

The Evolution of M.J. Walker

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The Osceola

February 19, 2021

M.J. Walker is just seven points away from hitting the 1,000-point mark in his Florida State career. It's a mark that 46 other Seminoles have reached in their careers, not exclusive company but one that reflects consistency and longevity.

Four years ago, before Walker arrived at FSU, few would have figured he would stay until his senior year to hit this milestone. Most national analysts, local writers and FSU fans figured Walker was a one- or two-and-done prospect.

He was an All-American.

But a funny thing about assumptions.

"Coming out of high school, obviously the politics, everybody thinks I'm a McDonald's All-American, I'm supposed to be a one and done," Walker told the Osceola. "When I was younger, coming out of high school, you think about that. I remember my freshman year, trying to figure it out, if you're going to be a one-and-done or not. A bunch of it don't matter. But I think that for me I just fell in love with the process. I think that was the biggest thing. And just maturing. I feel like I needed to go four years. It's no pressure or anything like that. I feel like a lot of people feel it's a rush to get to the next level instead of enjoying the process.

"It's all about the growth and not rushing your process. Understand that your journey is different from everyone else's. You can't necessarily compare your journey to what's already made for somebody else."

Reading those words and it's hard not to think about the maturity there. Walker arrived as a boy and a prospect known for his ability to score. Along the way, he evolved and grew. The man took on a leadership role, especially in the last two seasons, and became known for his ability to defend as well as pass.

"M.J. is always locked in," FSU coach Leonard Hamilton said. "He doesn't have as many highs and lows in terms of his mentality and his focus as some guys have. ... He represents that warrior mentality that you like in sports. You know what you are going to get from him — defensively, running the floor, fighting, being tough. It has shown up in his whole career. I remember even as a freshman, he could go in a game during critical moments and make big shots."

The points have added up over time: 246 as a freshman, 263 as a sophomore, 275 as a junior and 209 points as a senior going into Saturday's game at Pittsburgh (4 p.m. on Regional Sports Networks). He has done it by drilling 3-pointers with less streakiness and more consistency, one of 10 players in school history with 150 or more made 3-point shots. He has done it by driving the floor with an array of dunks, layups, pull-up jumpers and other high-degree-of-difficulty shots.

Walker will also pass. He has 40 assists this season, second only to Scottie Barnes' 60. There were five assists in the overtime win over Wake. An almost unheard of 10 assists in a road win over Louisville. If you were asking what position Walker plays, it would be easy to just say "shooting guard" but how many of those are distributors and rack up 10 assists?

Part of the evolution of Walker is learning to harness the emotion on the court.

"The easiest part to see is the physical maturation in terms of his body," assistant coach Stan Jones told the Osceola. "But, more importantly, his skill, consistency. The part that if you're not talking to him every day you're not seeing in practice every day is over the course of his career, the emotional IQ development of where he is. One thing that

makes M.J. good is he's a very emotional, competitive guy. That's also the thing that makes him bad at times. That sometimes spills over and has allowed him to sometimes stack a mistake on top of that mistake because he's too hard on himself, he's too hard on the situation.

"And as he's allowed the wisdom of coach Hamilton and our staff to just talk to him about how that's got to evolve and develop. And for him to move in this place, and so he can have a chance to be at the next level once he leaves us, it was going to be paramount for him."

How difficult is that, especially in a sport that demands energy and passion but also composure?

"It's faster to improve a jump shot than it is to help somebody understand their emotional management, understand their psychological development," Jones said. "Because it takes a long time to break bad habits and then it takes a longer time to create new habits. Those kind of things excite me more than just seeing the statistical progression."

Walker describes the scouting report on him back then, beginning with the scorer's mindset. "You feel like you had a good game based off of how many points you score," Walker said. "That's just the mindset you have coming out of high school."

He admits he was young and figuring things out. The FSU culture helped. There are always veterans to help teach and develop. He credits teammates and coaches for helping him understand his role and also how it can change game to game.

"It doesn't really matter about your production, you are just trying to do whatever you can, get lost in the fight and do whatever you can to win," Walker said. "Nobody is happy unless they are winning. It doesn't matter what you do personally. If everybody is winning that's all that matters. That mindset definitely clicked for me last year. What I learned the first two years definitely helped me get to that mindset. I played with a lot of good guys that are in the pros. Even the guys that aren't in the pros. All of the teams have helped me get to this point."

The culture established by Hamilton and the staff but truly reinforced by leaders each day. He found comfort in the process, he says, but how much of it is also a credit to coaches and teammates who helped in part shape his development.

"I'm not sure if there's a lot of programs that do it the way we do," Walker said. "I don't think if I had gone anywhere else I would have grown how I did here. I think the coaches really care about us, and it shows. They pour their hearts out into us. Whether they're talking about life, academics, our families back home, they try to do whatever they can to uplift us and make sure that we're good in life after basketball. So I think that's the biggest thing. I'm not saying other programs don't do that. But I think just being here, it shows a lot, how we win and how many guys are on the next level."

Walker may soon be on the next level, too. It could happen later this year. But there's plenty of college basketball left between the regular season, ACC Tournament and NCAA Tournament.

The scorer matured and evolved into a contributor in so many areas. Along the way, a leader, too. Hamilton recalls the game on Feb. 15, 2020, where Walker took 12 stitches to his lip but returned to finish with five 3-pointers in a win over Syracuse.

"He walks back out on the basketball court and produces," Hamilton said. "That says a little bit about what he is inside. That manifests itself and it comes through in his leadership. And sometimes he has a little bite to his tone but that's the passion that he has inside of him that makes him unique and special. I think he's going to be playing basketball for a long time."

That's what hits home about Walker. The can't-miss prospect that we all thought would make Tallahassee a one- or two-year pit stop — and few would have minded if that had been the case — instead has been a part of four FSU

teams. Two of them went deep in the NCAA Tournament (an Elite Eight and a Sweet 16), a third won an ACC regular-season title in a shortened season and a fourth is off to quite the impressive 12-3 start.

One of the things Jones says he tells all the players is perhaps even more appropriate when reflecting on Walker's evolution.

"You need to play with confidence like you are going to be here one year and you need to practice every day like you're going to be here six years," Jones said. "When you do those things it allows you to have an emotional calmness about yourself."

Walker figured that out. Off the court, Walker said it was important to him and his parents that he would have a degree when he moved on into life. And he will have his degree in social sciences in a few months.

On the court?

"This is my dream," Walker said. "This is the way it's going to be for me. I'm enjoying it. I'm loving it. I think that's the reason why I feel like I'm playing with a peace, having the mindset of just having fun and trying to win as many games as possible."