

Different Paths To Making A Similar Impact For Walker, Kabengele

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Noles 247

January 27, 2018

FSU has leaned heavily on a pair of freshmen as they entered ACC play - guard M.J. Walker and forward Mfiondu Kabengele.

Both have produced.

The path to this point is very different for the two though.

Walker Blossoming Within The Team Game

Florida State freshman guard M.J. Walker is dealing with having to balance two approaches.

The first, that of a highly regarded high school scorer who earned accolades such as an invitation to the McDonald's All-America Game, and the second, of a player within a college system.

"I know I am an aggressive player," Walker said. "I play aggressive, that is just how I am."

But he also knows that at the collegiate level, for the team to have success, it isn't solely about him. It is a matter of fitting into a team concept and serving a role while also excelling at his individual game.

"It is different," Walker also stated about the college game. "You have been used to starting and everything, but I had to understand and be mature enough to know that I am a freshman playing under guys that have been here in the system, they know the system well, so I had to learn the system. Learn defensively the principles and offensively. It is different. I'm adjusting, still learning."

Walker averaged 6.2 points through his first six ACC contests. After a 24-point breakout performance at Virginia Tech, he has averaged 16.5 points in his past two outings. That is a microcosm of his season, where he has been held scoreless on four occasions but also found himself in double figures seven times.

"I know I've been up and down on the season, it is going to happen," Walker said. "I know what I am capable of. I don't try to get down on myself. My coaches keep me up. My teammates keep me up."

"Of course that game, I felt like it gave me confidence," Walker added of his scoring outburst against the Hokies. "For me, I am just doing whatever I can to help my team win. It is not about me."

But an effective Walker, who sees his jump shot falling and scores in a variety of ways, makes FSU an even more dangerous offensive team.

"It was a big game for him definitely to gain his confidence," junior guard Terance Mann said about Walker's showing at Virginia Tech. "He hit a lot of jump shots. A player like him, to see his jump shot falling, definitely is going to help him down the stretch. ... It helped him, it helped us."

Walker said his approach wasn't different, but when things start going well for him on the offensive end, that it can lead to an avalanche of positive results.

"Just playing with confidence," Walker said. "I fed off that energy."

Head coach Leonard Hamilton didn't see Walker's performances prior to his breakout against the Hokies as him struggling in league play. He sees a lot of positives in what he has brought to the court throughout his freshman campaign. Hamilton added that Walker, a top recruit with high expectations, is now playing without a lot of pressure and his game is blossoming in that situation.

"He plays great defense," Hamilton said. "How many times have you seen a freshman come in that is really going to get after you and defend you with the effort that he gives?"

"He sprints the floor every time. He is coachable. He has been positive," Hamilton added. "The only thing is maybe sometimes his jump shot isn't going in and we know he could be one of the top two or three shooters on our team. That is just part of being a freshman, going through the process."

His defensive ability is something he takes pride in. It is also not the normal trait displayed by such a highly regarded scorer.

"For me, I feel like defense creates offense," Walker said. "That is just how I've played my game my whole life is that if you play hard on defense, your offense is always going to come to you. So even when you are having a hot night or a cold night, whatever [on offense], you can always control how hard you play on defense."

"There is a lot of stuff you need to learn," Walker added about FSU's defensive approach. "When I got here it was as far as defense, the principles and the details that we dial in on every day, that I had to learn. Just repetition and keeping it in my mind and just continuing to keep doing it. It was a challenge, but I am still learning."

Walker, who is averaging 8.1 points and 1.6 rebounds per game, has his best ball is ahead of him.

"He is just scratching the surface," Hamilton said. "He is coachable. He is a sponge. He is a guy that seems to be eager to do whatever it takes for the team. He is a great teammate."

Redshirt, Different Role Helping Kabengele Learn His Game

Forward Mfiondu Kabengele arrived at Florida State before the start of the 2016-17 season, but didn't touch the court as the Seminoles made a run to the NCAA Tournament.

"You want to play. You want to be active. You want to hear the crowd and be a part of the whole hype because we had a really great season," Kabengele said of watching that run from the sidelines, cheering on his teammates. But in his first year in Tallahassee, he was relegated to the role of a fan and a practice player.

He has no regrets over it though. It is why he is now finding success in his first year on the court.

"It was great because every practice I was with the green team and I had to guard Jon [Jonathan Isaac] Bake [Dwayne Bacon], X [Xavier Rathan-Mayes] off ball screens and vice-versa, they had to guard me. I just tried to be aggressive and score over [Michael] Ojo, so I learned a lot," Kabengele said. "I learned how to be more mature. I learned how to stay competitive because those guys are really great players. It was really beneficial for me."

After his redshirt season, Kabengele focused heavily on his diet and workout routine to cut weight and alleviate pain on his knees.

"I was super dedicated," Kabengele said of his offseason regiment.

Hamilton says Kabengele is still growing and that they are extremely pleased with where he is at 20 games into his college career.

"In evaluating him, we realized his best basketball is ahead of him. That is why we redshirted him last year," Hamilton said. "But he is still learning. He is playing off of instincts. He has good dribbling, passing and shooting skills. Now he doesn't always know exactly how to use them, but something is going to happen when he is on the court.

"But one thing, he plays with such passion and reckless abandon," Hamilton added. "He is extremely competitive and physical. We know that with that type of demeanor he is going to reach his full potential and he does have some potential that we see growing every day in practice."

Kabengele, who is averaging 8.1 points and 5.1 rebounds per game, admits that with each minute he gets, especially in league play, he is learning more about his game.

"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."

Kabengele spoke on figuring out in his first few minutes in a game how officials are going to call a game and his play. He admitted that he enjoys being a physical presence and mixing it up.

Entering the season, Kabengele expected his role to be as a 'four' in FSU's offense, but with the injury to Christ Koumadje he was thrust more into a post/center role. So going forward, he intends to work on ball handling and coming off screens to be effective in the four role.

But for now, he is enjoying his first full season of action while trying to get the most out of the lessons learned a year ago.

"They just told me just maximize the opportunity, because this season, this team is so connected," Kabengele said of the coaching staff. "It is about making sure our preparation is on point."