

Gray Thinking Big In 2020, Beyond

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FSView

November 22, 2020

In his defense, RaiQuan Gray is just saying what's on everyone else's mind around Tallahassee.

"I'm definitely a little biased. But I mean, if you ask anybody else, I think that they would have said that we would have won that [2020 NCAA basketball] championship," Gray said.

Though Florida State certainly had all the makings of a championship-caliber team, the arrival of the coronavirus in the United States shuttered their title hopes as they stood at the doorstep with an ACC title.

This past Thursday, a few key players from that 2019-20 team saw their dreams of playing professionally come true; forward Patrick Williams and shooting guard Devin Vassell were selected in the first round by the Bulls and Spurs respectively, while guard Trent Forrest signed a two-way contract with the Jazz after the draft.

The departures of those three athletes leave some big shoes to fill on head coach Leonard Hamilton's Seminoles squad, opening up an expanded role and leadership opportunity for Gray, who's preparing for his third season at FSU after redshirting the 2017-2018 campaign.

When asked if he was ready to take on that added locker-room responsibility in the new season, Gray didn't hesitate.

"Oh, yeah, most definitely," Gray said. "I've been here for a few years, so it's definitely something that I've signed up for, and I'm ready for it."

Standing at 6-foot-8, the Fort Lauderdale native has played his way into the starting lineup across the past two seasons. While he's always been durable, having played in all but one of FSU's 37 regular-season matchups in 2018-2019, Gray's career arc at FSU came full circle last year as he earned a starting spot in all but one of the Garnet and Gold's conference games.

For a player in a unique system like Hamilton's, where bench depth is utilized at a much higher rate than virtually any other NCAA team, that consistent usage speaks volumes. And as Gray's playing time has increased, so have his statistical contributions — the forward racked up career highs in points (6.0), rebounds (3.8) and steals (1.1) per game in 2019-2020, and looks to expand on those numbers with the new season fast approaching.

Gray's best outing of last season came against South Florida at the Orange Bowl Classic. The forward collected eleven points, seven rebounds and three steals on the day, totals that would prove quite decisive after the 'Noles overcame a late deficit to pull out a 66-60 victory over the Bulls.

Gray finished the season with four more double-digit performances and five more games with seven-plus rebounds; however, his game isn't one-dimensional at all, with the redshirt junior cementing himself as a robust presence on the defensive side of the ball and in creating scoring opportunities in transition for the Seminoles.

Despite the departure of Williams, Vassell and Forrest, the incoming class of players at FSU boasts plenty of blue-chip talent that should be able to replicate the trio's production.

With five-star recruit Scottie Barnes and Missouri-West Plains JUCO transfer Sardaar Calhoun headlining the new faces on campus, Gray sees a team-first approach as the name of the game for Florida State.

"Like I said, the main thing for us is to win games ... whether that's me or someone else scoring higher in the game, we just gotta play the other team and figure things out," Gray said.

Gray and the Seminoles will look to put those adages to the test very soon, with the team's season opener coming on Friday, Nov. 27 at home against Gardner-Webb. Florida State will get nearly two weeks to steel itself before jumping into the front end of a tough schedule, with a non-conference slate against Indiana and Florida.

The 'Noles will play their first six games at the friendly confines of the Tucker Center, where they've won 65 of their last 68 matchups.

Though Gray and the 'Noles had a shot for glory taken from them last season, they're hungry to pick up right where they left off. With a national title in their sights, look for Gray and his teammates to put opponents to the test up and down the court.