

Big Men Back For Florida State

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. – Practice starts today for the Florida State men’s basketball team, and the beginning of a new season brings the return of some familiar faces.

And some big bodies.

After combining to miss 57 games due to injuries a year ago, junior forward Phil Cofer (foot) and fifth-year senior center Michael Ojo (knee) are finally back in the fold.

Having the 6-foot-8 Cofer and the 7-1 Ojo will help the Seminoles in several ways, not the least of which is simply having two more players to rotate onto the floor.

But the biggest boost will likely come on defense and on the glass – the two areas where FSU needed help the most in 2015-16.

“Ojo and Phil gave us a lot of energy. They got a lot of stops,” FSU coach Leonard Hamilton said. “I don’t know if, some of those games where we got outrebounded, if we would have got outrebounded if we had had Ojo and Phil – If we had had a little more physicality in there from a defensive standpoint.”

Physicality ought not be an issue for Ojo or Cofer – especially Ojo, who tips the scales at 304 pounds.

And although they’d have preferred to be on the court, a season away – Ojo missed the entire season while Cofer played in just 11 games – provided each big man the opportunity to better learn the ins and outs of Hamilton’s system.

“Nobody wants to be hurt,” Cofer said. “But just coming in and having the opportunity to learn from the game – on the bench, you see much more than you see on the court.”

FSU won’t hold its first official practice until Monday afternoon, but Cofer and Ojo have been healthy for a few months, and they’ve gotten their feet wet in summer pick-up games with their teammates. Safe to say they’ve made a fast impression.

“I love having Ojo back – even though I hate guarding him,” junior forward Jarquez Smith said.

“We all love playing with Phil,” junior guard Xavier Rathan-Mayes added. “When I’m out there with Phil, he uplifts me and he gets me in a frame of mind where I’m guarding the basketball 94 feet. I’m playing the right way.”

For Florida State, “the right way” usually translates to relentless, physically imposing defense. That was the calling card for the Seminoles during their run to four straight NCAA tournaments from 2008-12, a stretch in which Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski once famously told his team, “The men are coming,” prior to a meeting with FSU.

And while the Seminoles have since steadily improved their offense over the last few seasons, the defense has often fallen short of Hamilton's standards.

As a result, FSU enters the 2016 campaign looking to make the NCAA tournament for the first time in five years.

"We can outscore teams easy," Smith said. "But we can't let them keep up with us by playing lazy defenses."

Hamilton doesn't blame laziness for FSU's defensive lapses last year. Rather, he's quick to remind that, without Ojo and Cofer, the Seminoles' bench was uncomfortably short.

And after a long grind through the ACC – FSU once played three games in eight days – the Seminoles wore down as the calendar turned to February and March.

"We weren't deep enough to sustain the kind of effort that it takes to play on both ends of the court," Hamilton said. "So we're pushing it, pushing it, pushing it, being much more aggressive offensively. And I just didn't feel that I had enough quality depth last year to maintain the same level of intensity on the defensive end."

Hamilton, though, is optimistic that a reloaded roster – he's got Ojo and Cofer back, as well as four key contributors and a highly-regarded class of newcomers – can get the Seminoles' defense back on track. The national media seems to agree. Although the official preseason polls have yet to be released, the Seminoles have checked in on early Top-25s from USA Today, Sporting News, SBNation and Campus Insiders.

FSU opens the regular season at home against Charleston Southern on Nov. 12.

"I think that we'll be improved defensively," Hamilton said. "One, I think our techniques will be a lot better. But I also think the quality of our depth will be improved. We can keep people fresher, so we can sustain a high level of energy."