

A For Accountability: How 5th-Year Walk-Ons Play Vital Role In FSU Success

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February 16, 2021

If a text message exchange could define what is so unique about the Florida State men's basketball team, and help explain some of the Seminoles' unprecedented success, this one was it.

On one end was five-star freshman Scottie Barnes. On the other was fifth-year walk-on Justin Lindner.

"I need you to be on me more," Barnes implored his older but lesser-known teammate. "I want to be great, and I want this team to be great."

Barnes is one of the most decorated freshmen in college basketball and an expected lottery pick in the 2021 NBA Draft. He's a 6-foot, 9-inch point guard averaging 10.2 points, 4.3 assists and 3.7 rebounds per game for the No. 16 team in the country.

Lindner is a 6-foot-1, 180-pound walk-on whose greatest individual achievements at FSU include scoring four points against Chicago State in 2019 and earning a bachelor's degree in applied mathematics last May.

Yet it is Barnes who is not only accepting basketball advice and constructive criticism from Lindner, but soliciting it.

And the story is the same throughout the Seminoles' program.

Florida State has four fifth-year senior walk-ons on the roster -- Lindner, Travis Light, Will Miles and Harrison Prieto -- and while they rarely see extended action on the court, they all have become major factors in the rise of the Seminoles' program.

"Those guys are all graduate students," FSU head coach Leonard Hamilton said. "They have been part of our system for four or five years. So they know all of the principles that we emphasize. And the guys in our program want to be called out because they want to be held accountable. So those fifth-year seniors are able to help us with that during practice and games."

Over time, they essentially have become extensions of the coaching staff, and they each have designated "accountability partners" that they help.

Lindner is paired with the point guards -- Barnes, RayQuan Evans and "point forward" RaiQuan Gray. Light's main guys are the shooting guards, while Miles and Prieto work primarily with the forwards and centers.

During offseason workouts, they help demonstrate fundamentals -- particularly when new players arrive in the program. During practices, they typically participate on the scout team and run the opponents' offense and defense. And during games, they provide extra sets of eyes and ears for the coaching staff.

They digest every detail of the Seminoles' game plan for a specific opponent, and then watch from the bench to make sure the scholarship players are executing that plan correctly.

"We have a certain way we like to close out [on shooters], a certain way we want to switch screens," Hamilton said.

"And if someone doesn't do those things correctly, someone else will hold them accountable. We call each other out."

Each of the walk-ons takes his own personal approach to delivering those messages.

When one of the players in his group comes out of a game, Miles said he usually waits for them to get a drink and to catch their breath.

"A lot of times, I'll start off by asking what they see, and then I'll tell them what I see," said Miles, whose father, Bobby, and uncle Blake Miles both played at FSU. "That kind of helps bridge the gap, because it's a different experience when you're off the court versus when you're on the court."

Miles, who is pursuing his master's degree in finance, also tries to always share a positive pointer when he is planning to offer up a critique. Before reminding a teammate that he made a mistake with a defensive assignment, for example, he'll compliment the way they fought through an opponent's box-out to grab a rebound.

Inside the program, Miles said, they call it giving "a little sugar and hot sauce."

"They're doing so many things out there," the Orlando native said. "A lot of times, they're doing a lot more good than bad. But everyone seems to remember the bad."

Light, who is working toward a master's in business administration, said most of his in-game feedback is offering reminders about the scouting report. Maybe the coaches wanted to force a certain player to one side of the court. Or perhaps they wanted to extend their defense against a shooter with excellent range.

Once a game gets going, he said, it's not unusual for some of those details to get overlooked.

"You get caught up in the moment when you're playing the game," said Light, who came to FSU from Virginia. "Everyone does. So it's nice to have someone on the sideline who can kind of watch and observe everything and let you know what corrections you need to make."

Prieto, who is pursuing a master's degree in meteorology, can't help but be amazed at how the seniors' roles have evolved over the last five years.

When they first joined the program, their main job was to serve as able bodies for the scout team. They all were very good high school basketball players, but they also knew they could be easily replaced by a program like FSU. So their top goal was to learn everything they could and simply not mess things up.

Over time, they feel like they've become well-versed in virtually offensive and defensive scheme being used in college basketball.

"In the first year or two, we learned so much basketball," said Prieto, who hails from Louisiana.

Added Miles: "In high school, you might have three plays and probably two defensive sets. Here, you've got different motions, actions, half-court sets, full-court sets ... it's a lot mentally and physically."

Lindner is the only one of the four who actually plans to go into college coaching. So he is not only watching and listening to the players on the court, but he also is paying close attention to Hamilton and his coaching staff.

With the bench area expanded and spaced out this year due to COVID-19 protocols, the Memphis native will purposefully get within earshot of associate head coach Stan Jones to get a feel for what impresses or concerns him.

"We're able to talk strategy a lot," Lindner said. "And I'm able to hear things he's saying and then relay it to players. He's in the huddle, so he can't say every individual thing to every single player. So I'll hear his thoughts and try to relay them."

Like the others, Lindner tries to pick his spots.

All of the walk-ons know better than to start offering their advice when Hamilton or his assistants are speaking, so Lindner will often chime in before the coaches begin or right when the huddle breaks.

He said one of his constant messages to Barnes is to be more aggressive in transition because the freshman is so dangerous in those situations. With Gray, it might be reminders about attacking the offensive glass or stepping up his defense.

And Gray is constantly asking for that feedback, Lindner said. "He's always on me to remind him to get steals and boards."

Because the seniors have been in the program for so long, they often know the offensive and defensive schemes of upcoming opponents before they even get the scouting reports. And during games, they have fun recognizing what plays the other team is running and calling them out to help the players on the floor.

"When we get a stop on that, that definitely means a lot to us," Miles said. "It means we did our job."

That obviously is a major reward in itself. But sometimes, like in Monday's blowout victory against No. 7 Virginia, they get even more noticeable recognition.

With 1:17 remaining, Hamilton inserted Lindner, Light and Miles into the game for the final few possessions. Prieto is nursing an injury and was not available, but the others have now made appearances in six of 15 games this season.

It's a token of Hamilton's appreciation for the quartet's many contributions behind the scenes. And in the minds of the fifth-year seniors, it's one more symbol of what makes the FSU program so special.

When the walk-ons get those late-game opportunities, the scholarship guys usually stand and cheer and smile, hoping each shot will go through the net. They root them on as a way to say thanks for everything they do for the program and for them individually.

"Guys like Scottie Barnes or [current NBA players] Patrick Williams and Devin Vassell, they'll come in and want to learn from us," Prieto said. "That's very cool. It shows the type of character guys that the coaches are recruiting. That they're not egotistical -- they're willing to humble themselves and listen to guys that don't see much of the court but know what's going on."

"That says a lot about the coaching staff and their ability to scout players as people -- not just players."