

New-Look RaiQuan Gray Reaping Rewards Of Offseason Work For FSU Basketball

By Curt Weiler

Tallahassee Democrat

January 26, 2021

It didn't take long this season for Florida State basketball forward RaiQuan Gray to show the strides he had made.

In the opening minutes of the Seminoles' second game of the season Dec. 9 vs. Indiana, Gray possessed the ball outside the arc in the corner. In one swift move, he accelerated past his defender, drove into the lane, rose airborne and slammed the ball into the basket.

It was a resounding play and one the redshirt junior admits he probably wouldn't have been able to make last year before he transformed his body this past offseason.

"That's a play right there I don't think I would have made last year," Gray told the *Democrat*.

"Obviously, I think I'm athletic, I think I'm more athletic than people think I am. But last year compared to me dunking the ball, I would say last year's Boston College game to the Indiana game and a few other games this year, you can kind of see the difference of balance and the quickness of my step a little bit."

That's just one of a number of plays this season made by Gray that have shown how his commitment to himself has paid off on the court.

Currently listed at 6-foot-8, 260 pounds, Gray is still very close to what he weighed over his first few years at FSU. But it doesn't take much time looking at him to see how drastically different his body looks this year.

After FSU had its 2019-20 season unceremoniously ended by the coronavirus pandemic, Gray took it upon himself to transform his body during quarantine.

"Just watching what I eat. Obviously, I'm a bigger dude, I have to watch what I eat, what time I eat, have to do extra cardio other than smaller people," Gray said.

"I stayed in the weight room with (FSU basketball strength and conditioning coach Mike) Bradley this offseason and I was just really locked in and focused on being in better shape this year.

"Because of a new team coming in, I didn't know what my role was gonna be, but I wanted to be prepared for anything thrown at me. I think I'm in better shape and I feel good out there moving around."

If you see Gray around FSU's basketball training center nowadays, he's normally carrying a jug of water as a reminder to stay extremely hydrated, a tip he picked up from former Seminole Trent Forrest.

Gray's journey at FSU has been a gradual one. A three-star recruit from Fort Lauderdale Dillard, Gray redshirted in his first year at FSU in 2017-18.

He's seen his playing time and production gradually increase in the years since. He went from 12.3 minutes and 3.9 points per game as a redshirt freshman in 2018-19 to 19.5 minutes and 6.0 points per game last season.

The timing of Gray's transformation was quite optimal as the departures of Patrick Williams, Devin Vassell and Forrest off last year's team forced him to take a larger role both on the court and as a leader.

So far this season, he's averaging 9.4 points and 5.5 rebounds per game, fifth and second-most on the FSU roster, respectively. He's also averaging 24.5 minutes per game, third-most among all Seminoles.

"He's becoming more comfortable with his role. Early on, that's a big adjustment to being a player that's playing on the team and kind of in a different role with Patrick and Trent and Devin over the last couple of years. Now, he's more a leadership role, he's experienced," FSU head coach Leonard Hamilton said.

"Whether we are successful or not, a lot has to do with how well he played. I think he's maturing into that, understanding his strengths and his weaknesses. He's going to the basket more, he's being patient with the shot selection. He gives us leadership on the floor, he gives us unique ball-handling and decision-making for his size, which is challenging."

While five-star freshman Scottie Barnes is a non-traditional primary ball-handler at 6-foot-9, Gray is an even more unusual primary ball-handler by traditional metrics. And yet, Gray has served as an occasional primary ball-handler for the Seminoles during the last four games with Barnes limited due to injury.

This dates back to when he was a late bloomer as a young high-school basketball player.

"Coach Ham, he recruited me and he always believed I could play one through five..." Gray said.

"I was always a short kid growing up so I didn't really grow into my height, my size until 10th grade. Before that, I was just a guard, honestly, dribbling the ball. Even in high school, I started at the point guard spot so it wasn't anything new to me. I'm comfortable playing anywhere on the court."

With Barnes limited of late, Gray has risen to the occasion in a big way for the Seminoles. He scored a career-high 19 points in FSU's win over North Carolina Jan. 16. Two days later at Louisville, he added 17 more points.

He played just 11 minutes in FSU's last game vs. Clemson due to foul trouble, but still managed to score 11 points. His streak of three consecutive games in double-figures is more than the two times he scored 10-plus points in FSU's first eight games this season.

These strides Gray has made have put him on the radar of NBA teams more than ever before. His mix of defensive ability, potential as a three-level scorer, solid passing skills for his size and the additional athleticism he has shown could one day make him another player in an ever-growing group of former Seminoles in the NBA. If he gets there, he knows much of it will be due to his commitment to self-improvement that began this past offseason.

"(FSU assistant coach Stan) Jones always touches on, 'If you want to be a star in this league, you've got to have that star condition. If you want to be a role player, you've got to have role player condition.' It's a different level of conditioning to the type of role that you have on your team," Gray said.

"I just wanted to be prepared for any role that I may fit in. I think that my body and my conditioning have come a long way. I'm still improving every day, taking it step by step, but it has definitely helped me a lot this season."