

Anthony Polite: Saint Andrews' Swiss Machine Has Taken South Florida by Storm

By Jesse Nadelman

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BOCA RATON, Fla. – Johnny O'Connell sat in his office, just a couple weeks removed from taking Saint Andrew's to states before falling to Lake Highland Prep in the state final game at the Lakeland Center. He watched as he saw a high-flying eighth grader cross over a defender, and throw it down over another.

That superstar middle school product was a kid from Switzerland named Anthony Polite, who was coming to play basketball in America and attend Saint Andrew's his freshman year.

"I knew he was going to be a special player for us," said O'Connell, who has coached at Saint Andrew's for over 20 years and has a record of 127-29 in the last seven. "I knew I had one guy for sure who was not going to come off the floor very often."

And that he is.

Since the day Polite was born, he's had a basketball in his hand. His father, Michael Polite, played basketball at Florida State, and had a very successful professional career in overseas and in Switzerland, where young Polite grew up.

"I started playing basketball when I was really young," Anthony Polite said. "I kept working at it all the time." But basketball wasn't always Polite's top sport, actually. While growing up, the four-star 6'6" guard took a brief hiatus to play soccer for four years, a sport very common in Switzerland and all his friends were playing.

However, Anthony Polite isn't your average athlete. He knew he was meant to play on the hardwood.

"I felt like basketball was the sport I had to play," said Polite, who made the Swiss national team for his age group. "I got better at it every year. One of my goals was always to play basketball in college."

To reach that goal, Polite made a switch to America.

"I thought that if I had a chance to play in High School, it would be easier to play in college," Polite said. "So I made the move to the United States."

Polite decided on Saint Andrew's, a school with a history not only of academic excellence, but also a rich history in basketball. The year before Polite arrived was when the Scots reached the state championship, and making the regional semifinals two years prior.

Those teams at Saint Andrew's, however, had been fueled by a group of upperclassmen that graduated the year prior to Polite's arrival. O'Connell had been searching for a new catalyst, a new leader for a team with a new look the following season.

"We had lost all five starters," O'Connell said. "We lost a lot, and we didn't have much depth. I knew immediately Anthony was going to be a huge part of our team. He was going to be a game-changer for us."

And he was.

It was during the Boca Raton High School summer league where Polite got his first varsity action. Saint Andrews was facing a familiar foe, North Broward Prep, a private school rival that was also located around the Boca Raton area. With a young group highlighted by Polite, O'Connell knew his team was going to have its hands full up against North Broward, which was one of the top teams in the area back then. But it wasn't just a test for his team, it was specifically a test for Polite.

Polite was facing off with Sammis Reyes, North Broward's 6'6" rising senior wing – a former Saint Andrew's player – who had established himself as one of the top talents in Florida.

That didn't deter Polite. Even as a rising freshmen – who just graduated Middle School – Polite went toe-to-toe the whole way with Reyes, who now plays for Tulane.

"Sammis Reyes was one of the best players in the area," O'Connell said. "We played a summer league game and Anthony was only a freshman, and we'll say he matched up point-for-point quite easily with Sammis. After that game, I now knew we were going to be good for the next four years."

That was just the beginning of what has been a remarkable High School journey for Polite. Freshman year, he led the Scots in scoring and helped them to a 14-7 record, despite a whole new starting five, and a berth in the regional playoffs where they lost to Coral Springs Charter in the quarterfinals.

Before sophomore year, expectations grew for the young Saint Andrew's squad, with 6'10" twins Brett and A.J. Haeffner transferring over from Pine Crest to develop a formidable – yet young – group that could potentially challenge reigning district champ Cardinal Newman and make a run in the playoffs.

Polite was again dominant as just a sophomore, now beginning to gain the attention of many. He averaged 18.6 points and 6.5 rebounds per game that year leading Saint Andrew's to an 18-8 season, but again, a loss to Cardinal Newman in the district title, and Coral Springs Charter in the regional quarterfinals.

It was as if history kept repeating itself for the young Scots.

"After that freshman year, you starting thinking about his sophomore year," said O'Connell, who sent Polite to Nike Team Florida camp in the fall of his sophomore year where Polite says he had the chance to showcase his game against some of the top players in the area. "It was exciting for me, because I was thinking that regardless, we're going to be good the next three years. As a coach, you're pretty excited because you know you're going to play a pretty high level. It was fun because we knew he was going to be a high major recruit."

Polite's first two seasons had shown so much promise; he was already considered a top prospect in the 2017 class. He was being recruited by top division one programs, and off the court had become a player every Saint Andrew's student knew. It seemed like – as just a sophomore – he had it all.

But something was missing.

"I wanted to win," Polite said.
And then there was his junior year.

Entering his junior season, Anthony Polite was a household name around South Florida basketball. Everyone knew what they were going up against when facing Polite, one of the top players in the area and a 6'6" tank that can shoot it, drive it past you, dish it like a point guard, or throw it down emphatically.

Polite wanted more than that, though. Polite wanted people to fear his Saint Andrews squad the same way opponents feared him, and junior year, he got his wish.

The Scots – armed with a much improved group of returning starters – raced out to a 16-0 start, including a Kreul Classic Public Bracket championship, and wins over top teams such as Gulliver Prep, St. Thomas Aquinas, Dwyer, and Loyola (NY).

"We started the season off really well," Polite said. "We picked it up. We just felt like we were a pretty solid team, we had good chemistry."

Saint Andrew's finished the regular season with a 21-1 record, their only losing coming to a tough, young Oxbridge Academy team at the MLK classic. The Scots continued their run, topping Coral Springs Charter to win their first district title in Polite's time there, and defeating Calvary Christian in the regional quarterfinals to set up a highly anticipated showdown with traveling Chaminade-Madonna in the 4A regional semifinals.

The Lions were armed with a talented group of their own, including 6'5" wing Darius Allen, 6'6" LeAndro Allende, 6'8" Jamal Clarke, and point guard Brandon Jai Ram, all of which are seniors.

"We knew that was going to be a tough one," Polite said. "Chaminade was a tough team, and it was a back-and-forth game. We expected them to come out and be ready just like we were."

The game was a dogfight, as expected. But it was just one of those games for Anthony Polite. Polite couldn't get anything going offensively, with Chaminade cooking up a strong defensive game-plan to deny him the ball and limit his productivity.

Polite's teammates, however, stepped up for him, just like he had done for them so many times.

"There are some games where it's just hard to make something happen," Polite said. "You have to keep your mind straight, just be positive, and I had a bunch of help from teammates that game."

And just like that, Saint Andrew's found themselves down two with under a minute to go.

"Just win the game," O'Connell says he told Polite. "It's a great feeling to have a guy you can tell that to, and Anthony is that guy."

He did just that.

Polite drove right, and just like he had done in the video O'Connell saw of him entering ninth grade, made a nice euro-step for the finish...and one. He hit the free throw, and sent the Scots to their first regional final since that 2012-2013 the season, the year before Polite arrived.

"He thrives on the big stage," O'Connell said. "That three-point play at the end of the game was the ice breaker. We put the ball in his hands and he made it happen."

After the win, it seemed Saint Andrew's was poised for another trip to Lakeland, with Westminster Christian – a heavy underdog – coming to Boca for the regional final.

Despite a hard fought effort that went down to the wire, the Warriors knocked off Polite and the Scots, keeping them short of reaching their goal.

"I think that's motivating us this year," O'Connell said. "It's motivating a lot of us this year. The way we lost in that regional final game against a team that played extremely well against us where we were the heavy favorite. That was just a tough one. It's one of those games I'll never forget the rest of my life."

The loss hurt. It was a knife into the chest of Polite and other Saint Andrews' players, their hopes of capturing another championship for legendary coach O'Connell crushed. Despite going two rounds farther that season, it was reminiscent of Polite's freshman and sophomore years in one aspect.

There was still another ride.

"I'm looking forward for big games," Polite said. "That's what I want. I want to compare our team against bigger teams and that's what I'm waiting for. Those are the games I'm waiting for to erase that loss."

This ride would be the last one. And that hope of this ride being the final time Polite has the opportunity to bring home a crown for Saint Andrews would finish him to put what he calls “110% effort” the off-season after his memorable junior season.

Cameras flashing there Anthony Polite sat next to two of the most important influences in his life. His father, Michael, to his right, and O’Connell to his left, Polite was set to announce to numerous media members a life-changing decision: Where his next stop in his journey was. Miami (FL) or Florida State? That was a question many across the country were waiting for Polite to answer.

After a quick intro, he released the choice he had made. Polite grabbed a garnet-and-gold Seminole hat from under the table and announced his commitment to Florida State University.

“I visited Miami and Florida State,” Polite said. “When I went to Florida State, I just felt at home. All the guys on the team, I mean it just felt different. It felt really good, I really enjoyed the time up there, I enjoyed the coaching staff, and I felt like it was the right spot.”

Polite will be following in his father’s footsteps, who also played basketball at FSU. But this choice – made after a long recruiting process highlighted by visits, long nights of thinking, and conversations with the ones he trusts – was his own to make.

“My Dad always said that the decision was up to me,” Polite said. “He never pressured me.”

For Florida State and Polite, the relationship started on December 18th of 2015, when Saint Andrews faced American Heritage (Plantation) on day one of the Kreul Classic with Seminoles’ coach Leonard Hamilton on hand. Polite finished with 24 points and eight rebounds that afternoon, and after the game was when Hamilton and his staff – already with their mind made on their 2017 target – approached him to share some good news.

“That was the day Florida State offered me,” Polite said of the game on December 18th. “Coach [Leonard] Hamilton came over to me and told me they wanted me. They were going to offer me a scholarship.”

Now almost a year later, he has already signed his letter of intent, and is focused on his goals during his senior season at Saint Andrews, but at the same time optimistic for his future at FSU. Polite is joined by a stellar 2017 Seminoles’ recruiting class, including Florida Vipers teammate RaiQuan Gray, Winter Park forward Wyatt Wilkes, and seven-footer Ikechukwu Obiagu.

He will have plenty of opportunities to succeed at Florida State, and become of the top freshman in the ACC, arguably the best conference in College Basketball.

For as much as Polite is gaining by taking his talents to Tallahassee, Hamilton and staff are gaining maybe more than anyone, being able to coach a special player like Polite.

“A player that all his teammates are going to love playing with,” O’Connell said of what kind of player Florida State is getting. “I don’t think you can say that about everybody. I guarantee within a couple weeks, if they play a pickup game and two guys are captains, Anthony will be the first pick.”

Polite walked around practice with a boot on his leg. He was a little gimp after injuring it in a contest with inner-city rival Boca Raton the night before, a game he fought through the injury and still finished with 23 points to lead the Scots to a 15-point victory, bumping them to 8-0 on the young season.

Despite not being able to practice that day, Polite still walked around high-fiving his teammates, encouraging them the duration of the practice with a vital district showdown looming with Coral Springs Charter the following day.

That’s the kind of player, and teammate Polite is.

“Anthony is a great teammate,” Saint Andrew’s point guard Ben Milstein said. “He’s very unselfish, never putting himself before the team. It’s a lot of fun to play with him because he’s not the type of player to shoot everything. “He’s going to make the right play even if it’s not him shooting, which is really good to see because he’s the best player and a lot of people look up to him.”

Any player, coach, fan, etc. that has ever been associated with Polite will echo that response. Ironically, his play on the court is not polite by any stretch, but off-the-court, his team leadership and character definite his last name and then some.

“His leadership came out this year,” O’Connell said. “If you talk to him he’s quiet, he’s humble, he’s reserved. There’s not an arrogant bone in his body. He makes everyone around him better.”

That character will be tested down the stretch. Saint Andrews is off to a fast start, and will likely cruise past their district, but will have their hands full come regionals. The likely opponents – University School and Calvary Christian – each boast overwhelming rosters. University has stand out sophomores 7’1” Balsa Koprofica and 6’10” Vernon Carey Jr., while new look Calvary Christian has 6’4” Butler commit Jerald Butler, 7’0” USC commit Victor Uyaelunmo, and his ‘little’ brother, 6’8” Solomon Uyaelunmo.

“I know the kind of team we are and I know we can beat both [Calvary and University School],” Polite said. “We have been training since the end of last year so I know how good we can be and how good we are going to be and when the moment arrives we’re going to show what we have.”

But as O’Connell told Polite over the summer, one aspect those teams lack is one that only Saint Andrew’s has, Anthony Polite.

“I told Anthony when everyone was making these choices over the summer that he has to remember something,” O’Connell said. “Yeah it’s going to be tough to guard them, but they’re going to have to guard us. And I believe that’s going to be tough.”

No matter what happens this season, Anthony Polite will be – and already is – a special player, and a special person. His character is off the charts, and his game even more stellar.

But if one thing has been learned from Anthony Polite’s four years at Saint Andrew’s and playing for AAU powerhouse Florida Vipers, it’s been not to count him out. It’s been never to doubt the three-star guard who has aspirations of hearing his name called at the NBA Draft one day.

From the moment O’Connell saw a simple tape of Polite playing in eighth grade, he knew he was going to be special. Only he knew at the moment.

He was, and now everyone else in the nation knows it, too.