

## **Native American RayQuan Evans Feeling Right At Home Playing For Florida State Seminoles**

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On that night, wearing that jersey, no one other than RayQuan Evans was destined to be standing at the free throw line for Florida State with the game on the line.

The 6-foot-4 senior point guard and the first member of a Native American tribe to play for the Seminoles men's team calmly dropped both free throws with less than a second remaining to secure the one point win over Miami.

And this wasn't just another moment to be celebrated and forgotten.

Evans, the son of Lavern OldElk and Israel Evans and a member of the Crow Tribe in Montana, stood at that foul line wearing the Seminoles' N7 turquoise jersey, which honors Native American culture.

"To have the moment as a team and me understanding what those jerseys represent, what a huge moment," Evans said. "I'm very thankful I was able to be put in that moment because there's a bunch of little kids at home who look up to me. I feel like it was a real surreal moment."

The man given the Indian name 'Young Man With Blessed Days' naturally secured the 65-64 victory, handing Miami its first ACC loss. That game played just more than a week ago sets up Saturday's 2 p.m. rematch between the top two teams in the ACC when the Seminoles (12-5, 5-2 ACC) travel to Miami (14-4, 6-1).

And Evans was not done making clutch shots. Four nights later at Syracuse, his two free throws with three seconds remaining sealed the win. Tuesday was a double-dose of Ice Water Evans against Duke. He sent the game into overtime with a layup high off the glass over two defenders just before the buzzer, and then made the winning free throws with 12.3 seconds left in OT for the 79-78 win.

"We feel safe when he's going to the line," FSU coach Leonard Hamilton said. "There's no doubt that he's very mature, he's given us tremendous leadership. Whenever the game's on the line, he seems to always make the right decisions."

Evans' 7.1 points and 2.6 assists per game do not come close to depicting his value to the Seminoles. He had five assists and one turnover in the Syracuse and Duke wins.

"He has to be on the floor in a lot of ways," ESPN basketball analyst Seth Greenberg said. "He's almost their compass."

And Evans will tell you he's had a lot of help when it comes to this season.

Evans has been playing with a heavy heart ever since his brother, Tye Lafranier, died Nov. 21. Tye, 27, suffered a seizure about six months prior to his death and was diagnosed with a rare and aggressive form of leukemia.

"Every game now and just the way I walk in my life is for my brother," Evans said. "Every game I've been playing harder because he fought to the end with his cancer. Not a day went by where he didn't fight. If he can fight at a time like that, I can fight on the court, I can fight in life ... I'm representing my brother through that."

### **Evans proud to be a Seminole**

RayQuan Ethan Evans is in the perfect place. Working on his third college degree, Evans as much as anyone understands the respect and reverence given to Native Americans by a school whose nickname has drawn criticism and calls to be changed.

Instead, Evans could not be prouder of the university he represents.

"There's been times where organizations have used Native American names and other cultures, names and mascots and didn't pay any attention to or give credit to those tribes," Evans said. "But here, it's awesome. Especially because it's not going unnoticed and (brings attention to the Seminole Tribe) and I'm using it to bring recognition to my tribe back home and tribes all over Montana.

"People need to take more time in understanding that there is no disrespect going on here at all."

Evans spent part of his childhood on the Crow Indian Reservation, located about an hour east of Billings. He learned basketball from his dad, who played for the University of Montana. He said basketball is an important part of his large family.

Evans spent two years at North Idaho College before being signed by Hamilton in 2019. He was aware of Florida State and its history with the Seminole Tribe, but never envisioned playing in Tallahassee.

Until that surprise phone call.

"When coach Hamilton called, I was shocked and amazed because the culture behind Florida State, what this culture represents, this program, the building blocks this program has set," he said. "I thought this is my opportunity. I get to play at the highest level of college basketball but also I get to share my culture and give kids a reason back home to look up to me, and give kids a reason to chase their dreams.

"I feel like I was brought here for something bigger and something more (than just basketball)."

#### **Playing game after brother's death**

Which is why Evans felt he was in a good enough place to play in a game the day after being told his brother's battle with leukemia had ended. RayQuan scored eight points and had a game-high six assists in 16 minutes of FSU's 81-58 win over Missouri in the championship game of the Jacksonville Classic on Nov. 22.

While Evan broke down in tears following the game, Hamilton was emotional when describing what he had seen.

"There are true Seminoles," Hamilton said. "But then there's whatever kind of Seminole Ray Evans is. For him to step up and want to do that ... not very many people can do that and play as well as he played tonight."

Hamilton, who is in his 52nd year of coaching, called it "one of the best performances I've ever seen in my coaching career."

What happened eight days later topped any clutch moment on the court. Evans was home in Montana that night to attend Tye's funeral. FSU was playing at Purdue in the ACC/Big Ten Challenge. Before the game, a Purdue student sent an envelope to Hamilton and said it was for RayQuan.

When he finally got to open it, RayQuan found a black card with the Purdue logo and a note inside from the student body saying how sorry they were for his loss and that the entire college basketball community "including your new fans in West Lafayette" were behind him. The Boilermakers' basketball program also tweeted out a link to a GoFundMe page that was set up to cover funeral expenses.

Evans got emotional reading the card.

"I couldn't believe it," he said. "It's competition, teams may not like each other, the crowd may not like you and for them to take the time before a big game and acknowledge what I went through even though I was not there, really meant a lot to me.

"That shows the character of people. That shows no matter how competitive the basketball world is I feel like we're all a family."