

FSU Center Mfiondu Kabengele Brings Passion To Court, Sense Of Purpose Off It

By Katherine Wright

Orlando Sentinel

January 3, 2017

NBA players have made suits fashionable and it's rarely a mistake for young man to don a jacket and tie for what essentially is a big interview.

Florida State assistant basketball coach Dennis Gates knew, however, suiting up isn't always the right call and first impressions are indelible.

"What was going through my mind was this would be the first time in the history of college athletics that a kid wore a three-piece suit, shirt and tie on their official visit," Gates said. "I had to stop it from happening."

Mfiondu Kabengele loved basketball, a passion his family shared. After all, his uncle, Dikembe Mutombo, was an 18-year NBA veteran and Hall of Famer.

Before FSU took an interest in Kabengele, Binghamton University was the only school to offer him a basketball scholarship. As a result, Kabengele's official visit to Tallahassee took on great significance and his dad wanted him to make the best impression.

The dapper suit was an appeal, one additional way of impressing an Atlantic Coast Conference basketball program.

The plan, however, was vetoed.

"Mfiondu appreciates it to this day," Gates said of his intervention.

The young man did not need the haberdasher's touch to impress FSU. But the ensemble made an impact that still resonates with Gates.

"It spoke volumes to, you know what, this kid is going to be somebody," Gates said. "That's where I think his discipline comes from. That's where I think his grit, his toughness has come from and it's a direct correlation to his parents."

Kabengele changed into a more comfortable ensemble — jeans and a button-up collared shirt — for the visit that would change the trajectory of his life.

First Meeting

Gates, Kabengele's primary recruiter at FSU, first saw Kabengele play at the Kennedy-King's Willie Little Gymnasium in the south side of Chicago. Kabengele, then a mere 6-foot-6 forward, played for Bosco Institute, a preparatory school in Indiana.

When he first graduated high school in his native Canada, Kabengele spurned Binghamton's initial offer and landed at Bosco to hone his skills. The move offered him a platform to engage the likes of FSU. By Gates' third visit, Kabengele had grown to 6-foot-10.

Even so, Kabengele was surprised by the interest he generated.

"When I first offered him a scholarship, he did not believe anything I was saying," Gates said. "His mouth dropped, he had no clue."

Once FSU made Kabengele an offer, Wisconsin, Georgetown (Mutombo's alma mater), Kansas State, Georgia and Boston College entered the recruiting conversation.

Gates made a statement for FSU at the very beginning. He was the first member of a Power 5 conference who believed in Kabengele's potential.

"It's not a sense that he did not believe in himself, he didn't know who else believed in him," Gates said. "One of the reasons we ended up signing him was because we were the first high-major school to offer him a scholarship and his mom and his dad remembered that."

A Sense Of Purpose

Once the NBA drafted Mutombo in 1991, he sent for his entire family to move from the Democratic Republic of Congo, which was plagued by volatile political injustice. Mfiondu's parents, Tshilongo and Tshimanga Kabengele, left their homeland to pursue an education in Canada. Mfiondu was born soon after in 1997.

Though their upheaval was not directly linked to the country's politics, Mfiondu has taken the injustices of The Congo to heart.

"There's a lot of corruption and I'd love to go over there and make a change," said Mfiondu, who is majoring in international affairs at FSU.

This passion for a land 7,000 miles from Tallahassee distinguishes Mfiondu from most other athletes. And it impressed Gates.

"The conversations that I had with the kid is what made me say this kid can play at Florida State," Gates said. "It had nothing to do with basketball. It had something and everything to do with the kid's ability to have comfortable conversations with adults and have a worldly understanding of the things around him."

Development Plan

Kabengele's FSU career began with a redshirt.

The Green Team, FSU's scout team, was Kabengele's first challenge. Facing soon-to-be professional basketball players Jonathan Isaac, Dwayne Bacon and Michael Ojo daily challenged Kabengele physically and intellectually.

"He was able to hold his own against those guys no matter the differences or what the advantages were," Gates said. "You knew right then you had a guy that could use his intelligence to his advantage. ... It makes him as versatile of a post guy there is in the country."

Kabengele has transformed exponentially since his redshirt season in 2017. He has emerged as FSU's sixth man this season.

During FSU's matchup against LSU in the AdvoCare Invitational on Nov. 23, the game was tied 76-76 in overtime with 11 seconds remaining.

"Coach Gates told me to get to the open corner," Kabengele said of the ensuing FSU possession. "They trapped Trent [Forrest] and Trent saw me and I just set my feet. When it came off my wrist, it felt good."

The ball hit the rim, intensifying the suspense and dropped through the net.

Kabengele's 3-point shot sealed the 79-76 victory over LSU and sent the Seminoles to the AdvoCare championship, where they faced defending national champion Villanova. FSU fell 66-60 but gained much from the tournament.

One month later, Kabengele notched a career high in points (24) during FSU's 95-81 win over North Florida.

"[Number] 25 is a beast," UNF coach Matt Driscoll said of Kabengele. "He's from the old school. I told him after the game, if you stay this way, you're going to make as much as you ever want to make."

Gates also sees a bright future for Kabengele, but he expects it to include success beyond basketball.

“He’s a Renaissance man. He’s a young man with an old soul, but he’s very educated,” Gates said. “He has basketball — [but] one thing will never define him.”