

Freshman Vassell Emerging For FSU Men

By Tim Linafelt

Seminoles.com

January 26, 2019

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. – The shot is probably what stands out most.

With the Florida State men's basketball team trailing Clemson by two points midway through the second half Tuesday night at the Tucker Center, the ball found its way to the corner, where Davin Vassell, a 6-5, 170-pound freshman averaging a little more than eight minutes per game, was waiting behind the 3-point line.

Given the situation – the Seminoles had lost three straight and were behind in a game they absolutely had to win – another freshman might have passed up the shot.

And Vassell was on the floor with Terance Mann, Trent Forrest and Mfiondu Kabengele, any one of which might have been a more obvious choice to lead the charge in one of the game's key moments.

Vassell, though, didn't think twice. Given an open look and the knowledge that he'd knocked down that same shot countless times in practice, Vassell pulled up, fired toward the basket and held his follow-through as the ball passed through the net.

At that point, the Seminoles had trailed Clemson for more than 24 minutes. After Vassell's shot, which gave them a one-point lead, they never trailed again and went on to win, 77-68.

"The feeling was amazing," Vassell said. "It's something I've never felt before.

"I was just excited, and I got right back on defense."

And that's the part of Vassell's game that wasn't so immediately apparent.

Because despite a healthy showing in the stat line – five points, a rebound and a steal in a career-high 20 minutes – Vassell's biggest contribution might not have shown up in the box score.

Or maybe it did, in the form of Clemson guard Marcquise Reed's output.

A senior guard, Reed came into the contest averaging 19.7 points per game – good for fourth in the ACC and behind only future lottery picks from Duke (R.J. Barrett, Zion Williamson) and a high draft prospect from Boston College (Ky Bowman).

And with three of FSU's best defenders either out (Phil Cofer) or playing through injuries (Terance Mann, Trent Forrest), Reed seemed in line for a big evening.

Vassell, though, had other plans.

Matched up with Clemson's Reed for much of his time on the floor, Vassell helped hold Reed to just four points at halftime and 13 for the game – his lowest total in more than two months.

With Vassell on the floor, Reed scored just six points.

"We wanted some length on Reed, because he is virtually unstoppable," FSU coach Leonard Hamilton said. "He has such a unique way of making tough shots. ... Devin is long, and he did a good job."

Added Vassell: "I just accepted the challenge. I don't want to back down from nobody, and I've never backed down from anybody."

"So seeing someone that's averaging 20 points a game right in front of me, I said this is the night where I don't want that to happen to me. So I took pride in that."

Vassell also takes pride in carving out his place on a team that boasts a wealth of veterans.

A former three-star prospect who described himself as "under-recruited," Vassell hadn't attracted much interest until FSU assistant Charlton Young checked in on Vassell's AAU team near Atlanta.

A 23-year coaching veteran with deep ties to the state of Georgia, Young has become famous for turning over rocks in search of underappreciated talent. And as soon as he saw Vassell, Young knew he was on to something.

"We were playing a pickup game and I ended up playing really well," Vassell said. "And on the spot, he said he was going to offer me a scholarship to Florida State."

"This was one of my dream schools, so there was no doubt in my mind I was going to come here."

Upon his arrival, Vassell found what seemed like a long road to playing time, but also plenty of upperclassmen who were willing to help.

One by one, Vassell would ask the more experienced Seminoles to tell him the best way to make an early impact.

One by one, they all answered in the exact same fashion:

"Everybody said, 'Defense,'" Vassell said. "So, I just came in trying to prove that I'm one of the best defenders on the team."

So Vassell committed himself to learning Hamilton's defensive principles — to shrinking gaps and keeping his hands high.

And he didn't think too much about scoring.

"I really wasn't worried about offense at all," Vassell said. "I was just worried about, 'Let me stop this guy right in front of me.' And I know if I can do that then my team has a great chance to win."

With Vassell giving a strong effort at both ends of the floor, the Seminoles had a chance to win against Clemson and took it.

They rallied from a nine-point deficit and, after fighting through a three-game skid, built some positive energy in advance of Sunday's game at Miami (6 p.m., ESPNU).

"He plays hard and gives effort. He just does what he's asked to do," senior David Nichols said. "That's huge for him to come into a game like this and do what he did."

And Vassell doesn't plan on slowing down any time soon.

"To contribute however I could just felt amazing," he said. "I want to continue to do that for my team."