

Spotlight Growing in Year Two for M.J. Walker
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In an era where social media can influence mindsets and outlooks, it's easy for a teenager to get lost in the process of becoming an adult. The instant publicity from success often times leads to a self-image of being bigger than life itself.

For sophomore guard M.J. Walker, the end goal has always surpassed the fame.

"The next person is always working so you have to keep working," said Walker. "Sure, there are accolades and everything, which you appreciate. But you've got to keep working. The accolades don't define me, there's always more in store."

Walker's resume is telling of who he is and what he brings to the Florida State men's basketball team.

Born in Jonesboro, Ga., Walker has always been attracted to sports. In fact, any activity with a ball in hand has often been considered to be a family affair.

Walker's parents, James and Jackie Walker, each played basketball growing up. James played basketball at Norfolk State and Jackie played at Hampton University. Each led their team to over 100 wins as student-athletes.

While basketball genetics flowed to him, being around the game grew a love from within.

"My parents got me in the game early when I was around seven or eight years old," said Walker. "I started playing basketball in a recreational league and it went from there."

Walker and his sister, Amoni, consistently played basketball, trying to emulate the success that their parents had enjoyed. It was family competition that birthed the spirit that carries with him.

"I feel like they made me competitive," said Walker. "I remember being in the yard with my family, playing two-on-two. We were just being competitive, challenging each other and I feel like that's helped me have a competitive spirit all the time."

Amoni Walker would grow into a basketball player, where she would eventually follow in the footsteps of her family as a current senior playing basketball at Miles College in Alabama.

Walker, meanwhile, eventually grew into a dual-sport athlete. While his love for basketball came natural, he grew a passion for football as well.

He developed into a standout at Jonesboro High School on the gridiron, playing both free safety and wide receiver. Prior to Walker's junior season, he earned football scholarship offers to Clemson, Miami and Michigan among others.

However, in today's world, the pressure to specialize in one sport is ever growing. Elite competition and dedicating a craft year round has become the staple to having success.

Knowing what was at stake, Walker had a crucial decision to make. Was he to focus on his passion for football or continue his growth on the basketball court?

"I messed my shoulder up after my 10th grade season and I had to make a decision," said Walker. "I didn't want to be hurt for football and basketball. I felt like my passion was mainly for basketball."

In his decision, Walker decided to forgo the collegiate offers he received on the football field and follow in his family's footsteps.

However, being successful in the game of football gave M.J. an edge over his competition on the court. It was the life lessons learned from the pigskin that gave him a mental edge unlike any other.

"Football is a different atmosphere," said Walker. "Before the games, you get in a different state of mind. You get yourself amped up more and in the zone. It was learning to be tough. On the court, that toughness taught me the ability to compete with no fear."

Walker took that mentality and a dedication to the sport to an elite level, growing into one of the best basketball players not only in the state of Georgia, but also in the country.

Starring at Jonesboro High, Walker earned national attention by averaging 27.8 points, 6.5 rebounds and 2.4 assists a game as a senior. He was named the 6A Player of the Year in the state of Georgia and honored as a McDonald's All-American.

The spotlight continued to grow on Walker as he was nationally recognized as a top-five shooting guard in the country and earned a spot on the 2017 U.S. Junior Select Team.

His character shined brightest at the McDonald's All-American week.

Walker was recognized with the Jack Daly Sportsmanship Award, given to the player who exhibits the best sportsmanship during the week of the McDonald's game. Earning the honor over the country's most prolific athletes, Walker credits his parents in his success as a young man.

"My mom and dad helped me a lot with being humble and staying on my toes," said Walker. "They gave me a mindset to always work and stay focused on what's at hand."

As his senior season wrapped up, and even bright spotlight shining on him, it was ultimately time to make a college decision.

While his visits to ACC competitors were successful, it was the visit to Florida State that stood out to Walker and his family.

"I felt like Florida State was family to me," said Walker "I felt like with Coach Ham (Leonard Hamilton), C.Y. (Carlton Young) and everyone else on the coaching staff made me feel as if I was at home."

Walker would make his decision in May of his senior year of high school, ultimately choosing the Seminoles.

With a basketball resume that includes being named a McDonald's all-American and a state player of the year, it was easy for his new teammates to assume he had an inflated ego. Walker entered the Seminoles' locker room hoping to prove the type of person he really is to his new teammates.

"There was a lot of expectation coming out of high school for him being a McDonald's All-American," said teammate Mfiondu Kabengele. "I was surprised with how he carried himself. He didn't have a boisterous attitude; he was all about the team."

In a team full of veteran wing talent, Walker fit into the system by familiarizing a role that he had never seen before -- coming off the bench. He was often called upon as one of the first Seminoles off a bench that has often been regarded as one of the best in college basketball.

As competitors, every student-athlete wants to be out on the court at all times. If you ask Walker, coming off the bench as a freshman and learning the game was the best thing to happen to him.

“There were a lot of good guys on our team that had experience and who are in the NBA right now,” said Walker. “I was learning from them. I had to ask questions and get better. I feel like that experience helped my game a lot mentally and physically. It made me the player I am now.”

Walker would relish his newfound role his freshman season, averaging 7.0 points per game and making 41 3-point shots. He ultimately became a key contributor to a Florida State squad that made it to the Elite Eight of the NCAA Tournament.

As the calendar turns to the 2018-19 season, Walker is excited to continue to grow in his role at Florida State. Expectations continue to build for the former McDonald’s All-American as the team looks to him to be a pivotal part of their success.

“He has the complete skills in dribbling, passing, he’s athletic, and makes good decisions with the ball, and is a good scorer,” said Hamilton. “I think as he gains more experience, you’re going to see him grow and become a much better basketball player. It’s a matter of time. It’s not whether he’s going to be successful; it’s just a matter of time. Experience will mature him and will allow his talents to manifest itself into productivity.”

For Walker, the spotlight and expectations don’t bother him. From the riches of a basketball family to the grind of an ACC slate, he relishes the opportunity to use his talents against the game’s best.

For Walker, it’s not about what people see in him, it’s about how he can impact the program that fuels his fire this upcoming season.

“I want to be more of a leader on the floor,” said Walker. “Last year I was more reserved and trying to learn. This year I’m trying to be a leader on the court, be more vocal, help my teammates the best I can. I also want to stay consistent through the whole year.”