

Different Paths For Walker, Kabengele Lead To Similar Freshmen Impact At Florida State

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Tallahassee Democrat

January 23, 2018

Florida State guard M.J. Walker and forward Mfiondu Kabengele have both made big impacts for the Seminoles this season.

But the similarities end there for the two freshmen.

Walker was a McDonald's All-American and a five-star, or high four-star, prospect that averaged 27.8 points per game as a senior.

He had offers from UCLA, Kansas, Memphis, and West Virginia -- among his 11 total offers -- but chose to come play for the Seminoles.

Now Walker is averaging 8.1 points per game and coming off the bench.

"It's different," Walker said.

"I was used to starting and everything, but I had to understand and be mature enough to know that I'm a freshman. I'm playing under guys that have been here and know the system well.

"I had to learn the system. Learn the principles defensively and offensively. It's different. I feel like I'm adjusting and still learning and it's definitely been a road for me."

Then you have Kabengele -- the 270th overall prospect in the 2016 recruiting class by the 247Sports composite rankings -- who only had offers from Boston College, Georgia, Binghamton, St. Louis, and St. Bonaventure.

He was making the transition from guard to forward after going through a growth spurt, and that hindered his progress when it came to earning more offers.

"Junior year summer, I was about 6-foot-4 and I became 6-foot-7, and I changed from a wing to a forward," Kabengele said.

"That was the biggest change for me. I was always a physical guard so when I grew into a big there wasn't that much change."

Walker has had his moments this season where he's shown flashes of brilliance -- he's scored in double figures in seven of FSU's 19 games and scored 22 points against Colorado State and 24 against Virginia Tech -- but he's also had four games where he hasn't scored at all.

"When my shots not falling, I try to do whatever I can defensively," Walker said.

"I was hot last game and it kind of came to me. I just fed off that energy. You have those games where you're hot or you're not... I feel like defense creates offense. That's what my high school coach preached. That's just how I've played my game my whole life...

"Even if you're having an off night, you can always control how hard you play on defense. So that's what I try to keep in my mind when I play."

One of the reasons that Walker averages nearly 20 minutes a game is because of the tenacious defense that he plays. FSU coach Leonard Hamilton has praised Walker's effort on defense consistently since his arrival.

"How many times do you see freshmen that come in and really get after you and defend you with the effort that he gives?" Hamilton said.

FSU redshirted Kabengele during the 2016-2017 season.

"Mfiondu is still growing," Hamilton said.

"That's why we have the knee braces on him... When we were evaluating him, we realized that his best basketball was still ahead of him. That's why we redshirted him. He's still learning, but he's playing off of instincts. He plays with such passion and reckless abandon, and he's extremely competitive and physical."

As a redshirt, he was put on the scout team and was forced to guard No. 5 overall pick in the 2017 NBA Draft Jonathan Isaac, or second round pick Dwayne Bacon during practice.

It gave him an appreciation for the speed of the game and how to play at the college level, and he's used that knowledge to carve out a role in FSU's defense this year playing as a forward as well, as the center position after junior Christ Koumadje went out with a foot injury.

He's averaging 8.3 points and 5.3 rebounds per game this season.

"The more games that I play in the ACC, I feel like I'm kind of getting the pace of the game, the way the referees are going to officiate the game, and what I can do and what I can't do," Kabengele said.

"Just waiting for my spots to be aggressive and being observant on the court."