

Phil Cofer's Resurgence Key In FSU's Run To Second Consecutive NCAA Tournament

By Safid Deen

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While the majority of Florida State's basketball players have contributed to the team's overall culture change, senior Phil Cofer has witnessed the evolution firsthand.

During Cofer's freshman season in 2014-15, FSU's roster featured a sharpshooting freshman guard in Xavier Rathan-Mayes, but lacked considerable depth and talent. The Seminoles did not play postseason basketball of any kind for the first time in nine seasons.

Cofer, a 6-9 forward with freakish athleticism, became a building block as longtime head coach Leonard Hamilton and his assistant coaching staff strived to alter the roster to present a greater challenge in the ACC.

The Seminoles, which fielded their best team in program history last season, continued to see the fruit of their labors, earning the second straight NCAA Tournament appearance, partly behind the leadership and resilience of Cofer, one of the ACC's most improved players this season.

"It's definitely come far — the culture is definitely changing," Cofer said as the No. 8 seeded Seminoles prepare to play No. 9 seed Missouri late Friday night in Nashville, Tenn.

"[FSU has] turned into a big-time school. I think everybody is doing a pretty good job trying to change the culture player-wise, and trying to get that junkyard defense back."

A defining trait in Hamilton's coaching career has been his team's knack of defensive intensity. But in recent years, Hamilton has worked to rely on guard-heavy sets with a stretch power forward to spread the floor offensively and remain nimble enough defensively with a shot-blocking presence.

Players like Rathan-Mayes, Dwayne Bacon, Malik Beasley and Jonathan Isaac from 2015-17 provided NBA talent for the Seminoles, while players like Cofer and leading scorer Terance Mann provided the glue as players who matured into major contributors later in their college careers.

Cofer fits Hamilton's need for versatility and athleticism at the forward position, and is having the best season of his career, averaging 13.1 points with 5.1 rebounds for the Seminoles.

"He's giving a tremendous effort on both ends of the floor," Mann said of Cofer. "He worked hard in the offseason, and he's been doing a great job of getting everybody on the same page."

As a sophomore, Cofer played in only 11 games after undergoing season-ending surgery to repair the fifth metatarsal in his foot. Cofer said he also had a procedure to remove a cyst in his other foot. The two injuries hindered his effectiveness as a junior where he averaged just 2.9 points and 1.9 rebounds in 32 games last season.

It was not until the offseason following FSU's second-round exit in the NCAA tournament in 2017 where Cofer began to turn the corner. Offseason workouts and pickup games helped him regain his explosiveness. But more importantly, his confidence was also being restored.

Cofer's transformation carried into this season where he's shooting 49 percent from the field, 40 percent from 3-point range, and is averaging a career-high 29.3 minutes per game. He has led the Seminoles in scoring in nine games this season, and has six 20-point performances, including a career-high 28-point effort in a loss at Duke on Dec. 30.

“Spreading the floor is definitely a key thing I worked on this summer and it’s paid off. It helps our offense a lot,” Cofer said. “I try not to be a liability on the court – like that guy can’t shoot, that guy can’t do that. That definitely was my mindset coming into this season.”

Cofer’s teammates have also taken his efforts on both sides of the floor into account playing alongside him this season.

“It pushes us when you see someone who puts that much effort in,” freshman forward Mfiondu Kabengele said of Cofer. “Before the season, he had a couple struggles, and he’s been so resilient.”

Added guard P.J. Savoy: “Phil’s one of the guys we look up to. When we see Phil fighting, it makes all of us fight. It’s just contagious. He does everything the right way. He leads by example.”

Cofer is preparing to further FSU’s culture in the NCAA tournament, but there is a chance he could have another season of eligibility to do so. FSU will request a medical redshirt for Cofer’s sophomore season after this season with hopes he can play for the team next season.

In the meantime, Cofer wants to continue playing with his improved mindset — like he has nothing to lose, and everything to gain.

Cofer’s love for the game has also been a driving force in his resurgent season.

“I think the coaches really helped me with that mindset,” Cofer said. “They put that confidence in me this year. It really helped me a lot just to get on the court and play like I just love basketball.

“I’ve definitely been playing like that, and it’s helped me a lot.”