

Wilkes Rewards Teammates' Faith With 3-Point Barrage Against Notre Dame

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. – As he watched the last of his five 3-pointers sink through the bottom of the net, Wyatt Wilkes backpedaled down the floor with an ear-to-ear grin on his face.

Applause from the sold-out crowd at the Donald L. Tucker Center poured down on him, and Wilkes' face seemed to be asking the same question that was one everyone else's mind: What the heck is going on here?

"I couldn't believe I got another one, mostly," Wilkes said with a laugh. "It's just fun. It's fun to hit shots."

Wilkes did plenty of that during Florida State's 85-84 win over Notre Dame on Saturday night: 6-of-10 from the floor – including 5-of-6 from 3-point range – and two free throws for a career-best 19 points.

Count it as one of the most stunning performances in the program's recent history, maybe since Deividas Dulkys went off for 32 points against North Carolina in 2012.

Not because Wilkes isn't a great shooter – coach Leonard Hamilton believes that Wilkes could end up as one of the best that FSU basketball has ever seen.

But because, due in large part to Florida State's deep roster, Wilkes hasn't had all that many opportunities to show it.

The redshirt sophomore forward came into Saturday's contest averaging about nine minutes per game, and he had taken only 36 shots all season.

And, were it not for an injury to standout freshman Patrick Williams, Wilkes' breakout performance against the Fighting Irish might never have happened.

Williams, however, missed the game and Wilkes more than made the most of his expanded role.

"I was just so happy for him," Hamilton said, "because he's put the time in. There's no doubt that his teammates, they all have a tremendous amount of confidence in him. And I think you're just seeing the tip of the iceberg."

That confidence didn't come by accident, either.

Both Wilkes and his teammates credited FSU's internal culture with allowing something like what happened on Saturday to come about.

For several years, the Seminoles have taken pride in their overwhelming depth, and the idea that the team is greater than the sum of its individual players.

That holds true for everyone, whether they're future first-rounders, walk-ons providing scout-team looks in practice, or anyone else on their basketball journey in-between.

"I think that's what makes us Florida State," Wilkes said. "I think that's why so many people are interested in coming here to play. You see the camaraderie every single day.

In practice it's not like, 'Oh, let's get this guy the ball.' It's, 'If you're open, shoot it.'"

The Seminoles had seen Wilkes drain enough open looks on the practice courts to know what he could do.

And the Orlando native made a believer out of the Fighting Irish by connecting on his first 3-point attempt a little more than two minutes after he checked into the game.

Wilkes would go on to play a career-high 19 minutes, besting his previous high against ACC opponents by eight.

"I feel like him going out and doing what he does just speaks volumes about this team and how we go out and win games," senior guard Trent Forrest said. "You never can key in on one guy. I mean, Wyatt, he comes in every day and gets his shots up.

And I'm sure (Notre Dame's) coaching staff probably was not worried about him as much. And he comes in and goes (5-for-6) and he changes the whole game for us."

Indeed, Wilkes after the game said he would have traded every single one of his 3-pointers if it meant the Seminoles could have won by a more comfortable margin.

As it happened, FSU needed every last point that Wilkes scored.

Despite trailing by as many as 14 points, Notre Dame rallied and had a chance to win in the game's waning moment.

Close as they came, though, the Fighting Irish couldn't overcome the effort from FSU's unlikely hero.

"That's almost entirely a coaching and teammate thing," Wilkes said. "Our culture is that we don't really have to do it ourselves. A lot of teams, if you're not shooting well, it's kind of up to you to get out of that slump.

"But here, it's not. You constantly have guys in your ear telling you you're a great shooter, telling you to shoot the ball, telling you to be confident. So, it's hard not to be."