

Phil Cofer Brings A Blue-Collar Mentality, Leadership To Florida State Basketball

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Phil Cofer is finally healthy and it shows.

Florida State's 6-foot-8 senior forward has recovered physically from ankle surgery that prematurely ended his sophomore season and mentally with the confidence to believe he can take the pounding of an entire college basketball season.

And on a team of young slashers and shooters, Cofer is the blue-collar glue as the Seminoles have raced out to a 6-0 record.

Entering Monday's game against No. 6 Florida, Cofer is second to Terance Mann in scoring with 14.2 points per game and shooting percentage at .642, is third in rebounding with 4.7 per game and is second among starters with the fewest turnovers (seven).

In his last three games, Cofer is shooting 23 of 31 (.742) and averaging 18.0 points. He's also developed more of an outside game and in the Seminoles' 78-73 victory over Rutgers last Tuesday he connected on 4 of 6 3-point attempts.

Prior to that, Cofer was 2 of 7 from the 3-point arc this season. He attempted only 32 3-points in three seasons before this year, making 12.

"My teammates are getting me the ball in those situations," he said. "We do a lot of drive-and-kick and it's what has been opening up the shots. I've worked on my shooting, a lot of repetition, and it's helped a lot."

But what has helped mainly is that Cofer can run and jump for a full game and not worry about his ankle — or his back and foot, other areas where he has had injury problems during his college career.

After a promising freshman season in which he averaged 6.9 points and 4.5 rebounds, and started the last 24 games of the season, Cofer required surgery in January of 2016 to remove a cyst in his ankle after playing only 11 games as a sophomore.

Cofer played in 32 games last season but averaged only 2.9 points and 1.9 rebounds. FSU assistant coach C.Y. Young, who recruited Cofer, said it was understandable that Cofer was tentative most of the season.

"The entire season, you could see him limping and favoring it," Young said. "He always said it didn't hurt but you could see when he ran he was obviously favoring onside more than the other. It was like he didn't want to put his foot on the ground."

Late in the season, Cofer began to get more confident about the ankle. And Young said the day after the Seminoles were eliminated in the NCAA Tournament in Orlando by Xavier, Cofer was in the gym.

"The next season started for him the day after our last game," Young said. "He was in the gym around the clock. I don't think he took any time off. That's the one thing about Phil, is that you never have to coach effort."

This season, Cofer is pain-free and looking forward to the rest of his senior season.

"Injuries take a toll on anybody," he said. "What's helping me is not dwelling on it. I'm leaving it in the past." Cofer, who played high school basketball at Whitewater High School in Fayetteville, Ga., said he received strong guidance from his parents, former Detroit Lions Pro Bowl defensive end Michael Cofer, and former University of

Tennessee basketball player Reba Cofer. Working hard and playing to win were stressed while being raised by the two elite athletes.

“Being competitive runs in my family,” he said. “Even in little things, like playing games, it’s competitive. My Dad and Mom gave me tremendous support. It kept me going.”

Cofer said some of the most heated games he’s played in were two-on-two basketball in his back yard: he and his brother vs. Dad and Mom.

“Mom still has her jump shot,” Cofer said. “They whipped us a few times before we finally got a little older and bigger.”

Given his parents’ background at Tennessee (his father played for Johnny Majors), Cofer intended to continue that family tradition. But when Cuonzo Martin was fired as the Volunteers coach in 2014, Cofer backed off his verbal commitment and signed with FSU coach Leonard Hamilton.

“Coach Martin and I had a great relationship,” Cofer said. “When he left I decided I had other options. I couldn’t have made a better choice; Coach Hamilton is like another father to me. He thinks of you as a person, not a basketball player. Everything happens for a reason.”

Cofer’s teammates say his leadership will be the glue in whatever success the Seminoles have this season.

“He brings the energy every day,” Mann said. “We all hurt for him when he was injured but he’s playing great now. It’s not just scoring, but all the little things that are important, like defense and rebounding. If he’s not scoring he’s always doing something else to help the team.”

Young offered an example. He said Cofer is a master at help-side defense (covering a man who has beaten his nearest teammate), forcing the offensive player to stop cutting or pick up his dribble, then moving back quickly to guard his man.

“That doesn’t show up in the stat sheet,” Young said. “He does a bunch of little things that don’t, but help us win. He brings an energy, physicality and toughness to this team.”

Young also said Cofer has been a leader from day one.

“He’s gotten that from his parents,” Young said. “Even as a freshman he didn’t hesitate to tell upperclassmen, ‘hey, listen to the coaches ... do your job.’”

It took four years, but Cofer has gone from role player to one of the team’s stars. Young said it’s rewarding to watch.

“Whatever success he has this season, he’s earned it,” Young said. “But for Phil, it will be all about the team success. It’s all he’s ever cared about.”