

## **M.J. – The Skywalker**

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FSView

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There's the CEO of Chick Fil-A, there's 2 Chainz, and then there's MJ Walker.

It's not easy to find Jonesboro, Georgia on a map. Only 5,000 people live in the town, and many of those born there end up staying. The people that make it out do not take it lightly. MJ Walker knows that.

"It was tough. There were a lot of distractions ... all kinds of trouble. Everybody is trying to get their own and make it," Walker says, re-living much of it in his mind. "I just tried to stay focused. Basketball helped me."

Playing basketball is Walker's earliest memory. A stellar high school career, count it. An invitation to the McDonald's All-American game, check. Five-stars as a recruit coming out of high school, no doubt. So, when did his favorite moment of playing basketball happen?

At nine years old...in a church league.

"There were two minutes left," Walker's eyes suddenly light up. "I got the ball, pounded it, got fouled and scored. I never show emotion in a game. That was the first time I ever screamed after I scored. After that, I knew I had that dog in me."

The ring of an elevator seems to come out of nowhere in a silent hallway of the FSU basketball practice facility. A basketball hits the hardwood in the distance every now and then.

Despite daily dosages of practice, film watching and class, Walker takes pride in arriving punctually. He drops everything in his arms just to shake hands. The walls of the facility are filled with photographs of standout freshman — from Beasley to Bacon to Isaac. Walker notices them every day, envisioning himself popping out of those same picture frames.

"That's one of the reasons why I came here. It was a good opportunity for me to take over what the [freshmen] used to do for the program," Walker says with a look of determination. "With what I can do, I felt like I would fit well in the program."

Shooting 42 percent from the field and 40 percent from beyond the arc is certainly a good start. Already one of FSU's strongest shooters, Walker's ability to create his own shot adds yet another dimension to a Florida State offense that's ranked third in the ACC in scoring.

"MJ is giving us everything he has," head coach Leonard Hamilton says about the true freshman. "He's coachable. He's a great teammate and he's got a good relationship with players and coaches."

With scholarship offers from UCLA, Georgia Tech and Virginia Tech lined up out of high school, the 6-5 guard chose the Garnet & Gold. Tough choice, right?

Not for MJ Walker.

"Family. That's the most important thing," Walker says without hesitation. "The loyalty as well. Florida State's coaches had been recruiting me since ninth grade. They cared about my life."

Caring is the first step in every walk of life, from the biggest cities to the smallest towns. For a small town in Georgia, Jonesboro has notable natives. 2 Chainz, Chick-Fil-A's CEO and several professional athletes are just a few to have made it out of Clayton County. Walker lights up at the thought of being on that list.

"It would mean a lot," Walker takes a breath before looking out onto the court. "A lot of good guys made it out of that area. Those are guys that I looked up to. It gave me hope that I could make it out."

Memories fly out of Walker's mind in a vacuum. Jonesboro is still very much with him, probably resting on a shoulder like the "chip" so often described by those who make it out. Time passes, practice is about to start, and so it's back down the elevator. Drake's "God's Plan" is blaring in a nearby film room on the first floor.

To Walker, landing at Florida State is part of the plan — a plan so vivid that he must see it every time he closes his eyes. Trusting the process is something that he and his father have always lived by, but the first part of the process is remembering where you come from. To Walker, that means never being far removed from what he started as.

Just a kid from Jonesboro.