

## **Florida State Guard M.J. Walker Has Finally Embraced Being A Leader**

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During M.J. Walker's time at Florida State, there have been a few established leaders he deferred to because he was an underclassman.

Now in his senior season, Walker has become the leader of the Seminoles roster.

Players and coaches have said Walker has always been a leader without having an official title. Walker is often seen talking to players during practices and giving them advice on what they could be working on.

Now, Walker has fully embraced a leadership role in his senior season by being more vocal and not being afraid to call out players during practices in front of his teammates. Walker says it has been a process trying to adapt to a more vocal leadership role.

"Not just when I need to be but at all the time," Walker told the Democrat. "So, I think that's the biggest thing I'm focusing on. And just being that leader on the court. Trent (Forrest) was that guy, and we could depend on him during games to just calm everything down.

"Get us in the right formation or whatever the situation may be. He was just that guy to calm things down, and we can depend on that. So, I've been working on that in and practicing those habits and being that everyday guy."

Walker has taken pride in mentoring players on the team including junior guard Nathanael Jack, who transferred to FSU from Eastern Florida State College last year. Walker has been seen hanging around Johnson as the two have formed a tight-knit relationship.

In just his short time with the Seminoles, Jack says he has seen a difference in Walker's leadership skills.

"The main thing where I've seen M.J. grow is definitely his voice," Jack said. "Last year, I felt like he was a leader, and a lot of us did. Just because he never had that actual title as being a leader of a captain, I felt like he was reserved. I felt like he knew a lot of what was going on and wanted to help and wanted to be more vocal, but he just wasn't.

"He would be more of a person where he would pull a player to the side and talk to them instead of trying to motivate a group as a whole. And I think that's where he took his biggest steps. He stepped out of his comfort zone of being more verbal and kind of addressing the entire team instead of pulling players to the side one by one. Just trying to use his voice and being more demanding. This year he is embracing the leadership role as a whole."

Not only has Walker taken steps in his leadership growth, but also his play on the court. Walker is the Seminoles' leading returning scorer from the 2019-20 season as he averaged 10.6 points and 1.7 rebounds per game. He also tied a career-high last year with 44 three-pointers as a junior as he helped FSU to a 26-5 record and the ACC Championship.

Expectations are high this season for Walker as he not only was named to the Second-Team All-ACC team, but he also finished third in the ACC Preseason Player of the Year voting.

FSU head coach Leonard Hamilton has seen the growth in Walker's play on both sides of the court.

"We have a symbol, and it is a picture of a junkyard dog," Hamilton said. "A guy who you relate to with all of those broken down cars and people go in and buy spare parts. And they have those mean dogs that protect the yard, we call our defense, junkyard defense. And we have this emblem of this mean-looking bulldog. And M.J. represents that.

"He's a hard nose, tough junkyard dog mentality that will bite you if come into his territory. But he is equally effective on the offensive end as he is on the defensive end. He leads by example. He's not a real talkative guy, but he's an energetic, confident person who leads by example. And when he speaks, everybody listens. I expect him to have an unbelievable year."

During the summer, Walker worked on his game by watching a lot of himself. While he did put in work on the court, watching film of his past games repeatedly was the biggest difference in this offseason compared to others. The main reason Walker watched a lot of film was to better understand the different coverages and plays teams use against him and the rest of Seminoles players. Walker also wanted to know how teams scouted him and the rest of his teammates.

Walker said by watching film, he learned a lot about his game and what he needed to improve on.

"I play in spurts," Walker said. "But I think the biggest thing for me is when I'm not hot or not shooting the ball well to just continue doing other things as far as steals, rebounds, energy generates hoops, just things that would continue to bring energy to the game without necessarily the ball in my hands.

"I was always a scorer my whole life, so just trying to find different ways to affect the game and keep my teammates involved at all times."

Despite FSU losing three top players in Forrest, Devin Vassell, and Patrick Williams from last year's team, the Seminoles are expected to be in the mix for the ACC Championship once again this season. A major reason why along with Walker, is the addition of freshman Scottie Barnes.

Last week, Barnes was named as the 2020-21 Preseason ACC Freshman of the Year. Barnes, the highest-rated recruit under Hamilton and his staff, was also selected to the Preseason All-ACC First Team.

Walker says he has been building a relationship with Barnes since he stepped on campus as he is expected a huge season from the freshman.

"Scottie, he's is going to shock the world," Walker said. "But just being in that system that we've been in an NBA system. With his athleticism and the way he plays, he is just going to shock the world.

"His talent alone, but his dog mentality and the energy he brings is really going to separate him because a lot of people have that talent but don't necessarily bring that dog every day. But he has that energy and everything. So that's what I like about him the most. And just his willingness to learn and get better every day. So as long as he keeps that and continues to push, he will be fine."

When he isn't on the court and working on his game, Walker is a devoted fan of music, especially R&B. Walker even has a small studio set up in his room where he makes beats and raps as well.

Music is a hobby for Walker, but he hasn't ruled it out as something he would focus on in the future.

"I don't know if I would make a career out of it. It is just something that I love doing," Walker said. "It is just something that takes away maybe if I'm stressed out or I just want to have fun or whatever. Something that I do to bring other people along when I bring my teammates around, rap and stuff like that. This kind of thing, I just have fun with it.

But at the same time, I love doing it."