

FSU Basketball Center Balsa Koprivica Taking Next Step In Development At A Critical Moment

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One year has made quite the difference for Florida State center Balsa Koprivica.

Last year as a true freshman, the 7-foot-1 big man from Belgrade, Serbia averaged just 4.7 points and 2.4 rebounds over 10.3 minutes per game, working entirely in a reserve role.

But even then, FSU head coach Leonard Hamilton knew the special kind of player he had in Koprivica.

"I remember talking to coach Ham last year and he told me point blank, 'Balsa doesn't realize how good he is. That comes with the confidence he'll develop in this system because if you know me, you know that I play through my posts and those guys have to be ready to play. They're gonna be involved,'" ESPN college basketball analyst Jordan Cornette told the Democrat.

"That's very different from most programs out there. Sometimes those bigs are screeners, rim-runners and rebounders, but Coach Ham wants to establish his bigs. I think Balsa had to develop the confidence, the conditioning and also the health for him to realize he's got to play not only a role but an integral role, a paramount role in what they do defensively."

Koprivica became the latest in a long line of FSU seven-footers when he signed with the Seminoles in 2019. However, it was clear from the moment he signed that he wasn't the usual FSU center signee.

As the No. 77 overall player and No. 19 center in the 2019 class according to the 247Sports composite rankings, he arrived at FSU much more polished than many of his predecessors like Christ Koumadje, Boris Bojanovsky and Michael Ojo.

Still, he needed a bit of time at the collegiate level to get acclimated.

"Balsa came in with way more acclaim than some of those other guys. He was so highly-rated as a younger player that it was almost a detriment to him because of expectations which create an anxiety level..." FSU assistant coach Stan Jones told the Democrat.

"The biggest thing for bigger players is time. Big players always develop a little later than perimeter players do, but when they start coming, they start coming in a big way."

After battling some injuries last season, he's benefitted greatly from a healthy offseason as well as a year of experience in the FSU system.

Mental preparations help Koprivica improve in 2020-21

Koprivica has been an improved player throughout his sophomore season. He's become a mainstay in the FSU lineup, starting 19 of the Seminoles' 24 games, and has seen a surge in his impact at both ends of the floor.

He's nearly doubled his scoring average up to 9.2 this season and more than doubled his rebounding average up to 5.7 per game. He's also averaging 1.4 blocks per game, over one more than the 0.3 he averaged as a freshman.

"It helped me a lot because mentally I've been preparing a lot. Especially during the summer when everybody was home, I was working on myself and mentally preparing for next year, trying to study a lot of film," Koprivica said.

"Just trying to prove myself as a player and try to prove myself mentally. I got a chance to do that, not having to worry about any injuries. I'm just trying to get better every day."

Now entering the second weekend of the NCAA Tournament, Koprivica seems to be playing his best basketball at the right time.

He got in early foul trouble and played just 11 minutes in FSU's second-round win over Colorado. But before that, Koprivica had two double-doubles in as many ACC Tournament games and came up one rebound short of a third straight double-double in FSU's NCAA Tournament opener against UNC Greensboro.

"Balsa is growing and maturing right in front of our eyes. He's gotten to the point where he realizes that if he can just give all he has, give tremendous effort and then come out and get a rest, he can be more effective," FSU head coach Leonard Hamilton said.

"He's put himself in the frame of mind he wants to go as hard with as much energy, as active as he possibly can be and then if he gets fatigued, he comes out and someone else goes in. That's allowing him to, I think, be much more effective in the game."

As Hamilton said, it took Koprivica awhile to learn that he can rely on FSU's deep rotation of players. As he's started playing with maximum effort while on the court until his tank runs out, the results have shown up in his play.

"It's nothing that crazy. I was just talking to my coach and he told me to exhaust myself every time I'm on the court and sub myself out," Koprivica said.

"I just try to exhaust myself, play as hard as I can and then get back in the game, not take any possessions out. I think it helped me be more productive and be more beneficial to the team, helping with winning."

Koprivica's recent run of strong play is well-timed as he may be the single most important FSU player in the Seminoles' Sweet 16 matchup.

If FSU is going to pull the upset and keep its season alive Sunday at 5 p.m. against No. 1 seed Michigan, Koprivica keeping UM center Hunter Dickinson in check will play a major role in that.

Dickinson, the Big Ten Freshman of the Year and a second-team All-American, enters Sunday leading the Wolverines with 14.2 points and 7.5 rebounds per game this season.

With Koprivica, FSU is one of the few teams with a center who has both the size and athleticism to potentially match up well against UM's 7-foot-1 center.

"He's a well-conditioned athlete who competes. He's got a toughness and an athleticism that can bounce around down there. He can be good with his footwork to front, play behind, maybe generate some deflections, elevate for some deflections and shot-block opportunities. He moves well laterally, he moves well changing ends. He's a gifted athlete," Cornette said of Koprivica.

"Dickinson won't have an advantage running the floor because it's a (less athletic) big. Koprivica is not that. He moves well. I think the lateral ability, the athleticism and the level of physicality that Koprivica has, I'm not saying he's elite in all those areas, but he possesses enough in those areas to not have a disadvantage clearly to a guy like Hunter Dickinson.

"Hunter is great scoring it, better scoring it than Koprivica, but when it comes down to banging and being a defensive guy that tries to limit, Koprivica is built for that in this matchup."