

Former Billings Skyview Standout RayQuan Evans Thriving On Big Stage At Florida State

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — RayQuan Evans didn't receive much notice before making his first start in the ACC.

"I found out I was going to be starting a couple minutes before the game," Evans told MTN Sports. "It didn't change my mindset. I just had to play my role, move the ball, score when I need to, bring energy, be that glue guy, so that's what I tried to do, just play my role and tried not to change anything."

Maybe the short notice was for the best. The former Billings Skyview High School basketball standout had his best NCAA Division I game, scoring 24 points — on 9-of-11 shooting, no less — to help his Florida State squad roll to a 105-73 win over North Carolina State on Wednesday.

It might have been Evans' first start for the Seminoles since joining the program in 2019, but it was a long time in the making. He said he used last season "like a learning year," and that experience is paying dividends this year. Evans has played in all eight of Florida State's games and is averaging 7.4 points, 2.7 rebounds and 1.0 assists per game. He's doing it efficiently, too, shooting 47.4% from the floor, 45.5% from 3-point range and 91.7% from the free throw line.

"It's been a great journey. Last year I got the opportunity to learn from a bunch of veterans here. Trent Forrest, he's a great point guard, I got to watch him every day, compete with him and be able just to learn," Evans said. "... This year I've been able to apply everything I've learned, just embrace my role and do what I have to do for this team. It's been a great journey, it's been a challenging journey, but it's led me to become the player that I am today."

The player today is living out the dream of the player from years prior.

Evans was a high school star in Montana, bursting onto the scene as a sophomore at Skyview in 2015. As a junior, he helped the Falcons win their second consecutive Class AA state basketball championship. As a senior, he was one of the best players in the state, averaging 18.2 points, 6.3 rebounds, 3.3 assists and 2.1 steals per game and helping the Falcons to a third-place finish at the state tournament.

Evans originally committed to play college basketball at Rocky Mountain College, but he was a non-academic qualifier, which ultimately led him to North Idaho College, one of the premier junior college basketball programs in the Pacific Northwest. He had a stellar two-year career at NIC and became a big-time recruit on the transfer market. The likes of Georgetown, Washington State and Gonzaga showed their interest, but Evans was all-in on Florida State and the ACC.

Now in Tallahassee, Evans has shown he belongs — Wednesday's breakout game being the final point of affirmation. "It felt good. I felt like I showed my teammates and the ACC what I'm capable of as a player, but more importantly we got the win, and that's what I was more excited about," said Evans, a 6-foot-4 senior point guard. "One of our teammates came off the bench, had 18 points, Nate Jack, so I was really just proud of our team and the way we performed. I was just happy for everyone else."

Florida State is 6-2 this season after last year's remarkable 26-5 season where they won the ACC regular-season championship. The Seminoles never got to finish out their postseason, though, as the coronavirus pandemic shut down the ACC and NCAA tournaments.

Since then, the pandemic has continued to take its toll on sports across the country, but college basketball teams are persevering through the season. FSU has had three games postponed, with Wednesday's matchup with NC State marking their return to action and first game of 2021. The Seminoles are slated to host North Carolina at 10 a.m. (MT) Saturday.

“It’s been kind of difficult,” Evans said of playing during the pandemic. “You’re so used to your home environment and on-the-road environments with just loud noises and crowds, and now you’re going into environments with no fans at all and all you can hear is each other. It’s quite an adjustment, but as long as you just lock in mentally, I feel like you kind of avoid all that, you kind of don’t really pay attention to it, and I feel like that’s what our team has been doing pretty well, just getting locked into the game and focusing on each other. Whether there’s fans or not, we’re just going to continue to play how we’ve been playing.”

And all of those games are still broadcast to a national audience, usually on ESPN or the ACC Network.

“At first, it was a different feeling just knowing that this game might be on ESPN, because that’s what you dream of as a kid, just playing on TV,” Evans said, before adding that that no longer registers.

In fact, having his games available on national broadcasts has become a big benefit of playing at Florida State. Evans’ family back in Montana can watch and cheer from afar, and he receives plenty of support from the Treasure State. Social media buzzes whenever he’s in action — especially when he has a big game like he did against NC State — though he’s not likely to see it.

“I’ve felt the support ... through high school to now,” Evans said. “My mom’s always calling me, talking about people are supporting you at home, and you really don’t realize until you hear it from other people, because I’m not really on social media much so I don’t see it. But I hear it all the time, and it’s just a good feeling to know that there’s support back home.”

The pride works both ways, too. Evans receives the support from back home, but he’s embraced the opportunity to showcase his Native American heritage on some of college basketball’s biggest stages.

“All of my family back home in Montana are Native Americans. To be able to show people that I’m proud of where I come from, where my heritage is, and to see that this program really takes pride in that as well — like, we have jerseys dedicated to that — it’s a great feeling,” he said. “I’m very prideful when I wear those jerseys and just wear my Native American culture on my sleeve, so it’s a great feeling to be able to represent my home that way.”