

ChIPLEY Blacktop Courts, Family Hoop Roots Shape Forrest

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Thirty miles separate the Florida Panhandle towns of Chipley and Malone; roughly twice the distance between New York City and Newark, N.J., where the 11th-ranked Florida State men's basketball team meets UConn in Saturday's Never Forget Tribute Classic at the Prudential Center.

The disparate connection between those locales is Florida State junior point guard Trent Forrest, whose love and acumen for the game was nurtured and honed on the blacktop courts in rural North Florida.

The height of the rims and passion for basketball are the lone common links between the asphalt courts at Chipley's old Roulhac Middle School - where Forrest tagged along with his older brother Trey for pick-up games - and places like Harlem's legendary Rucker Park.

"There were 15-20 guys out there," Forrest said, recounting his formative basketball days. "I was the only young kid out there and my brother would let me play. I was just trying to stay on the court and win as many games as I could. If I was on the opposite team of my brother, he would always push me. If the game was close, he'd try to get the team to give me the ball so they could force pressure on me to try and get a turnover. That's where it all started, playing with older guys..."

"We would play from the time I got off the bus until dark."

Those days on the courts at old Roulhac were instrumental in the development of the 6-foot-4 Seminole guard with the Swiss Army Knife skill-set. Forrest is averaging 10.4 points, 4.9 rebounds and 3.6 assists. He leads the 7-1 Noles in steals (14) and free throw percentage (.893), and ranks second in field goal percentage (.509) among the regulars.

Genealogy and geography have also played a role in Forrest's development.

The apple did not fall far from the tree, as the basketball roots run deep on both sides of the Forrest family. His father, Lester Forrest, was an all-state player at Malone High in Jackson County, Florida, which borders the Washington County seat of Chipley to the east. He went on to play at Chipola Junior College before joining the military. Trent's mother, Barbara Lee - a pastor today in Chipley and a constant presence at his FSU games - also played basketball at Chipola.

There are few places in Florida more passionate about high school basketball, than the small towns throughout the Panhandle. Standing room only, Friday night crowds have been the norm for decades at places such as Malone, Chipley, Grand Ridge, Marianna, Cottondale, Graceville, Paxton and Laurel Hill.

"My kids were pretty much born into a basketball kind of family," said Lester Forrest. "Basketball was king in Malone back in the 80s and 90s because you really didn't have anything else to do unless you liked to hunt or fish...The fans loved the game, and basketball history was really high in Malone."

Malone High has produced 14 state titles; second only in Florida high school history to the 18 of Miami Senior.

Lester Forrest won one as a junior in 1981, and his "baby brother" Derrick was a freshman when the Tigers won another in 1983 under legendary coach Marvin Lassiter. After two years at Chipola, Derrick went on to star at Clemson alongside future NBA standouts Elden Campbell and Dale Davis, after helping those Tigers to their only ACC regular season title in 1990.

Malone kept winning, rolling off a state-record five straight (1994-1998) under coaches John Ellerbee and Matt Anderson.

ChIPLEY was often in Malone's championship path, and despite unprecedented success during coach Rickey McCullogh's 20-plus seasons at the helm, didn't win its first state title until 2012 under Joel Orlando. They doubled that total with Trent leading the way, claiming the 2015 and 2016 crowns – one under Orlando and the last under Mike Gates - after watching Malone cut down the nets in 2014.

"With Trent's two state championship titles in 1A, and my contribution of one and the rest of his cousins in Jackson County at Malone...we've won nine state championships," Lester Forrest said, proudly. "Trent had an opportunity to see that from both spectrums, from Malone and then at ChIPLEY. Being in that environment he took on that mentality."

Basketball Hall of Fame center Artis Gilmore may be the biggest star out of ChIPLEY, but he wasn't alone. Former FSU and NFL tailback Amp Lee starred on the court, as did Tony Davis, who went on to play tailback at the University of Florida. Trent is related to both Lee and Davis, who was the school's all-time leading scorer, until Trent shattered his record during a four-year varsity career. Alex Hamilton, Trent's godbrother, was the linchpin on the 2012 state title team and enjoyed a strong collegiate career.

In addition to his job managing and maintain Gilmore Park for the city's recreation department, Lester Forrest was building up the youth basketball program, which coincided nicely with his sons' interests and served them well as they moved on to ChIPLEY High.

Trent's earliest memories of ChIPLEY High basketball included going to watch his brother Trey's games.

"I was probably six or seven," Trent said. "After they would play, I have a goal at home and I would always try and emulate the things they would do in games."

Sometimes he wouldn't wait to get home.

"When his brother would be playing, at halftime and after the games were over, while the little kids would be playing around on the court trying to shoot, Trent would be doing basketball drills," Lester said. "The adults would be like, 'Look at that little guy. He's pretty advanced.'"

And Trent Forrest kept improving. By the time he was done at ChIPLEY he had scored 3,103 points, won two state titles and become a polished product when it came to end-game decision-making and execution. Competing in travel basketball, as a youngster with the Lynn Haven Wildcats, and later, on the AAU circuit with the Alabama Challenge and Georgia Stars, further sharpened those skills.

"In AAU I kind of got exposed to just how good people really are outside the area I'm from," Trent said. "In this area I was the best player, but when I got exposed to AAU I was like, 'Wow, there are a lot of other people out here that were better than me, or had the same talent.'..."

"At the same time, I learned how to play the right way. That has helped me be able to mesh if I was playing with guys better than me."

Coach Leonard Hamilton's Seminoles have been the beneficiaries.

"He's an unselfish player," Hamilton said. "He impacts the game in a lot of ways, even if he's not scoring. He moves the ball. He makes good decisions. He defends well. He talks to his teammates and communicates well. He's a very valuable asset."

Hamilton's comments came after the Noles' recent 73-72 win over Purdue on Forrest's game-winning runner with five seconds remaining, off a play designed for him to either take or create the final shot.

"In games like these, I want to be able to affect it in whatever way I can, whether that's playing defense, scoring; just making the right plays," Forrest said.

The decisive basket came in the middle of a 16-second, end-game sequence, sandwiched around a pair of Forrest steals; the first with the Noles trailing by 1 to set up the go-ahead possession, and the second, of a desperation pass as the horn sounded.

It certainly didn't surprise Florida State associate head coach Stan Jones, who in the recruiting process watched Forrest guide the star-laden Georgia Stars to 24 straight wins on the July travel circuit, including the Peach Jam and Las Vegas Classic titles.

"I'm not sure anyone has done that," Jones said. "He was just able to hold a team together, figure out what the team needed and when it was time to win, he makes winning basketball plays. It was not just that play the other night against Purdue. He's made an awful lot of big plays, like the shot the other night and the pass to PJ Savoy in the Xavier [NCAA Tournament] game last year..."

"The character of that young man is very, very high and I think it reveals itself when the pressure is highest."

The folks from Chipley are accustomed to seeing one of their favorite sons deliver in similar fashion. Many were in the stands at the Lakeland Center for the 2016 Florida 1A state semifinal game against Hamilton County. Trent Forrest remembers it as perhaps the first time he delivered with the game on the line. His Chipley Tigers trailed by eight with roughly a minute to play.

"I had a couple free throws late in the game against Hamilton County when they were trying to shorten the game," Forrest said, humbly down-playing his vastly more significant contributions.

"One play in particular that kind of blew my mind when he hit a 3-pointer," Lester Forrest recounted. "The ball was taken out on the side around half court. He ran and retrieved the ball and reversed, spun opposite of the way he was going, got to the top of the key and hit a fall-away 3-pointer that was really huge in that game."

Then came the game-sealing free throws. He scored 26 points in the state final, a 65-38 shellacking of Panhandle rival Paxton, as the Tigers rallied from a 28-26 halftime deficit. Forrest locked down Paxton star Zach Varnum in the second half after requesting the defensive assignment at intermission.

"You live for those moments," Trent Forrest said. "It just shows a lot of what you're made of and I feel like if you're a basketball player you want to be in those situations."

Like his FSU coaches and teammates, Forrest's friends and family in Chipley have a great appreciation for the person and player he has become. That was evident on his senior night three years ago, when the fire marshal and police were forced to lock down the overflow gymnasium for his final home game, much to Jones' chagrin.

"I started to panic as I tried to find somebody so I could talk my way into the building, because there was that much enthusiasm around the program and Trent's career there," said Jones, who had hoped to surprise the recent Seminole signee in person.

Jones eventually got inside, but Forrest was helped off the floor late in the game after bumping knees with another player.

"It bothered him pretty bad and so they decided to take him to the emergency room after the game to get it checked," Jones added. "I went over there with him and when he came out from his exam, they should have sold tickets. There were that many people in the emergency waiting room to make sure he was okay."

Chipley remains as proud of Trent Forrest today, as he is appreciative for the people and places who have been essential to his development as a person and player. There are two things he has taken from those formative years and applied to his success on and off the court at Florida State.

“The pureness of the game, and the dream,” Trent Forrest said. “In small towns there’s really not the politics you might see in the big city. People are just playing for the love of the game, honestly. That’s helped me get here now; the love of the game and desire to get better.

“If you ask people where Chipley is, they don’t know. That’s one thing I’ve taken with me since I’ve left – it’s to always remember home, and you can do whatever you really want to set your mind to.”