

FSU Hoops Finds, Develops 'High-Character Gym Rats'

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Watch a few Florida State basketball games and it becomes quite clear why the team is successful.

Devin Vassell is a budding star. Trent Forrest is the engine that makes the team go. M.J. Walker is the 3-point threat.

But then there is the depth – 10, 11, 12 or more players. It comes at opponents in waves.

“The guys that come in play with the same exact energy as the guys that had just been in,” reserve forward Wyatt Wilkes said. “That’s exhausting to play against. In everyone’s mind, there’s no stars, there’s no backup guys. You just play basketball. You are a Florida State Seminole. That’s what it is. That’s what it’s about.”

Some college basketball teams win with future lottery picks. Duke typically has a few. Louisville has Jordan Nwora. North Carolina likely has one in injured freshman Cole Anthony (who could return soon). Vassell is playing like a potential All-ACC first-team guard. If he stays for his junior year – and keeps developing on his current arc – it’s possible that he will be a lottery pick, too. But it’s also worth reminding that when FSU offered Vassell in high school he had two other offers: Presbyterian and North Florida.

FSU’s success has allowed the coaches to sign five-star prospects. But the coaching staff has also identified some diamonds who were lightly regarded. And found prospects who were the right fit.

At the top of the list: basketball IQ and unselfishness.

“We like to call them high-character gym rats,” FSU assistant coach Charlton Young said. “Guys who can affect the game in the non-ball-dominant fashion. Most times you go to a game to evaluate and it’s natural for coaches to gravitate to the guy who scores the most points. That’s not what we do.

“We gravitate to the guys that affect the game, being non-ball dominant.”

Young tells an anecdote of seeing Terance Mann play as a high school freshman. Mann was down in the low post, fighting with another player for a rebound. The opponent hooked him, Mann could barely jump up and all he could do was tap it to a teammate, just a few feet away near the basket. Mann’s “pass” to his teammate resulted in a basket.

“That’s a rare breed,” Young said. “I offered him a scholarship on the spot as soon as I saw that play. This guy is a basketball genius. And so you put four or five guys out there that make decisions that way.”

Comb through the FSU box scores and you’ll see players who aren’t just efficient shooters but also will fight for rebounds, create steals or block shots. And often there are things that don’t show up in box scores.

There’s no stat for altering shots. But it results in frustration for opponents. There’s no stat for making extra passes in a half-court possession. But it results in better looks. And while that isn’t in a box score, FSU coach Leonard Hamilton has his staff note the number of passes – not assists but passes – in each game.

Hamilton often feels the strength of the team is the sum of its parts. After a recent win he also cited chemistry.

“We’ve developed an outstanding level of chemistry,” Hamilton said. “We share the ball; we share playing time. The guys cheer for one another. No one really cares who gets the credit. That’s a tribute to them (and) their character. I’m very proud of these guys.”

FSU has won 17 of 20 games this year with guards like Vassell, Forrest and Walker. But on any given night either of those three can lead the team in scoring. Or it could be Malik Osborne, Balsa Koprivica, Anthony Polite or Wilkes.

“That’s kind of the strength of our team,” Forrest said. “You never know who can come in and give us that spark.” That’s also what makes FSU a tough team to scout. Opponents can worry about the Seminoles’ trio of starting guards and will likely forget about the potential sparkplugs off the bench.

This is the result of years of work. FSU coaches scouting prospects who fit the mold: team-first players who are well-rounded, will learn defense and have the requisite length and athleticism. And then the coaches spend years watching and working with players.

“Coach Hamilton does a great job of developing players,” Young said. “Before coach Hamilton only got credit for developing big men. But the truth of the matter is J. Leonard Hamilton can develop any position in a basketball program. And I think it’s time that he starts getting his credit for his ability to develop players. And its time for this staff to get credit for developing players.”