

Florida State's RaiQuan Gray Gaining Confidence As Game Slows Down

By Wayne McGahee III

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Redshirting is not a common occurrence in major college basketball.

No. 14 Florida State (6-1) had three players -- forwards RaiQuan Gray and Wyatt Wilkes and guard Anthony Polite - take a redshirt last season knowing that they would struggle to break into the rotation.

Prior to forward Mfiondu Kabengele redshirting the 2016-17 season, FSU hadn't redshirted a player other than for injury in more than a decade.

Of the three players that redshirted in 2017-18, Gray had the longest way to go, but also the most to work with. In addition to making the jump from high school to college, Gray was also well over the weight he should be at to be able to play at the level FSU needs its players to when he arrived.

But his ability to play the game of basketball couldn't be denied.

"RaiQuan has never been lacking on talent," FSU associate head coach Stan Jones told the *Tallahassee Democrat*.

"His skill set is very diverse and unique with his ability to be a ball handler, a shot maker, a back to the basket guy, a facilitator. He's always had a unique offensive skill set that caught our eye early in the recruiting process."

He went to work immediately to change his body so he could showcase that talent.

He's dropped 40 pounds since he arrived on campus -- he's still listed at 6-foot-8, 260 pounds -- and is in the best shape of his playing career thanks to the work of strength and conditioning coach Mike Bradley and the rest of the FSU staff.

"I feel a lot better," Gray said.

"I feel like I can play longer, jump higher, move faster, guard everybody. That was the main thing really, just losing weight so that I can play defense. I knew on the offensive end that everything was going to take care of itself, but really, the main thing was defense.

"Coach Hamilton prides himself on defense so to be out there on the floor and stay out there longer, you've got to be able to defend."

Gray played his first college game in the Seminoles' season opener against Florida Nov. 6.

It didn't go particularly well for him.

He made one of his three shot attempts with two rebounds and four fouls in 13 minutes.

He didn't get much of an opportunity to play in FSU's second game against Tulane with just six minutes and two points.

But then things started to click for him.

He had four points against Canisius and six points against UAB with three rebounds, two assists, and a steal.

"I think what you've seen the most from him since the season's started is that his confidence is growing, and the game is slowing down for him," Jones said.

"Just by getting game experience. Everyone thinks this is a game where you can just walk on the court and have success. It's a lot of different variables from being a high school player to being a red shirt to being a significant contributor. I think as you see game to game, you see him be less passive and more aggressive as his role's expanded."

FSU has played three straight teams that have been ranked when FSU played them or ranked after and come away with two victories.

Gray played a big role in all three games.

He had eight points, four rebounds, two assists, and a steal in 16 minutes in the Seminoles' 79-76 overtime win over then No. 21 LSU.

Two days later, Gray put up seven points and two assists in 14 minutes during FSU's 66-60 loss to No. 23 Villanova in the AdvoCare Invitational championship game.

Wednesday, Gray had seven points and two rebounds in 14 minutes during FSU's comeback 73-72 victory over No. 18 Purdue.

Those numbers may not look all that special, but for a player that is still adjusting to his new body type and the speed of the college game, they're a start.

"This is a game that you can't gain confidence without experience," Jones said.

"Actually getting into the game and seeing yourself on tape and talking to your teammates and reviewing your film after the game. (Gray) is an instinctive basketball player. You can see from game to game that the light's getting brighter for him and his confidence is growing exponentially every game."

Gray isn't happy with making a small impact this season.

He wants to be a major contributor as the Seminoles' look to make another deep run in the NCAA tournament after making it to the Elite Eight last season.

"I really have high expectations for myself," Gray said.

"As the year goes on I just want to gain more confidence and be able to be out there in the big games where it matters the most. So I just see myself getting better as the season goes on. More rebounds, more assists, more points. I feel like as long as we keep winning everything will take care of itself. I want to make the ACC All-Freshman team."

There's no denying that Gray has the talent to do that this season as long as he continues to develop.

He moves very well for a player his size and can play inside or outside on the offensive end comfortably.

It's going to come down to his ability to play deeper into games and develop defensively to become the player the coaches believe he can be.

"I've always compared him to a poor man's Mark Aguirre or Clarence Weatherspoon," Jones said.

"He's not as explosive as Charles Barkley, but a guy that can be so versatile offensively with a unique body type that makes him very hard to guard. He can run and jump, but he also has a low center of gravity. He has a wide hip and shoulder base, which allows him to create space on pivots and post ups and rebound opportunities.

"I don't see why he can't develop into a player that's going to contribute here significantly throughout his whole career."