.

"Every year, in March, I am in spring training and I am watching all these crazy (NCAA Tournament) games and I am like, 'Man, I could be doing something crazy like that.' I just missed basketball."

Hopkins, a Durham, N.C., native, played in 28 games during the 2011-12 season at TCC, helping the Eagles to a 15-13 record. He transferred to FSU and was a valuable member of the scout team last season. The sophomore has patiently waited his time. "It's just a matter of being mentally ready and getting out there and contributing where needed," Hopkins said.

"You have to ready to go at any time."

White knows the feeling.

The freshman, who contributed primarily on special teams last season, has split time between basketball and football practice with the start of spring football last Wednesday.

Interestingly, White first impressed FSU basketball coaches when he attended a summer team camp at FSU during his sophomore season at Northview High in Dothan, Ala.

White made an unofficial visit to FSU in 2011 as a basketball player.

"I caught a couple eyes during that team camp here, and we've kind of stayed in touch," White said.

"When I got here, coach Fisher (Jimbo, FSU football coach) told me I could do both. I was able to handle my business on the field and in the classroom. It feels good to contribute in basketball, especially knowing how hard we put in the work in practice.

"We know everyone is going to have to contribute, and you have to be ready."

FSU's Thomas showing signs of being elite scorer Sophomore currently leads the Seminoles in scoring

By Corey Clark
Tallahassee Democrat
February 14, 2014

It's all there.

The leaping ability, the quickness, the ever-improving jump shot, the competitiveness – they're all a part of Aaron Thomas' game. And they're all a part of why the Florida State guard has become the Seminoles' leading scorer, averaging 13.3 points per game heading into Saturday night's matchup with Wake Forest.

"Aaron is an extremely confident person," FSU head coach Leonard Hamilton said. "He has that rare combination of athleticism, quickness, body strength and power. But mentally and emotionally he's maturing. Some guys have a bad game and they lose their confidence. He's confident. He's a good teammate. He's unselfish.

"And the good thing about him is that his best basketball is still ahead of him. He's growing and developing." Hamilton thinks Thomas has the ability to average 20 points per game before he leaves Tallahassee.

And with good reason. The Ohio native has always had elite athleticism and a knack for scoring at the rim. This season he has showcased a vastly improved jumper, and is currently shooting a team-best 47.4 percent from 3-point range.

Last season Thomas shot just 22 percent, making 9 of 41 from beyond the arc.

"My jump shot was real bad last year – it was the mechanics," he said. "Last year my elbow was out, this year I'm getting my elbow more in. My follow-through has gotten a lot better. I'm just getting a lot of shots up. Every day. Sometimes I might come in and shoot 500. Sometimes I might shoot 100 before I leave practice. Just a lot of shots."

It's paying off.

After making only one 3-pointer in the first seven games of the season, Thomas has hit 26 of his last 50. And he's made 21 of 38 over the Seminoles' last 10 games.

That hot shooting is why Thomas is currently averaging 13.7 points per game in conference play. Take away a frustrating, foul-ridden two-point effort at Duke and the sophomore is scoring 14.8 points per game against ACC teams.

He scored 24 against Virginia Tech, 20 against Notre Dame and earlier this season put 26 on Charlotte. In just 22 minutes.

It's the type of player Hamilton was expecting when he signed him from the Brewster Academy (N.H.).

But it's not quite the type of player he got a season ago. Thomas had his moments for the Seminoles in 2013, scoring 49 points during a three-game stretch in the non-conference schedule, but he also had plenty of games where he barely made an impact. He averaged just 4.8 points per game in ACC play as a freshman.

"It was tough," Thomas said. "I've always had that type of ability to put the ball in the hole, and last year I wasn't able to show that. I showed spurts that I could score, but I had a lack of aggression and a lack of confidence."

That Aaron Thomas is nowhere to be found anymore.

In his place is an Aaron Thomas seemingly on the brink of stardom. He leads the Seminoles in scoring despite only starting four games. He's scored in double figures in 10 of FSU's last 11 games and is averaging 19 over his last three.

He's become a dependable offensive weapon, which is what the FSU coaches have been stressing to him since the beginning of the year.

True scorers don't have one 20-point game followed by a four-point outing. No, the elite scorers, the all-conference type players, bring it every game. That's what Thomas says he's learning to do.

"I think I'm doing a good job of being consistent," he said. "They put a big (emphasis) on that all that – just being consistent and not just having spurts. Good teams finish hard. Good players finish hard. That's consistency.

"And you want to go out there and feel like you're one of the best players on the court."

Rising To The Challenge

Aaron Thomas is emerging as one of the ACC's top scorers

By Bob Thomas

Seminoles.com

February 13, 2014

As a perceptive freshman, Florida State's Aaron Thomas understood very early on last season that the quickest way to get into coach Leonard Hamilton's playing rotation would be excelling at the defensive end of the floor.

Seizing the opportunity, the 6-foot-5 Cincinnati, Ohio native, who arrived in Tallahassee with a reputation as a scorer, became a trusted perimeter defender. The experience - he played in all 34 games and made 12 starts, including the final 11 games - was both invaluable and eye-opening.

In the process of learning how to shut down opponents, Thomas also discovered that the easy drives to the hoop and soaring dunks which made him a consensus top 100 player over his well-traveled prep career, weren't so easy to come by at the Division I level. Despite averaging better than 18 minutes a game, Thomas managed only 6.0 points per game.

"Last year, changing from high school to college, there were some obstacles I had to face about showing that I can step in and make plays," Thomas confessed. "I was doing a good job with defense. People outside didn't really know I could score. My teammates did and my coaches did. They told me if I just gained confidence that I would be able to perform with my skills.

"I think I did a good job of that, as far as sticking with my confidence and putting in the offseason work. It's starting to show and catch peoples' eyes, not just paying attention that I could just play defense. People are actually starting to see that I can produce on the offensive end."

Uh, yes they are.

Entering Saturday's pivotal ACC game at Wake Forest, there is little doubt that Thomas has caught the eye of Demon Deacons' coach Jeff Bzdelik. You see Thomas not only leads the Seminoles in scoring (13.3 ppg), he ranks 19th in the ACC, a standing that jumps to 16th with his scoring average climbing to 13.7 points in conference play. It would be easy to dismiss Thomas' progression as the result of added minutes in the absence of graduated guard and scoring leader Michael Snear. That, however, would be a disservice to Thomas, who has worked tirelessly to improve his offensive game without compromising his defensive reputation.

While Thomas remains a lock-down defender - he is fifth in the ACC with 1.6 steals per game - he has completely transformed his offensive game. Consider these facts:

- The rangy shooting guard has improved his field goal percentage from 40.8 percent to 46.9 in one year, thanks large to becoming a better-prepared catch-and-shoot guard;
- A year ago his 3-point marksmanship was a liability (22.0 percent). Now, the only thing separating him from leading the ACC in 3-point field goal percentage (47.4) is two more made 3-pointers to his season total of 27;
- As good as he has been from beyond the arc overall, Thomas is even better in league play, converting 21 of 42 (50.0) attempts through 12 ACC games;
- After converting just 70 percent of his free throws a year ago, Thomas ranks fifth in the ACC from the line (84.2), which improves to 90.2 percent and ranks second in conference games;
- Last season Thomas recorded six double-figure scoring games (two in ACC play). He has tripled that total to 18 through 24 games, including each of the last five and 10 of the last 11.

Those figures are byproducts putting in the necessary work over the summer.

"Aaron is a very unique and special type of player in that he has such a drive and competitive spirit that allows him to put his whole heart and soul into everything he does," Hamilton said. "The interesting thing about Aaron is he's only scratched the surface of his potential. That's kind of the way this whole sophomore class is. I see him being so passionate about being a good teammate. He wants to defend. He wants to rebound. He wants to give effort. He's not all about scoring. He's a great teammate.

"He has all the mental and emotional tools that will allow him to utilize his athletic potential, and you know that at some point in time he's going to reach his potential because of his passion and his attitude."

Thomas has benefited greatly from being in the same system for a second consecutive season. After playing his final three seasons of prep ball at three different schools - Aiken and Withrow high schools in Cincinnati and a year at Brewster Academy in New Hampshire - before arriving in Tallahassee, he has a better understanding of what is expected of him.

"That (continuity) has helped me become a lot better basketball player," Thomas said. "After last year, I talked to my coaches and teammates because I'm one of those who wants to know what I need to improve on; to be able to be that guy that the coach has confidence will produce.

"I made those small adjustments, getting my jump shot right. It has been a good transition. Coach Hamilton is one of those guys that as long as you play (defense) the offense will take care of itself. I think I did a good job of showing him that I could come in and play D at the college level, and once I showed him my defensive skills, he started believing in me and my hard work started showing at the offensive end. Now he, my other coaches and my teammates have confidence in me."

There were moments last season when Thomas flashed the potential which led Hamilton to sign him. He was most productive over a three-game stretch when he backed up a 15-point performance against Maine with back-to-back 17-point outings against Louisiana Monroe and Charlotte, earning ACC Rookie of the Week honors in late-December. Unfortunately, he managed just two double-figure scoring efforts over the final 23 games.

Those days are like a fading memory for anyone who has seen Thomas this season. He has eclipsed his freshman season high of 17 points six times, highlighted by a career-high 26 in a win over touted Charlotte, and 24 against Virginia Tech just a little over a week ago. In those two games alone, Thomas combined to convert 9 of 13 3-point attempts, matching his freshman season total for 3-point shots made.

"Everything he does he has more confidence in," said fellow Seminole sophomore guard Montay Brandon, who regularly defends Thomas in practice. "We see him do things on the court that everyone knew he was capable of doing - even last year - but he just didn't have the confidence to do it.

"He is great at slashing to the basket, and he knows how to move his body in ways to always get to the basket, even though the defense knows exactly what he's going to do. With the added element of his jump shot getting better, makes everything better."

Thomas attributes much of his success to regaining his confidence; something he had plenty of while averaging better than 20 points a game over the three-year stretch prior to his arrival at FSU.

"I've looked back on my freshman year and wondered, 'Why didn't I do this when I first got here?' he said. "I think it was just my confidence. Coming in as a freshman I was thinking too much and worrying that if I messed up I might get subbed out or I might not get the ball again. Now I'm comfortable, I'm happy and I just think my hard work is paying off."

His coaches and teammates aren't the only ones who have noticed the change.

Miami coach Jim Larranaga was quite wary of Thomas' ability entering Monday night's game.

"Here was our defensive strategy," Larranaga said. "We were hoping that Ian Miller wouldn't play and we were going to put the box-and-one, with one guy chasing Aaron Thomas, saying, 'Don't let this guy beat us.' He's just a

very good all-around player. He's shooting the ball great from 3 (point range) - like over 50 percent in conference play - and he's got size, athletic ability and they do great job of finding him. I think he's an all-conference caliber type of player."

A scoring point guard in high school, Thomas has had to adapt to playing without the basketball in his hands at all times. That is one area where his game has improved dramatically from a year ago, in large part due to a greater understanding of the game.

"That has been a huge difference," said Thomas. "There are more adjustments than I thought. When you're in high school and you're good, you go and dominate the game. One thing you have to learn when you get to college is that it's all about adjustments. You can't just hoop and play, especially in the ACC. You've got - not just individuals - but teams that are really good at making adjustments against your offense. I think I make a lot of plays where I see it before it happens."

One of those plays came against Miami, when Thomas caught the eye of sophomore point guard Devon Bookert, who was sizing up the defense from beyond the 3-point arc on the right side of the floor.

"You see the defense paying attention to the perimeter guys and not covering the back side," Thomas said. "I'll tell my teammates, 'Watch the back side because they're not paying attention.'"

As Bookert dribbled, Thomas made a strong move along the baseline and to the rim on the back side of Miami's match-up zone defense, depositing the lob pass through the basket with a thundering dunk for two of his 16 points on the night.

"I've got some abilities that other guys don't have," Thomas said. "Not to put myself on a pedestal, but I think I can make adjustment to defenders."

Hamilton marvels not only at his rising stars' skill set, but his efficiency. Even though his scoring average continues to climb, Thomas is averaging just over nine field goal attempts per game.

"Aaron is not a guy who takes a whole lot of shots," Hamilton said. "He's been very efficient. He's a good teammate, he's coachable and he's unselfish. He's a team guy. It's almost like, 'Coach, tell me what you need me to do.' He is not overly concerned about anything other than winning."

Throughout much of the season, Thomas was coming off the bench with Miller, providing the Seminoles with a 1-2 backcourt reserve scoring punch that was clearly one of the most potent in college basketball. He has also excelled in four games as a starter - including each of the last three games - averaging 19.25 points an outing.

Never one to dish out unwarranted praise, Hamilton realizes that Thomas has the requisite size and skill set to be one of the finest guards he has coached with the Seminoles.

"He has the size and all of the physical attributes to play basketball at the next level for an extended period of time," Hamilton said. "The best thing about Aaron is he realizes that he's still developing and he's hungry to be successful, but he's not obsessed with what he's trying to get to. He has an understanding that, 'I have to work hard and I'm in the process to get where I want to go.'"

"I just want to be consistent, remain a team player and not fall into my stats," said Thomas, whose continued production - at both ends of the floor - are critical to the Seminoles' postseason aspirations. "As long as my teammates believe in me, my coaches believe in me, I'm going to continue to do what I'm supposed to do."

"There's more season ahead, and now that I'm catching peoples' eyes, I need to remain more consistent and more focused."

The Seminoles are counting on it.

Thomas embraces key defensive role for FSU

Sophomore guard picking up where Snaer left off

Nov. 20, 2013 7:41 AM | 0 Comments

Written by

Natalie Pierre

NoleSports.com reporter

Aaron Thomas already is showing flashes of what he could mean to Florida State's defense this season.

After just three games, the sophomore has a team-high 12 steals. But to understand the integral role the 6-foot-5, 195-pound guard plays in head coach Leonard Hamilton's trademark "Junkyard D" defensive system, you have to look beyond the stat sheet.

Thomas, much like former FSU star Michael Snaer, provides his team with instant energy on defense. Coming off the bench, it is his job to disturb the opposition's primary ball-handler — like Snaer did so well the last four seasons.

"He's like Mike Snaer, but a little bit better because he's quicker," said senior guard Ian Miller, who says the Seminoles' offense also is faster and more fun when Thomas is on the floor.

"He gives us a lot of opportunities to get steals, and just gives us a heart — a guy who sets the tone. As soon as he comes in the game he's clapping, he's up in them, and you have no choice but to respond and to do the same thing."

Senior forward Okaro White compares the lift Thomas gives FSU men's basketball (3-0) to what Snaer provided the Seminoles in 2012, leading the program to its first — and only — ACC championship.

"We all think he has that ability in him," White said. "He's kind of proving it out here."

When Hamilton recruited the Cincinnati native, he felt Thomas had a skill set that could make him an elite defender, in large part because of his lateral quickness.

"He told me he saw a lot of potential in me. Last year I was shying away from it a little bit," Thomas said. "But over the summer, I gained my confidence and now I'm trying to be that elite defensive player."

With new foul rules this season limiting physical play, including hand-checking, Thomas not only faces the challenge of being FSU's defensive leader, but adjusting the way he creates havoc.

"What he's doing is invaluable," Hamilton said. "Aaron's taken an awful lot of pride in wanting to become an elite defender. It's challenging him more because the way the game is being officiated now, so he has to be really careful."

In FSU's most recent victory against UT-Martin, the guard had a career-high six steals for the Seminoles.

"I think his instincts are really good," Skyhawks head coach Jason James said following FSU's 89-61 victory. "He was able to shoot some gaps, and when he was guarding the ball, his hands were very quick."

With Snaer, a member of the ACC All-Defensive team, exhausting his four years of eligibility, FSU has full confidence in Thomas' ability to maintain his contributions on the defensive end of the floor.

"Coach Ham told me at the beginning of the year, he was going to need me to step up and take that defensive role, which Mike Snaer did his last three, four years here," Thomas said. "I'm just trying to come in and do what I can do, and disrupt the offense and the point guards, so we can have more fast-break opportunities."

Thomas' commitment to defense is not only helping his team, but also serving to improve his play on the other end of the court. Against UT-Martin, he had a career-high 19 points.

"I think the fact that he's energized defensively is making him a little bit more aggressive offensively, and a little more relaxed," Hamilton said.

"I think he's taking the ball to the hole a lot better, his free-throw shooting has been very good, and he's improved his perimeter shooting. I'm very pleased with the progress he's making."

A higher level: Okaro White playing best basketball of career

By Corey Clark
Tallahassee Democrat
March 17, 2014

It might have been his lowest point as a college basketball player.

With his team in desperate need of a marquee win, Florida State's Okaro White had as many points (four) as fouls in an 81-75 loss to North Carolina. It was two nights after he fouled out with just six points in a win at Wake Forest.

The senior forward was angry at himself.

Irate, really. And he knew it had to change.

"That's when I first really realized how much I hurt my team when I'm not on the floor," White said. "I definitely took (the UNC loss) hard. It was one of the low moments in my life basketball-wise."

After talking with the media following his four-point performance against the Tar Heels, White posted this message on Twitter: "I cannot continue to let my teammates & Nole nation down."

He hasn't.

Since that tweet, White has been one of the best players in the conference. He has averaged 21 points and seven rebounds in the last four games as the Seminoles (18-12 overall) finished the regular season with a 3-1 record down the stretch.

Even in Florida State's loss to Syracuse on Sunday, White shined — scoring 20 points and pulling down 11 rebounds against one of the most talented frontcourts in the country.

"I'm proud of it," White said. "Finally playing how I thought I should have been playing — being aggressive. And I just want to leave a legacy to the 'Nole Nation and fans that I was a good player here for four years."

White is currently 20th on the Florida State all-time scoring list with 1,312 career points. With four points in Thursday's ACC Tournament game against Maryland, he will pass Chuck Graham and move into 19th place.

The senior is now averaging 13.3 points and a team-best 6.6 rebounds on the season, and this week was named to the All-ACC Defensive team by conference coaches.

But it has been the last four games, especially, that the Clearwater native has elevated his game to a different level. "Well, Okaro's growing up," FSU head coach Leonard Hamilton said. "Okaro has just been excellent down the stretch here for us. And he's given us tremendous leadership. He's a quiet, unassuming youngster.

"He's not that vocal, but he's been leading by example."

Bookert, 'Noles Growing Together **Alaskan sophomore has been instrumental in NIT run**

By Bob Thomas
Seminoles.com
March 25, 2014

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. - One of the great benefits of postseason basketball, or any sport for that matter, is the opportunity it provides for younger players to gain experience in a completely different setting.

Florida State's run to the quarterfinal round of the National Invitation Tournament, which continues Wednesday night at the Donald L. Tucker Center against Louisiana Tech (7 p.m., ESPN), could reap great benefits for a Seminole team that will return six of its top nine scholarship players next season.

While senior standouts Okaro White and Ian Miller and sophomore scoring leader Aaron Thomas were instrumental in Monday night's 101-90 win at home against Georgetown, the play of sophomore point guard Devon Bookert -- through the first two NIT games - may be one of the most encouraging signs of all.

Bookert scored a career-high 21 points and matched his career-best with nine assists against the Hoyas in what was arguably the finest big-game performance of his career. The Anchorage, Alaska native converted 4 of 5 field goal attempts - 3 of 3 from beyond the 3-point arc - and knocked down 10 of 12 free throws. He finished stuffing his stat line with five rebounds and a pair of steals, while logging a career-high 37 minutes.

FSU coach Leonard Hamilton wasn't the least bit surprised to see Bookert, who has started both NIT games after coming off the bench in the six previous games, step up to the plate.

"I'm not overly opinionated over what I saw him do last night [against Georgetown], because I've seen him over a period of time making that transition," Hamilton said. "He's becoming more vocal. He's communicating with his teammates. He's more engaged. He's more motivated. He's communicating with his coaches, asking questions. That has manifested itself into a certain level of confidence; so that once you go into the game you have a different swagger, a different body language. It's obvious that he's comfortable and he's in control; that he's also in control of his emotions.

"The fact that you're in the postseason, playing in a tournament, has heightened his awareness. I think it shows he's growing up."

More importantly, the Seminoles are continuing to show signs of growth, having put the disappointment of an NCAA Tournament snub behind them. A victory Wednesday night against Louisiana Tech will send FSU on to New York City and Madison Square Garden for the semifinals; a place the program has not been since 1997.

Bookert's understated personality may be more befitting of the Northern Lights, as opposed to the bright lights of Manhattan, but it's clear he and his teammates are on a mission to make the most of this postseason run.

"I think we're all growing as a team," Booker said. "That sense of urgency has given us a narrower focus - a tunnel-vision - trying to get us our goals. Everyone is growing as a group."

With a laser-like focus through the first two tournament games Bookert has been producing in a variety of ways for an FSU team which has won six of its last eight games. Despite managing three points in a then season-high 36 minutes against Florida Gulf Coast, he matched his season-high with eight rebounds and carried the burden of directing the offense in Miller's absence due to injury.

Not only was Booker on-point offensively against the Hoyas, he served as a calming influence on several occasions in a tension-filled game, often corralling his teammates at the free throw line to settle things down. Offensively, he found his shots -- and his teammates -- in the flow of the game; yet another sign of his continued growth.

Though quick to credit his progress to the FSU coaching staff and his teammates, there is little doubt that Booker has put in the work to become a more complete player as a sophomore. And while he insists he doesn't feel any differently than he did by the end of his freshman season, there is mounting evidence that he is much further along in reaching his potential as quality lead guard in a major program.

"Last year I was more searching and just trying to do my role on the team," Bookert said. "Everyone is still doing that, but we've got a bunch of people that can go off on any single night, so the person that's open should be the go-to man. ...

“Everyone has been encouraging each other to step up and lead, and follow, at times and to do whatever is best for the team. I think we’ve all grown up a group and see whatever our team needs at one time.”

Through 34 games Bookert is averaging 8.3 points while shooting 42.1 percent from both the floor and from 3-point range, and 87.8 percent from the free throw line. His 97 assists lead the team, while his 38 steals trail only Thomas.

“The thing you have to understand about Devon is he’s in the process of developing,” said Hamilton. “When a guy puts a jersey on, he has a number and he’s on the floor, people sometimes assume that he is a finished product. Devon came from Alaska, where basketball is not the main sport, and obviously the competition is not anywhere close to the level that he’s playing against now.”

“His progress, his understanding of the game, is in direct proportion to what he’s been exposed to. So he’s still growing and learning. He’s a smart youngster, but he still has a lot of upside available for him to continue to grow.”

Upside aside, Bookert is currently FSU’s all-time leader in 3-point field goal percentage, having knocked down 46.2 percent of his attempts (72 of 156) from beyond the arc. And over the last seven games he’s on a roll, converting 12 of 16 3-point attempts.

Bookert has also demonstrated maturity beyond his years down the stretch this season. After starting the first 21 games of the season, he has been in and out of the starting lineup as Hamilton has been adjusting his rotation, in part of our necessity due to injury. The soft-spoken guard has been unfazed by the changes.

“I’m very proud of his attitude,” Hamilton said. “Even when he’s not been playing well his attitude has been so good. He’s been eager to learn. He’s been so coachable. He’s growing more in his confidence. He’s being more vocal and being more aggressive in terms of his leadership. I see a bunch of guys growing up right before your eyes.”

That Bookert and the ‘Noles are doing it in a single-elimination tournament is even more impressive.

“There’s a different mental and emotional frame of mind that you have to be in when you’re playing for a championship,” Hamilton said. “You’re in a tournament and your preparation is different. You’re playing against guys you’re not familiar with. If you lose a game, you’re out. There’s a different mindset – I don’t know if you call it pressure – but a sense of urgency that exists.”

“As you prepare, in the back of your mind, you’re thinking, ‘We have a chance to win a championship.’ But you’ve got to take it one game at a time and you realize now, that to win a championship against other good teams who have the same goals, you have to all be together. ... That’s growing. That’s maturing. That’s giving them an idea of what it’s like to be in this situation, which can’t do anything but benefit them as they move through their careers.”

Robert Gilchrist Hoping for NCAA Tourney Berth to Finish College Career on High

By Sam Neter
Hoopsfix.com
March 9, 2014

For Florida State forward Robert Gilchrist, Sunday's marquee match-up against Syracuse will not only mark his senior night, but is also a must-win game that could be the difference between the Seminoles receiving a berth for the NCAA tournament or not. Gilchrist's FSU are now 9-8 in ACC play (18-11 overall) and sitting on the bubble. Beat the reeling Syracuse, who have lost 4 of their last 5, and people think it may just be enough to go dancing, lose, and it is believed that at least two wins in the ACC tourney will be required.

"The way we're playing right now and the way Syracuse is playing, it's just another college basketball game, anyone can win, we can come out and punch them in the mouth and they might not have anything to give back," said Gilchrist in a call from Florida, an hour before practice on Friday night.

"They went on a 25-0 streak before they ended up losing, so they're struggling right now. We're on the turnaround and they're struggling. This will be their fifth loss in six games if they lose to us, so there's definitely a chance of anything happening and we think we've got a good shot of winning this game, for sure."

Even if they do lose, Gilchrist feels the 'Noles have as good a chance as anyone of making some noise in the ACC tournament to still get a spot in greatest basketball tournament in the world, March Madness.

"The ACC tournament is going to be very open," he said assuredly. "This is college basketball, it's weird like that, it's not like American football where they say the team that has the best chance of winning is going to win. Anything can happen on the night."

Playing in front of over 12,000 fans at the Donald L. Tucker Center on Sunday will be a far cry from Gilchrist's humble beginnings in London.

Introduced to the game at 12 years old by his best friend Lukas Volskis (who now plays in EBL Division 2 with Eastside Eagles), the long armed athlete soon enrolled at Barking Abbey Basketball Academy in East London. He crossed the pond five years ago, played a year at Worcester Academy, MA, before enrolling at Polk State Junior College, and then signing with Florida State for his final two years.

He says he still sometimes has to take a step back to look at his life now to see how far he has come. Sold out arenas, playing against NBA talent, fans asking for his autograph and cheering his name, personal academic tutors and mentors, chartered planes, non-stop travel. Life can be good.

"Coming from England, no-one really cares about you unless you play football," the 6'9" forward said. "For me to come over and still be an amateur and people really invest their time and energy into supporting you as an athlete and everything you do, it's really encouraging.

"I would encourage people at home with the talent in England to get over here as soon as possible and experience the things that I've experienced because it really changes your outlook on life. It gives you that extra push when times get tough; people will contact you and send you letters and stuff.

"Fans really do reach out to you and let you know that they still support you. They'll send you stamped addressed envelopes so you can send it back to them after you've signed it. Especially at times like this when you're not playing so well, it means a lot."

Ah yes, the small matter of personal performance. Gilchrist is clearly disappointed with his own output so far at Florida State. His first season with the 'Noles, his junior year, was a tough one, but things got better towards the end of the season, and the beginning of his senior year it looked like it was all clicking.

He opened up the season with a career-high 10 points against Jacksonville, he added another 10 in the second game of the season versus UCF. His numbers, and minutes, were solid.

But then his production stalled. He was pulled from the starting line up on the 10th February against Miami.

The 'Noles have gone 4-2 in those games since, but Robert has seen more than five minutes in just two of those games. His season averages of 3.5ppg and 2.0rpg on 45.4% shooting in under 15 minutes per game do not match the world of potential that can be seen in him.

He still remembers the challenging transition from JUCO to the ACC, being unable to no longer just rely on his raw athleticism and talent.

“It was definitely tough,” he continued in his English accent, one he has managed to keep despite five years in the US. “ACC basketball is arguably the best conference in the country, at this level all the athletes are top of the rung, this is as close as it gets to NBA athleticism. Transitioning from being able to just freelance and use my athleticism on defense. So I struggled a little bit with that, but when I found my way, I started doing a little bit better towards the end of the season.

“But I was a junior so I needed to be ready to go by the time I got here, so that was a little bit disappointing. As you’ve seen this year, I’ve struggled a little bit more, even though I’ve made progress, it’s not as much as I wanted it to be.

“We started out pretty hot with the regular season then we kind of tapered off. We got a few injuries, and people’s production went down; I was one of those people.

“I’d say towards the end of the season, about 23/24 games in I came out of the starting lineup, my production wasn’t as good as it was before, and they made some changes. And that was when we went on a quick run to get some wins under our belt and keep the season alive. They stuck with that lineup and it’s been like that for the last 6/7/8 games and I’m hoping that this will get us where we need to go.”

Gilchrist knows the reason for his reduced minutes is lack of rebounding, but understands that the coach has to do what he thinks is in the best interest of the team.

“At this level rebounding is key,” he said. “It’s really what wins games for you. For someone like myself to be out there and not rebounding is almost like a travesty, having the kind of jumping ability that I have; if you’re not rebounding what are you doing?”

Gilchrist regularly left people in England in awe of his natural ability. There are very few players out of the UK that have his type of God-given talent to get people out of their seats every single time they play. What is stopping him from rebounding like he knows he is capable?

“It’s just a mental thing really. As you know I’ve got the ability to do it, I can jump out the gym, I’m pretty strong, I don’t get pushed around. It’s just a mental thing.”

Regardless of the final numbers from his college career, one thing is for sure, Robert will get pro looks. He didn’t want to go into details but seems confident he will get high level offers.

“I’m sure I’ll have a shot at next year”, he said. “I’m pretty positive I’ll have a shot, both here and overseas. Playing at this level the connections are, I don’t want to say ridiculous, but they’re pretty up there.

“Playing at an ACC school, playing under a guy like Coach (Leonard) Hamilton and everyone else on the coaching staff, they all have connections to people all over the world, so wherever I may end up I’m sure it will be at a decent level, because I’m still learning and figuring out the game. I got a long way to go before I reach my peak, so I’m excited.”

And will we get to see him suit up in a Great Britain kit before he takes to the court for what will almost certainly be his first professional season in 2014-15? Despite being inexplicably cut from the GB U20s in 2010, Gilchrist remains loyal to the national team and says he would love to suit up for the senior side.

Since seeing the GB party in Greece at the beginning of the season as they played EuroBasket warm-ups, whilst FSU were there on an international tour also facing the Greek national team, Robert says they have been in regular contact.

“It all depends what time allows (*as to whether or not he can suit up for GB this summer*). I’m sure I will do workouts over here as well as in Europe but I don’t know what time will allow me to get into, if time allows it then yeah I would love to, the sooner the better.

“Right now for me being able to get finished with school and play basketball as a job it’s definitely exciting for me and I’m excited to get into that.”

He speaks regularly with the likes of Andrew Lawrence, Matthew Bryan-Amaning and Drew Sullivan for advice and to discuss basketball as he begins thinking about the next step in his career.

As with any athlete who moves abroad, of course, his hometown London can cross his mind, but with a potential March Madness appearance and future pro career in the pipeline, there is little to complain about.

“Yeah, I suppose I miss the city. Just little things like being able to jump on a train and be on the other side of London in no time stuff like that,” he concluded. “But I’m chasing my dream, so I don’t really think about it too much to be honest.”

Florida State guard Miller uses 13-year-old friend with Treacher Collins Syndrome as motivation

By Matt Schneidman

The Daily Orange

March 6, 2014

Florida State senior guard Ian Miller gets great joy out of participating in physical education classes at United Faith Christian Academy.

When Miller visits his old school, he hangs out with a 13-year-old named Casey Roffler.

Roffler suffers from Treacher Collins Syndrome, a condition that stunts the growth of the face, jaw and chin and can potentially cause life-threatening respiratory problems. He's inspired Miller to overcome his own adversity, as Miller missed chunks of his first three seasons at Florida State due to academic and injury issues.

"He's like my little brother," Miller said. "He's a soldier."

In his freshman and sophomore years, academic ineligibility forced Miller to miss 22 total games. In his junior year, Miller was hampered by injuries, as he missed six games and only averaged 5.3 points.

This year, he's only missed two games and is averaging 13.6 points and 3.0 assists, good for second and first on the team, respectively.

"He's had some challenges," FSU head coach Leonard Hamilton said. "As a result of those challenges, I think he's matured, grown up and that's one of the reasons why he's playing so well now."

Miller's struggles aren't quite as severe as Roffler's, but the lesson is the same.

Roffler underwent 15 surgeries in the first 12 years of his life. Despite the time he's spent in Levine Children's Hospital, Roffler still performs at a high standard both in the classroom and on the athletic fields.

"He showed me how to fight each and every day," Miller said. "If he can get up and do it, why can't I?"

That attitude, one that Miller has adapted in part because of his relationship with Roffler, has made him a more mature player and person as he leads the Seminoles into the home stretch of their season.

"I could've quit, dropped out of college, a lot of things a lot of people do," Miller said "But I decided to stick to it, fight and really become a man."

Miller's roommate and fellow senior Okaro White has known Miller since well before college. The two attended camps and played together throughout their high school AAU days.

White has been right there with Miller along his roller-coaster ride and has seen promising changes from someone he calls his "lifelong brother."

"I think he's learned over his four years," White said. "He's matured and learned how to overcome adversity. I think that's the biggest thing with him."

Miller noted that his attitude toward life changed after meeting Roffler. After seeing his points per game average drop five total points from his sophomore to junior year, Miller had no reason to be happy.

But it was the outlook of the 13-year-old that kept Miller's head up.

"He didn't look like the rest of the kids in his class," Miller said. "But if you've seen him playing around, you couldn't tell."

“To see someone free like that and in their own world, living carefree but so loving, it helps you develop a humble attitude.”

Hamilton recognized the efforts Miller has made to turn the struggles he has had into positive opportunities.

As a player who played at 222 pounds last year, Miller has cut that to 198 pounds for his senior season.

Miller’s improved physical condition has helped him become a more versatile player. Not only that, but he’s also demonstrated the leadership qualities expected of a senior guard.

“He’s running the team when we have him at the one,” Hamilton said. “When we put him at the two, he’s a lot more aggressive.

“He’s found a way to mix in being offensively productive and also running the team, so he’s at a good place for him.”

But Miller may not be at that “good place” without the help of someone nine years younger.

Roffler has been Miller’s inspiration, and as Florida State makes one last push at an NCAA Tournament berth, its senior leader will always keep his hero in mind.

Said Miller: “He’s the definition of a Seminole.”

Miller coming up big for FSU

Senior making most of final year

Feb. 28, 2014 | 0 Comments

Written by

Corey Clark

NoleSports.com editor

He was already having the best season of his career. But since returning from an ankle injury in early February, Florida State senior guard Ian Miller has taken his game to an even higher level.

The North Carolina native is averaging 19.8 points in his last four games, including a career-high 25 in a win at Wake Forest on Feb. 15.

“It’s just confidence and being healthy,” Miller said. “My coaches have confidence in me and believe in me to be a leader and to really just take on a lot. ... This year, I’ve just been focused, man.”

He has been the player many expected him to become when he arrived at FSU as a highly touted prospect from United Faith Christian Academy in Charlotte. Though Miller had plenty of big moments and games for the Seminoles the last three years, each season was also derailed at times.

He missed time as a freshman and a sophomore for academic issues. Last year he was slowed by a lingering foot injury, missed six full games and averaged a career-low 5.3 points.

During the offseason, after he got healthy, Miller devoted himself to getting in the best shape of his life. He was noticeably slimmer — and quicker — when the season began, and he has been shining as a result.

Especially during the last four games, in which he has scored 13, 25, 22 and 19 points, respectively.

“Before the injury I knew I was being aggressive, but I wasn’t being aggressive enough for us to win consistently,” said Miller, who currently leads the Seminoles in scoring at 13.8 points per game. “And I knew if we were going to win, my mindset had to be ultra-aggressive.”

Since getting injured in the first half of the Clemson loss — and then missing the subsequent games against Virginia Tech and Maryland — Miller has also been shooting better than ever. The senior guard is 16 of his last 28 from 3-point range, including back-to-back games in which he made five 3-pointers.

Miller was 3 of 7 in FSU’s upset win at Pitt and now is shooting 40.5 percent from beyond the arc for the season and 47.1 percent in ACC play, which is the best mark in the conference. He’s also third in the ACC in free-throw shooting at 88 percent.

But for Florida State head coach Leonard Hamilton, Miller’s impressive marksmanship hasn’t been as important as how he has matured as a point guard — which was something Miller admittedly struggled with a season ago.

“In my opinion, the biggest progress Ian has made is learning when to be aggressive and when to run the team,” Hamilton said. “That was always kind of a moving target with him because he was coming off the

bench pushing the ball and giving us that spark. Now he's trying to get us in and out of our system, being a little bit better distributor, taking care of the ball and making better decisions.

"He's at a point now where I can truly say he understands how to run our team."

Miller leads the team in assists at three per game, including five against Pitt in his second start of the season. The Seminoles (16-11, 7-8 in the ACC) have won two of their last three and will look to build on that momentum on Sunday night against Georgia Tech at the Civic Center.

"It's all coming together," Miller said. "We've just got to keep doing what we're doing."

Seminoles' Miller making most of last chance

By David Scott

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Posted: Monday, Dec. 16, 2013

Florida State's game Tuesday against the Charlotte 49ers at the Tucker Center in Tallahassee, Fla., isn't a homecoming for Seminoles senior guard Ian Miller.

Instead, home is coming to him.

Miller, a former United Faith Christian star, leads Florida State (6-3) in scoring and is winding up a career that has seen as much disappointment and adversity as it has success.

Miller has played in every game this season and is the first backcourt player off the bench. He averages 14.6 points and 3.6 assists, both team bests.

For Miller, it's about time.

"I've had to tough things out," he said. "But I'm happy with how things are going now."

Academic issues early in his career and a foot injury last season cost Miller lots of playing time in his first three seasons in Tallahassee.

Not that things were all bad though: as a sophomore, he hit a 3-pointer as time expired to beat Virginia as he established a reputation as one of the ACC's top shooters.

But generally, Miller's career has been more about what might have been – at least until now.

"I'm really proud of him," said Seminoles coach Leonard Hamilton. "He's had some setbacks, but he's come back stronger. It's like he's had a new lease on life."

Miller is far past the academic issues – he's on schedule to graduate next spring. And the foot injury that held him out of five games of his junior season – including a game against the 49ers in Charlotte – has fully healed.

"I had high expectations coming into last season and then I got hurt," said Miller. "It was pretty depressing. I had to watch at practice to keep up with the little details of what was happening. But I think that made me stronger mentally."

Miller also dropped 25 pounds off his 6-foot-3 frame over the summer – from 223 to 198 – and is now equally comfortable at the point or sliding over to the off-guard position.

Miller, known mostly as a scorer, has embraced playing point guard.

“Last year we asked him to give us some minutes at the point, but because of his injury he was never able to get the reps in practice for us to give us a true idea of how he’d play with his teammates,” said Hamilton. “He’s had time to work on that and he’s built that right type of chemistry.

“Now he can run the team with the kind of leadership we need. He understands what needs to be done in relation to what we have on the floor.”

Miller was an all-state player at United Faith and the Observer’s player of the year – twice.

One of Miller’s mentors is former Charlotte Hornets star Muggsy Bogues, who is now United Faith’s head coach.

The foot injury didn’t allow him to play last season when the Seminoles beat the 49ers 79-76 at Time Warner Cable Arena.

“That was tough,” said Miller. “Being home and not being able to play, with your family and friends there. That was the worst feeling.”

Miller will be on the court Tuesday against the 49ers (7-2). When he returns to Charlotte in the offseason, he sometimes plays pickup games with 49ers guards Terrence Williams and Pierria Henry.

“They’re pretty cool guys,” said Miller. “But to me, this is just another game.”

Brandon steps up for Seminoles

Feb. 16, 2014

Greer Smith

High Point Enterprise

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. -- Standing outside the Florida State locker room, Montay Brandon wore a wide smile of satisfaction on Saturday night.

Minutes earlier, the Seminoles had finished off Wake Forest, allowing the former Wesleyan Christian Academy star to do well in front of family, friends and other well-wishers.

"There were several here," Brandon said. "It's a lot of different for them to see me play in person than on television."

He made his mark when it mattered. With the score tied at 55, Brandon made a free throw to put FSU in front for good with 3:14 left. On FSU's next possession, he drove for a layup, sparking an 8-0 run that put the Seminoles in control on the way to a 67-60 victory.

"I just felt that I needed to try and make a play," Brandon said. "Wake was getting some momentum so I just tried to make some plays so we could come out of here with a win."

The win brought a bright spot to a team that had lost five of its previous six games and six of eight after starting 8-2. It came as the Seminoles look ahead to a week in which they play red-hot North Carolina tonight and powerful Pittsburgh on Sunday.

"It was nice to get this win, but we can't celebrate it too much because we've got a tough game coming up (tonight against the Tar Heels)," Brandon said.

Brandon has started all 26 games this season after starting 22 of 32 last year. He's played on the wing this year after starting 22 games at point guard as a freshman last year.

"The main thing is that it is more natural for me because I've played wing most of my life," Brandon said. "Even though I have the ball-handling ability, when you're at the point, you've got to think about more people than just yourself. When you are on the wing, you can think about what you're doing a little more."

Brandon came into Saturday's game averaging 8.3 points, 4.9 rebounds and 28.3 minutes per game. Against the Demon Deacons, he was just below his averages with eight points and three rebounds but stayed on the court for 35 minutes, including 20 minutes in the second half.

He was also the primary defender on Deacon forward Travis McKie, who managed 14 points and hit four of eight field goals. McKie scored 10 points in the second half but never got on a hot streak.

"That's my job to guard one of the best players," Brandon said. "I relish guarding the toughest people. I've guarded C.J. (Fair of Syracuse) and K.J. (McDaniels of Clemson). Basically, whoever the best player is, I normally guard." Some of Brandon's shots didn't look textbook as he hit two of his five attempts from the field, but he did make four of six from the line.

"He's had some moments when he's made some real outstanding plays and some moments when he's looked like a sophomore this season," FSU coach Leonard Hamilton said. "What happens with young players is they want progress without going through the process, and sometimes that causes anxiety. He is a great competitor and teammate. He lays his heart out each time he plays. Sometimes when he's not playing as well as we want to, he puts extra pressure on himself. But, a lot of times, my kids are better as juniors and seniors than they are as sophomores and freshmen."

Michael Ojo: Player profile

Four years ago, Michael Ojo was playing soccer in Nigeria. Now, he is one of Florida State's most promising players.

FSView – FSU Student Newspaper

David Walker

@JDavidWalker

January 15, 2014

Upon meeting Michael Ojo, your hand doesn't really get shaken, but engulfed.

At 7-foot-1 and 292 lbs., every part of the Florida State center from Lagos, Nigeria seems devised with basketball in mind. On the court, in the moment before checking into the game, he stands as a statuesque personification of the "big man" archetype.

When the action starts that potential crashes with reality, and the recency that Ojo was introduced to the sport is revealed.

"I was playing soccer, like I used to do," Ojo recalled. "And I met this guy who said 'Hey tall man, what are you doing playing soccer? You don't realize what basketball can do for you!'"

It was just four years ago that Michael Ojo first found a basketball in his hands. The sport was a known commodity in Nigeria; icons like Kobe Bryant and Michael Jordan are labeled as global for a reason. But the game itself, its various nuances and intricacies, not to mention its hundreds of rules, was shrouded in ambiguity to the young Nigerian.

He began the arduous task of learning the sport on an outside court near Nigeria's national stadium, playing pick-up games with locals. His skills were sub-rudimentary at best, but his physique propagated another story entirely, one that levied expectations far outside Ojo's capacity to fulfill them immediately.

Upon seeing a literal giant show up on the court one day, as if out of the sky, wonder and excitement at the sudden appearance soon inspired lofty expectations.

Towering well above his peers, Michael Ojo has a body that seems predisposed for basketball, tailored to the game that values size more than anything else.

But pressure to live up to potential his physique inherently possesses, and initial failures to pick up such a complex game right away led to understandable frustration.

"They wanted me to know how to play basketball in, like, a month. They were like, this is Michael Jordan. But my coach said this is a process, take it one step at a time. It was really frustrating, trust me [...] sometimes you feel like you want to quit. [But] my coach [wouldn't] let me, because he was a good guy, he was always there for me, encouraging me every time. He used to say that 'If basketball was so easy, my grandma would be playing.'"

It was this coach, Lateef Erinfolami, who would end up fostering his development. Erinfolami would not let basketball become a means-to-an-end for Ojo, at least not yet. He emphasized school and learning the game above all else, and kept his pupil oblivious to both international basketball camps and the dream of parlaying the sport into a full-ride scholarship to a college in America.

It was nearly two years before the idea of earning a scholarship entered his consciousness. It was soon after he was attending his senior year at Tennessee Temple before enrolling at Florida State.

Going to school in America was always a vague, out-of-reach dream for Ojo. However, it turned into swift reality after his brief introduction to basketball. His voyage has carried him far from home, a place he hasn't returned since leaving three years ago.

“It’s something I’ve been prepared for, because I knew someday at some point I would have to leave and go fight for my future. It was something I was prepared for but it was tough. Trust me.”

College basketball is a year-round endeavor and Ojo believes that he will likely have to wait until graduation to have enough free time to make a return visit. His ultimate goal of a college degree is what fuels him apart from basketball, a promise that helps ground him so many miles away from home.

“My degree is something I owe my family. I promised my people, because they know American culture can change anybody to anything, so I promised them just that I would be the same person I am and get my degree. I won’t let anything distract me from school, my degree is something I promised my people and I will get it.”

Well into his sophomore year and already a defensive terror, Michael Ojo is well ahead of the learning curve. Where once he was grounded, still afraid to break the only basket they had back home in Nigeria, he now soars and throws it down with unrestrained fury. He still sets his screen and lumbers to the basket in the tentative manner of one not yet completely confident in what he wants to do, but he now knows where he needs to be. He possesses a burgeoning post game and his explosiveness is being allocated and refined.

Michael Ojo began his basketball journey far later than most, and has chased the promise of his professed potential from Lagos, Nigeria to Tallahassee, Fla.

Basketball, a sport that always seemed imbued in his DNA, is only but a recent revelation. He has already reaped the rewards of all his hard work in the form of an education in the United States he could otherwise not afford. His degree will stand as a testament to the fulfillment of his enormous potential, regardless of whatever else happens on the court.

And perhaps sometime soon, either in this season or the next, basketball will no longer be a journey fraught with trial-and-error, but an endeavor that is finally bearing fruit.

Seminoles' 7-footer gets bigger and better

Bojanovsky leading FSU in blocks, field goal percentage

By Natalie Pierre

NoleSports.com reporter

December 29, 2013

On the court, Boris Bojanovsky has to constantly remind himself to sprint back on defense.

When one of his teammates puts up a shot, there is no time to relax or catch his breath. Instead, Florida State's coaches expect him to fight with defenders for positioning, in case the shot doesn't fall.

It's a lot different, and more demanding, than the style of basketball the Slovak Republic native played in Spain at the Canarias Basketball Academy.

So it's taken time for Bojanovsky to adjust.

Off the court, the Seminoles' slender, 7-foot-3 center is met with the daunting task of eating 5,000 calories a day. It's what he has to do to maintain his weight, which fluctuates on almost a daily basis.

Just 11 games into the Seminoles' 2013-14 season, the sophomore has been anywhere from 225 to 235 pounds. But on the court, he has shown continuous improvement and production in his second season at FSU.

"I've just gotten more adjusted to our system. I'm getting more opportunities now since I'm playing a little bit more now," said Bojanovsky, who has started every game for the Seminoles this season. "I'm just trying to help my team with blocking shots."

In FSU's most recent victory — and one of its most impressive so far this season — Bojanovsky turned in a career-high seven blocks in his 16 minutes on the court.

In what was a one-possession game until the closing seconds, Bojanovsky's defense around the rim was a key to FSU pulling out the 60-55 victory over then-No. 22 UMass. The sophomore's seventh block of the game preserved the Seminoles' two-point lead with three seconds remaining.

"When he went back in the game the other day, I said, 'Big fella, you've got to go out here and make a difference.' And he's responded," FSU head coach Leonard Hamilton said. "Whereas, sometimes mentally and emotionally, when you come from another overall basketball system, you don't realize the adjustment that you've got to make." Bojanovsky's showing in the closing minutes of the grind-it-out game was another display of his growth, and the adjustments he has made since arriving in Tallahassee in the summer of 2012.

After blocking 25 shots in 33 games last season, he already has a team-high 23 blocks in FSU's first 11 games this year.

"When a coach is on you like that every day in practice, to be 7-3 and not block shots, you've got to start blocking shots to prove them wrong," sophomore guard Aaron Thomas said. "So that's what he started doing."

Bojanovsky currently ranks third in the Atlantic Coast Conference, averaging 2.1 blocks per game and helping lead the Seminoles to the No. 11 ranking nationally in blocks per game.

"It's something we've been working on all summer. Even since last year when we came in as freshmen," fellow sophomore center Michael Ojo said. "At least more teams will be scared of us now, to not be able to get in the paint so easily."

Hamilton says much of the improved shot-blocking is a result of the young team's overall understanding of how to rotate and get in position to block shots without fouling.

But Bojanovsky's improvements are noticeable across the board. After averaging 2.9 points per game last season, he is averaging 6.9 points a contest so far this year.

And he currently leads the Seminoles in field-goal percentage, shooting 73.8 percent from the floor, in comparison to the 54.7 percent he shot last season. His improved shooting includes a stretch where he made 18 consecutive field goals — shooting 100 percent in three straight games.

“You can see him assert himself a little bit more. But he's also adjusting to the speed of the game and what's important,” Hamilton said. “Most of his adjustments have been more mental than they have been physical. He has tremendous skills and abilities. But I think he's gaining more confidence now.”

Bojanovsky's teammates say they've seen flashes of his abilities on both offense and defense since last season. “When you're 7-3, you normally don't have to jump very much,” Hamilton said. “But when you're 7-3 in America, and you're playing against a 6-8 athlete, you can't just reach for the ball.”

Even though he's put on more than 20 pounds since arriving in Tallahassee, Bojanovsky says the off-the-court adjustments are still some of the most difficult.

“Because of my body build I'm not a big eater. It's tough for me to eat a lot sometimes, because I'm full,” the center said. “But if I miss one meal, I lose weight. So I've got to keep eating.”

Spotlight: Florida State's Boris Bojanovsky

Talkbasket.net

By Mohamed Abdihakim

From Bratislava to Tallahassee, Florida State's towering Boris Bojanovsky is showing improvement.

In the early part of the new season, the play of Florida State University's Boris Bojanovsky has shown notable improvement.

The sophomore center doubled his scoring, going from 3 ppg to 6 ppg after a bump up in floor time.

The statistical boost seems negligible in and of itself, but Bojanovsky's play has suggested something arguably more important for FSU.

"I'm feeling more comfortable in the system," he said. "I'm getting my chances, and just trying to play my best."

Even before making the move to Florida State University, Bojanovsky's game was molded by time spent representing his native

Slovakia in the European Championships. He played on three national teams, including a 2011 stint that saw him average 22 ppg and 13.5 rpg for the U18 squad.

"It was a great experience," said Bojanovsky. Though his squad finished 10th among the 18 competing countries, the young center was in the top tier of several statistical categories. Bojanovsky led the field in field goal percentage, defensive rebounds, blocked shots, field goals made, and double-doubles.

He also got to see his fair share of physical post play. One of the memorable match-ups for Bojanovsky was against Poland's Przemek Karnowski. FSU's big man was impressed with the physicality of Karnowski, who is averaging a productive 8.9 ppg and 7.4 rpg as a sophomore at Gonzaga.

Bojanovsky skipped playing in Europe this past summer to focus on school a bit and work on improving his game back in Tallahassee, Florida. It's that offseason work that has enabled the FSU coaches to put more trust in their big man, which has been reciprocated.

"Coach Hamilton has been doing this for a really long time," he said. "I trust him and the rest of the coaching staff completely. I know they'll help me [improve]."

One of his teammates, senior FSU guard Ian Miller, saw Bojanovsky's potential early on.

"Oh yeah, we saw from his freshman year that he can really be a talent for us in the middle, and that's what we need."

As a young player (20 years old), he's got a ways to go. Bojanovsky still gets visibly frustrated when something goes wrong on the court, but that's what his teammates are there for.

"I tell him to not worry about mistakes," added Miller, "to just move on to the next play."

The Atlantic Coast Conference boasts a history of exceptional big men.

James Worthy, Ralph Sampson, Christian Laetner, Tim Duncan, and David Thompson are some of the more recognizable names in the conference's respectable all-time list.

Bojanovsky got to face some of the conference's best men in the middle in his freshman season, battling with the names like Alex Len and Mason Plumlee.

In the nature of a two-titan conference, the ACC championships have been split between two sides of Tobacco Road, with Duke and North Carolina accounting for 14 of the last 17 titles.

That trend may be nearing its end. With the oncoming storm of Notre Dame, Pittsburgh, Syracuse, and Louisville, future championships look almost certain to be hotly contested.

Bojanovsky hopes to be a big part of that diversification. In fact, he doesn't care for being remembered the way in the lore of the Duncans, the Worthies, or Thompsons.

"I have no personal goals, other than getting my [International Relations] degree," he said when asked how he'd like to be remembered. "I want to win something before I leave here, whether it's an ACC title or national title.

"I just want to win."