Dennis Gates recalls the story with fondness.

It might sound egotistical to others. Or even delusional. But to Gates, the Florida State assistant coach who discovered, recruited and eventually signed Mfiondu Kabengele, it’s the perfect illustration of how and why the FSU sophomore forward has gone from unknown recruit to one of the best players in the ACC.

Gates flashes a big smile when he starts telling the story, about that first day of school in 2016, when Kabengele strolled into his office and brought up the name of the most heralded recruit of the Seminoles’ freshman class -- and one of the highest-rated recruits in school history.

"Coach, I'm better than Jonathan Isaac," he said.

Gates couldn't hide his amusement, letting out a fake laugh/cough as Kabengele began explaining his reasoning. "I've watched all of his YouTube clips," Kabengele said. "I've watched all of his stuff. I know every move he's got. I'm better than Jonathan Isaac."

"So the first open gym, he decides to guard Jonathan Isaac," Gates continued. "Afterward, Mfiondu was in the training room with a sprained ankle. From getting crossover'd. ... He came back into the office and said, 'Coach, Jonathan Isaac is pretty good.'"

Gates still laughs when telling the story. As did Kabengele when it was brought up to him last week, after he had helped lead Florida State to another ACC victory.

"At the time, I was very confident," Kabengele said with a wide smile. "Maybe a little overconfident. But I believed in my skills when I told him that. ... I was a little overconfident, but I wanted to make a statement my freshman year. "I wanted to come in with a lot of confidence and prove I belong here."

That was important because for his entire high school career -- even as the nephew of Hall of Famer Dikembe Mutombo -- he wasn't sure he would ever get the chance to play major college basketball.

The Discovery
It seems impossible now with the hindsight of what he's become. But before Mfiondu Kabengele was FSU's leading scorer as a redshirt sophomore, before he was the runaway choice for ACC Sixth Man of the Year, before his name started appearing on NBA scouts' radars, he was a 6-foot-6 unknown Canadian who didn't have a natural position.

As Kabengele put it: "My handles weren't really good enough to be a wing, and I wasn't big enough to be a big."

So he was recruited by exactly zero schools coming out of high school in Burlington, Ontario.

Zero. None. Not a one.

His only real option of chasing his basketball dreams was Don Bosco Prep School in Crown Point, Ind. Before he got there, though, he decided to do something he had never done before: Play AAU basketball.

That summer was the first time a college scout wrote down the name Mfiondu Kabengele. His game was developing. And he continued to grow. But it wasn't as if the big-time schools were beating down his door each night.

On Sept. 9, 2015, he got his first college scholarship offer. From Binghamton.
Three months later, after being tipped off by the Don Bosco coach, FSU’s Gates came to Chicago to watch Kabengele play in a weekend tournament.

The reason the assistant coach wanted to be there in person was because of who and where Bosco Prep was playing: Inner-city Chicago. Against junior college teams.

Gates had a good idea he'd know a whole lot more about Kabengele after seeing him in this setting.

"I was able to gauge his level of toughness, his level of fight, his rebounding ability and his resilience," Gates said. "I wasn't trying to figure out how fast he could get up and down the court or how high he could jump."

Over that weekend, Gates saw what the rest of us see today: An ultra-competitive, ultra-confident young man who doesn't back down from anyone or anything on the court.

His game wasn't anywhere close to what it is today, but his mindset was.

So Gates offered him a scholarship. Right there in Chicago.

"I was so shocked," Kabengele said. "I didn't make a move. I didn't make a face. I didn't show any emotion. Everybody is clapping around me, and I didn't know what to say. Coach Gates said, 'Aren't you happy?' And I said, 'Yeah.' And then I woke up and I thanked him."

But he didn't commit to Florida State. That wouldn't come for four more months.

The Chase
By now, the story has become almost apocryphal: That Florida State signed a kid whose only other offer was Binghamton, and now he's become one of the best players in the ACC.

That's not quite true.

By December of that year, other colleges had noticed the still-growing Kabengele (he was 6-foot-8 when he left Bosco Prep and is exactly 6-foot-10 today). Coaches from all over the country were watching him, scouting him and thinking about offering him.

But nobody had pulled the trigger yet. Until Gates did on Dec. 12, 2015.

On Dec. 13, Georgia offered.

Then Boston College. And St. Louis. And Clemson. Schools like Kansas State, Wisconsin and Illinois started pursuing him as well.

Even before Gates arrived on the scene, mid-majors like Binghamton were recruiting Kabengele heavily. They pushed him to commit in the early signing period because they knew what was coming as his game and body continued to develop.

"They kept saying, 'If I don't get you now, I'm not going to get you in the future,'" Kabengele recalled. "And I never got that until Coach Gates offered me."

Suddenly, the chances of Kabengele going to a place like Binghamton were non-existent.

He had a chance to play in the ACC. He had choices all over the country.
"I didn't want to commit everything right away (after the FSU offer)," Kabengele said. "I wanted to see what the landscape was. I saw Clemson. I saw Boston College. But deep down in my heart, me and my family knew it was Florida State."

Kabengele was so excited about his official visit to Tallahassee, which coincided with the Seminoles hosting Pitt, that he originally planned to wear a three-piece suit.

Gates talked him out of it.

"I wasn't going to let that happen," the assistant coach said with a laugh.

Once Kabengele arrived, the thing that stuck out most to Gates then -- and still does today -- is the way he communicates with his coaches.

The young forward wasn't in awe of Leonard Hamilton. He was respectful, and he wanted to make sure everyone at Florida State knew how appreciative he was of the opportunity. But he seemed comfortable from the jump.

"It was an ego-less recruiting visit," Gates said. "We had our priorities on an in-season game, and he wasn't trying to garner all of our attention. He was trying impress us on his official visit more than we were even trying to impress him."

Which explains the three-piece suit.

"So when you have that," Gates said, "you know you have a special kid with a unique personality."

The Redshirt
College basketball wasn't an immediate success story for Kabengele. Despite believing he was better than Jonathan Isaac when he arrived in the summer of 2016, the coaches had no plans of playing him his first year.

With Isaac and Phil Cofer at the power forward spot and Michael Ojo and Christ Koumadje at the center position, there were just no minutes to be had for a 6-foot-8 project who hadn't even been on the coaches' radar the year before.

Gates and the rest of the coaching staff thought a redshirt year would be perfect for Kabengele. Even if the confident freshman didn't agree.

"I was like, 'Wait, I'm just as good as the next man,'" Kabengele said. "But then after Coach Gates gave me the bigger picture of what my game could be, with this team, I had faith in him. Because he had faith in me when I was playing in those dingy gyms."

Since he wouldn't be playing in games, Kabengele became the leader of the Seminoles' scout team. He was asked to bang with Ojo in the low post. To try to guard future NBA players Dwayne Bacon and Isaac on the wing. To switch on a screen and guard Xavier Rathan-Mayes at the top of the key. All while playing mostly with walk-ons.

Welcome to college basketball.

"It was challenging," Kabengele said. "Because sometimes 'Bake' (Bacon) would make these spectacular plays in practice, and you can do nothing about it. Or with Jon's length, he would block your shot. ... So it was very challenging and sometimes frustrating because it was me and the walk-ons trying to guard these superstar talents."

"But you saw him compete and never back down," said Gates.

No one has worked more with Kabengele on improving his game than associate head coach Stan Jones.
The longtime FSU assistant has compared the Canadian's rise to that of Al Thornton, another unheralded recruit who eventually became FSU's leading scorer and an NBA lottery pick.

Jones said many of the strides Kabengele has made came during that redshirt year, when he could only practice.

"The first thing that was critical for 'Fi' (pronounced Fee) was developing consistent workout habits," Jones said.

"He had kind of a spurtability work ethic. He'd go a couple of days, go hard, and then a wall would hit him and then he'd kind of go dark on you for a week. And getting him to understand that to become the player that he said he wanted to become, it was going to take an everyday focus."

The second thing Kabengele had to improve were his skills and fundamentals.

"We had to clean up some things with his footwork," Jones said. "And the mechanics with his shot. He had grown so much in a period of time, his hands had gotten bigger, his arms had gotten longer, and sometimes that causes you to have hand-placement issues. So we tried to get him to lock in so he could make the 3-point shots he always wanted to shoot.

"So those were two of the bigger things we were working on with him."

FSU's coaches shared one more note about Kabengele's redshirt freshman year: As much as he might have been frustrated about not getting to play, when the Seminoles hit a big shot that season and the TV cameras zoomed in on the FSU bench, the guy who was always jumping the highest and celebrating the most was Mfiondu Kabengele.

"And it's sincere, too," Gates said. "Those were authentic cheers. He's not standing up clapping because he's supposed to. He's standing up and clapping because that's who he is.

"He didn't allow it to turn into a negative that he was redshirting."

The Arrival
When it came to Al Thornton's development, Jones said there was never really a light-bulb-going-off sort of moment. It was more of a gradual brightening.

But with Kabengele, he thinks everything changed in Brooklyn last season.

The Seminoles lost to Louisville in the ACC Tournament, but the then-freshman came off the bench to score 10 points, grab six rebounds and block two shots in just 16 minutes. He helped spark a run that almost brought FSU all the way back from a massive deficit.

"And from that moment all the way through the NCAA Tournament, you could see that he now believed in himself," Jones said. "He believed in all the work he had put in. He always thought he could find another level, and he's been pursuing it ever since."

Kabengele is the only player in college basketball this season to lead his team in scoring without starting a game. He's currently averaging 13.1 points and 5.7 rebounds per game. He's also second on the team in blocked shots and is shooting 35 percent from 3-point range and 77 percent from the free-throw line. All while averaging less than 21 minutes per game.

NBA scouts are now showing up to watch him play.

Legendary college coaches, with names like Krzyzewski and Boeheim, are saying he's as good as anyone in the league.
All this for a guy who four years ago didn't have a single scholarship offer and who two years ago was working on the Florida State scout team.

And as he prepares to help lead the No. 12 Seminoles into an ACC quarterfinal game against Virginia Tech on Thursday (2:30 p.m., ESPN), Kabengele can't help but be grateful that Gates was willing to take a gamble on him that day in Chicago.

"To see what he saw in me, to see it kind of happening in front of his eyes, it's so gratifying," Kabengele said. "And he's always challenging me. And he says he's proud of me. So I'm very happy about it.

"Because some coaches just see you and say, 'Oh, this is the final product.' Coach Gates saw what I could be. I'm so thankful for that."

Most importantly, though, Kabengele knew what he could be.

Even when he wasn't offered a single scholarship out of high school, even when for three months his only option was Binghamton, even when he arrived at FSU a wee bit overconfident and got sent to the trainer's room by Jonathan Isaac, his self-confidence never wavered.

He never lost that absolute faith that he was going to become a great basketball player.

Said Kabengele: "This is what I've been working for my whole life."