

From Tumor To Leading Scorer: Phil Cofer's Roller Coaster Ride At Florida State

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No player on Florida State's basketball roster has had a career like Phil Cofer's.

Cofer was never supposed to be playing in Tallahassee. He was supposed to be in the orange and white in Knoxville, Tennessee. However, when Tennessee head coach Cuonzo Martin took off for California after signing day, Cofer was released from his letter of intent and signed with the Seminoles before the 2014-15 season.

His freshman year it looked like FSU had stolen a future All-ACC caliber player after he averaged 6.9 points and 4.5 rebounds per game in a reserve role.

His dunk over future No. 3 pick and 2014-15 ACC Player of the Year Jahliil Okafor against Duke was one of the highlights of FSU's season.

Then it all came crashing down.

Cofer was asked to change his playing style to more of a stretch-four role to combat the growing trend of stretch fours in the ACC and college basketball in general. Stretch fours play on the perimeter more and have to be able to shoot and handle the basketball.

"It's really just how the game is changing now," Cofer told the *Tallahassee Democrat*.

"Back then a lot of (forwards) were straight post players. That's what I was in high school so that's really all I did, but with everything changing so much, the coaches asked me to up my game... Coach C.Y. (Charlton Young) was telling me that it was going to take time and I would get towards it. I just kept working."

He struggled with the move initially averaging just 3.8 points and two rebounds per game while only playing 12 minutes per game during his sophomore season.

It didn't help that he had a recurring ankle injury that ended his season just 11 games in.

"It definitely wasn't a good feeling just from the pain," Cofer told the *Tallahassee Democrat*.

"It definitely confused me a little bit because some days were good and then some days were bad. I always felt it so it was hard to play on it. It was always on my mind. I think my family, the way they keep being strong, helped me out to keep pushing through. It definitely messed up my game because there was some stuff I couldn't do and some stuff I could do. I was kind of a liability on the court when playing ACC basketball."

The Injury

The injury was far more serious than anyone expected, and the reason why he was having so many issues wasn't found until he actually had the surgery.

His surgeon found a bone tumor in his foot that had to be immediately removed.

"When you have something removed like that from your body, especially the size of the tumor that was removed, it takes your body a long time to accustom itself to literally having a bone removed," FSU men's basketball athletic trainer Amanda Robinson said.

"He actually responded pretty well once he had surgery. It was the unfortunate timing for when he had the procedure."

The growth was at least three millimeters long, which is a substantial size for a foot tumor, according to Robinson. The tumor was tested to make sure that it wasn't going to be cancerous or going to spread. It was a pretty nervous time for Cofer and the FSU staff as they waited for the results to return.

"There was some concern of course," Robinson said.

"As with all of us. It wasn't determined that it was a tumor until surgery. The doctor was in there and he saw it. When he found out it had already been removed from his foot. There's always that concern so he was a little shocked, but he trusted the doctors and they ran the tests as quickly as they could..."

"Once it was removed it becomes a scary thing because is it going to spread is it going to get bigger? That's why it immediately had to be removed. Once it was removed we ran tests and we were able to catch it in time."

The Recovery

Once it was determined that the tumor wasn't cancerous and there wasn't a danger of it spreading, Cofer began his rehabilitation in the hopes of returning to the court for the 2016-17 season.

It was a tough process for him to go through because he wasn't cleared to return to practice for a full six months, but he held up as best he could.

"When I have any athlete that's out for any period of time, the psychological component of being out of the sport you love and not being able to do the things that you want every single day takes a toll on you," Robinson said.

"Phil, he endured a lot of isolation because there were certain things that he could and couldn't do. His personality, he's just such a great guy. He was just smiling his way through the whole thing even though it was a downer because it was in the middle of the season. He handled it very well. He's very charismatic. He's always the one to lift everyone else's spirits up and he was kind of able to do that for himself, which is pretty unique."

Cofer returned the following year and the struggles that he had as a sophomore continued.

He had to fight for playing time with future Top-6 pick Jonathan Isaac and he was also trying to lose a lot of bad weight that he had put on while waiting to be cleared.

He was also still transitioning into the stretch four role that he wasn't accustomed to.

"I was watching his games as a senior in high school," Junior FSU guard Terance Mann said.

"Him and Jarquez Smith started at the four position and I thought he was a great player. Real athletic, and I always looked at him as like a four man. No dribbling, no shooting, that's just how he was. He would like to shoot the mid-ranges, which always went in, but the three ball wasn't there..."

"It's just hard to come back knowing that you have to battle for your position even though you're not 100 percent yet. That probably took a toll on him, but it gave him even more time to work on his game."

Cofer averaged just 2.9 points and 1.9 rebounds per game while only playing 12.5 minutes per game during the 2016-17 season.

But he took his struggles in stride and tried to look at the positives that came from the injury and the season.

"I think it definitely helped a lot," Cofer said.

"I think my injury definitely gave me some pros and some cons. I think most of the pros is that I was able to keep working on my shot and I didn't stop working on my shot no matter how my foot felt or how my injury was.

"I think it helped me progress. Just spotting up in the corner when I was hurt that year and shoot the J. Just being on the bench and learning from coach Stan (Jones) how our offense rolls. It definitely helped me."

Cofer spent as much time as he was able to in the gym working on his shooting and ball handling, the two traits that would be required of him if he was going to transition into that role and make an impact during his senior season.

Cofer earned a starting spot on the floor during the 2017-18 season and made the most of it showing off his brand-new skills while leading the team to its first Elite Eight since 1993 and just the third time in program history. He had the second-best three-point percentage (.375) on the team behind Braian Angola (.376) and led the team in points per game (12.8). He was also second on the team in rebounds per game (5.1).

It was a complete turnaround from what he was able to do during his sophomore years as he recovered from injury and a complete 180 from the way he played as a freshman.

He's enjoying the new style of play and enjoying the success that came with it.

"The things that I'm doing now I never could have done before," Cofer said.

"I think that's just staying in the gym and keep working on your game. Four mans now are all stretching the floor and shooting jumpers. I think the way our offense now is way better than what it was before... I think the cleanup guy needs to come back a little more. Last year I got too much on the perimeter side and wasn't rebounding as much as I should have.

"I think the way the game is now and the way I've been working, I kind of deserve this, the way I'm playing now, and I think I knew that I was going to be able to do all this stuff. I just had to be patient no matter how my injury was looking."

The Appeal

The injury wasn't the last battle Cofer would have to fight at FSU.

Because the injury ended his 2015-16 after just 11 games, Cofer and FSU attempted to get him a medical redshirt. The initial attempt was denied by the NCAA because he didn't fit in the criteria for a medical hardship waiver after playing in one too many games.

In order to qualify for a medical redshirt, a player must not have played in more than 30 percent of their team's games that season.

Cofer played in 32.4 percent of the Seminoles games during the 2015-16 season and fell just outside of that range. "We had to go through a process where we first submitted it to the conference office and the conference office, based on that he had played in one too many games, denied it," Assistant Athletics Director for Compliance Tasha Fisher said.

"Once you get that denial from the conference office you can appeal it to the NCAA. When you appeal it to the NCAA you have to look at the entire scope of what the process is. You have to have kind of a 'but for' analysis a lot of times. What was the reason behind him participating in too many games? What was the reason for the injury?" Despite being slightly over the limit for the waiver, FSU pushed forward to get Cofer the extra year that he deserved.

FSU head coach Leonard Hamilton never had a doubt that it would come through.

"I think the NCAA in the last couple years have worked hard to try and be more concerned about the welfare of the student-athletes," Hamilton said.

"In this case with Phil, it definitely represented their increased emphasis on the welfare of the students. In Phil's case, it was unfortunate that he had those recurring injuries that was systematic to an ankle turn because that's what it was initially.

"Had he never turned his ankle we probably would never have found out about the growth in his ankle. That was problematic and once that was resolved it made sense that Phil would fall within that category and warrant giving the kid an opportunity to at least have another year of healthy play."

Initially, Fisher was not as confident as Hamilton that his appeal would be approved because of her experience with these types of cases previously.

Once she dove deeper into Cofer's case, her confidence grew.

"I think there's always a little bit of doubt," Fisher said.

"As we were going through the process I had varying degrees of confidence in whether it would be approved. I think when I started the process we were probably at a low one because I know from experience not all of these get approved. As we started to get more information and I got to hear Phil's story and Amanda's story, I heard Coach Ham's recollections of it, that at the point I hit submit I felt pretty good about it because of all the information we had and knowing there were reasons why Phil deserved to be able to come back."

Cofer had to wait over two months to find out if he would be able to stay at FSU for one more season. He stayed in the gym trying to continue to improve and hoping for the good news that he would be able to stay in Tallahassee.

On May 25, he got the news that his appeal had been approved.

Now he's ready to make the most of his final year at FSU on the court and in the classroom. He will be graduating in December with a degree in Sociology.

On the court, he's looking to improve on last season's Elite Eight run.

"A national championship is definitely on my mind," Cofer said.

"The feeling of being in March Madness and winning. I just want to get back there and finish what we started."