

Malik Osborne's Versatility Paying Dividends Early In His Florida State Career

By Curt Weiler

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Days before his Florida State debut, Malik Osborne found out it would go a little differently than expected.

The redshirt sophomore on the FSU men's basketball team had worked all preseason with the guards as he transitioned away from the center role he played in high school and in his one year at Rice before transferring to FSU.

And yet, days before the Seminoles took on Pitt last Wednesday, he discovered that a calf strain to projected starting center Dominik Olejniczak would keep him out of the game.

While he had worked with the guards for the majority of the preseason, his 6-foot-9 frame paired with the inexperience of true freshman center Balsa Koprivica caused a change of plans. Osborne would start at center in his FSU debut.

"It was probably like a couple of days before when I heard that Dom was not gonna be able to play, so that it was like, 'Okay, you played big before at Rice and you had some experience,'" Osborne told the *Democrat*.

"It was pretty much like I was a vet big even though I wasn't practicing as a big already so based on my prior experiences, a couple of days before, that's when I knew. I was like, okay, it's time to start game-planning at the five.

"I never really knew I was gonna start and then I got the nod to start for the five so I was like you know it's not about just playing the five, it's about doing what I need to do at that position for what my team needs. It really wasn't a concern for me."

Despite the late change, Osborne has found instant success in a spot he didn't expect to play for the Seminoles (1-1, 0-1 in ACC). After a pair of road games to start the season, he'll finally make his home debut Friday at 7 p.m. against Western Carolina (2-1).

While Osborne transitioned away from playing the center position during his redshirt year, he's still got plenty of experience at the position.

He played center in high school as well as in his only year at Rice, averaging 9.0 points and 6.5 rebounds as a true freshman for the Owls.

This wealth of experience helped it all come back to him quickly when he and the Seminoles needed it most.

"At this point, it's second nature. The techniques, the footwork, all that stuff, it just comes naturally at that point because I've been doing it for so long and for so many reps... Nothing really went away and I'm thankful for it because it's helped our team," Osborne said.

"I'm still working on guard stuff in practice, but I'm also focused on the bigs right now because that's where immediate help and assistance is needed right now."

In his debut in FSU's 63-61 loss to Pitt, Osborne's offensive impact was minimal. He scored two points on four shots. However, he made a significant impact at the other end, wrangling a game-high nine rebounds -- four more than any other Seminole -- and blocking four shots.

Olejniczak was able to play in FSU's second game at Florida Sunday, but he remained limited enough that Osborne was called on to start again.

In his introduction to the FSU-UF rivalry, he made his impact felt as he finished with 10 points and played a major role in keeping SEC Preseason Player of the Year Kerry Blackshear Jr. from hitting a shot from the floor. Blackshear had 10 points, but they all came from the free-throw line.

"It's just huge to show the type of upside that he has and the type of ability, the type of player that he is to be able to go in and make an impact on the position that he's never really played at Florida State," sophomore Devin Vassell told the *Democrat*.

"I'm excited for him to just keep learning the spot because I know that once he really gets it, he's going to be a dominant force."

In short time, FSU head coach Leonard Hamilton has seen significant growth from Osborne in a role no one expected him to have to play entering preseason camp.

"When you are playing in our system, you get accustomed to working on your individual improvement areas, working on your game, thinking that this is what is needed for me to fit in and help our program. All of a sudden now, you lose Dominik and he's the next choice," Hamilton said.

"That was a tremendous adjustment for him. That didn't come easy because just to get in there, draw fouls, he was challenged by that early. A few more practices, I thought he got a little more comfortable. Those are some areas we need to work on because we need everybody to be comfortable in whatever position we put them in in relation to what we need in a particular game."

It's unclear whether FSU will ask Osborne to remain at center or return to more of a perimeter role once Olejniczak is fully healthy and ready to claim the starting center role.

It doesn't much matter to Osborne. He's going to have the same approach regardless.

"Everything is pretty much was the same as far as my mindset, the aggression in and just going out and being who I am and that's just like a rebounder, a hustle player and an energy guy," Osborne said.

"I knew whether I was going to be a perimeter player or play in the post, that that was going to be my mindset regardless."