

## **Underdog Unleashed: Freshman Matthew Cleveland Makes Mark For FSU Hoops**

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Ralph Cleveland was living the life of millions of other youth sports dads.

His son Matthew loved basketball and showed legitimate potential. He was dedicated to improving. And with any luck, he was going to have the same growth spurt his father experienced around the time he hit high school.

So Ralph did what parents do.

He worked with Matthew on his game. He and his wife, Sandra, drove all around metro Atlanta, taking him to rec-league practices and AAU tournaments. He enlisted the help of skills trainers.

All with the hope that Matthew one day might have the opportunity -- if he continued working really hard -- to play college basketball somewhere. Anywhere.

It wasn't until a scout approached him at an AAU event before Matthew's freshman year of high school that his father realized what the future might really hold.

"He's probably going to be an inch or two taller than you, and with the way he's playing, he's high-major material," the scout told Ralph, who stands 6-foot-4.

At the time, Matthew was still a middle-schooler. Having fun. Playing a game.

He was nowhere close to 6-5 or 6-6. And the idea of making it to high-major college basketball -- in a conference like the ACC, SEC or Big Ten -- seemed like something out of a dream.

"That was the first time someone said it to me," Ralph Cleveland remembered. "Honestly, my jaw dropped. That was probably the earliest indication that this was going to be a little bit different ride."

### **'It just took off'**

Matthew Cleveland was not a basketball phenom from an early age.

He wasn't bigger or stronger than all the other kids. And because he split time between basketball and baseball, he wasn't quite as polished as the boys who hooped all year-round.

When Cleveland did finally decide to focus full-time on basketball and tried out for a summer AAU program around the age of 12, he wasn't quite good enough to make the outfit's top team. He was relegated to one of the lesser squads.

It was what he considered a common theme.

"Pretty much my whole career playing basketball, I've always been the underdog," the FSU freshman told Warchant this past summer. "So I've always had that chip on my shoulder."

Underdog is a relative term these days.

By the time he enrolled at Florida State, Cleveland was a five-star prospect and the No. 17 recruit in the country. He chose the Seminoles over national powers like Michigan, Kansas and Stanford. Countless other elite programs didn't make the cut.

But beneath all the recent success, Cleveland and his family distinctly remember his humble beginnings.

When he was still learning how to transition from rec ball to the competitive AAU circuit. When he wasn't as adept at ball-handling and passing, but his father encouraged him to play in the backcourt anyway. When he made his high school team as a freshman but couldn't grab a starting role.

To be certain, Matthew Cleveland tasted plenty of failure in his youth. But even in those toughest times, his family says he never doubted that he could one day play at the college level, and possibly in the NBA.

Even if others were not quite so sure.

"We were a long ways from there when we started," Ralph Cleveland said with a laugh. "We'll just put it that way." The progress started to come quickly, though, once the younger Cleveland hung up his baseball bat and glove. One year after getting left off that AAU program's top roster, Cleveland worked on his deficiencies and earned an invitation the next time around.

"Slowly but surely, he worked his way up," his father said. "To being a starter and to being a big contributor on that team."

Then came the growth spurt.

As a freshman in high school, Cleveland was listed at 6-foot-2. One year later, he shot up to 6-6. Then 6-7 the year after that.

Ralph Cleveland always expected his son would grow into a small forward's body. Not only was he himself tall, but his wife's family had some height as well.

But instead of banking on that size and having Matthew focus on playing around the basket, Ralph wanted him to work on being a guard. He even placed him on multiple AAU teams at a time so that Matthew could play on the wing with some squads and actually handle point guard duties on others.

"I knew that was going to be important for his growth and development, that he could take on the ball-handling responsibilities for a team and gain some comfort level with that," the father said. "Let's make sure that you can really handle the ball and that you can play on the perimeter."

By the time Matthew was a sophomore in high school, everything came together.

Not only had he grown four or five inches, but his body started filling out thanks to steady work in the weight room. His skills were also continuing to improve.

Soon, he would leave the Hype Hawks, an independent AAU team that had been his offseason basketball home, for the prestigious Adidas-sponsored Atlanta Celtics.

"You could just see the progression really take off," Ralph Cleveland said. "He didn't play on a shoe circuit team all the way up until 17U. And because the coaches were so supportive and just instilled a tremendous amount of confidence in him to go out and perform ... man, it just took off.

"Once he started playing above the rim, it was kind of done," Ralph continued with a laugh. "His confidence went through the roof at that point."

### **A perfect match**

Choosing a college destination ultimately would be Matthew Cleveland's decision, but he certainly had guidance from the family.

Both of his parents graduated from Georgia Tech -- Ralph majored in engineering while Sandra majored in management with a concentration in accounting -- so academics were definitely going to be a major consideration. With that in mind, they encouraged their talented son to choose a school that not only would prepare him for life after basketball, but that could help him achieve his "highest potential."

They urged him to seek the same from a basketball perspective. To find a program that would develop him to become the best player he could be.

And the third criteria was character within the coaching staff.

"Are these people that you can trust?" Ralph asked his son. "Are these people that when they say they're going to do something, are they going to do what they promised? And are these mentors of men? What's their track record on that?"

It didn't take long for Leonard Hamilton's Florida State Seminoles program to emerge as the frontrunner.

"They are A-plus on all three of those scales," Ralph said.

Cleveland didn't announce his commitment to FSU until the summer before his senior season -- after schools like North Carolina and Kentucky had tried to make a late push -- but looking back, he says he knew he would be a Seminole following his first visit as a high school sophomore.

"No other visit was like that. No other coaching staff was like that," said Cleveland, who was recruited primarily by FSU assistant coach Charlton Young. "And I knew no other school was going to be able to top that. So it was really just a waiting game after that."

Cleveland would end up taking three trips to FSU during the recruiting process, and each only served to solidify his decision.

In January of 2020, a few months before he made his commitment, he attended an FSU home game against Notre Dame. It was a Saturday night. Prime time with a sold-out crowd. And the game was a thriller that the Seminoles won 85-84.

Cleveland loved watching the way FSU loaded its lineup with tall, versatile wings like himself. He appreciated how hard they played defense and how quickly they got out in transition on offense.

"Florida State was a great fit from that standpoint," Ralph said. "You look at the fit from a basketball standpoint, and it's really undeniable, right? Coach Ham, Coach Young and all of the coaches do a terrific job of developing players with his size and skill set and versatility."

The academic piece pushed the Seminoles over the top.

Florida State's status as a Top 20 public university would be impressive enough. But because Cleveland has long dreamed of pursuing a career in the FBI, he was thrilled to learn that FSU's criminology department is routinely ranked in the top 10 nationally.

And Hamilton's incredible record of graduating players speaks for itself.

"It's top-notch," Ralph said. "And then a really good law school as well? With a clear articulation plan from undergraduate into a law degree? That was just hard to beat. It was really hard to beat."

### **'You don't have to rush it'**

It hasn't taken Matthew Cleveland long to make an impact on the college level.

At just past the midway point of his freshman season, he ranks third on the team in scoring at 10.5 points per game and third in rebounding at 4.3, despite coming off the bench in every contest.

He was named ACC Freshman of the Week in early January after recording a double-double -- 13 points and 10 rebounds -- in a win at N.C. State. He hit a game-winning shot with 2.1 seconds remaining to lift FSU past Boston University. And just last week, he led the team with 15 points in a one-point win over Miami.

While the scoring is noteworthy, Hamilton said recently that Cleveland's "defense, his rebounding, his aggressiveness and his tenacity" have been perhaps his greatest contributions to the Seminoles, who are now 11-5 overall and 5-2 in the ACC after knocking off No. 6 Duke late Tuesday.

Those descriptions wouldn't come as much of a surprise to Ralph Cleveland.

He knows better than anyone how much time and effort his son has poured into becoming the best all-around player he can be.

"He's really a Swiss Army Knife on the floor," Ralph said. "There's so many different things he can do. And he makes it look so easy sometimes. But by the time you've seen Matthew do it in a game, he has really worked at it."

In Cleveland's early years, that work might have been devoted to basics like ball-handling, passing and shooting. In the months before he enrolled at Florida State, it was finishing at the rim with both hands -- with finesse and with power. Skills we have seen on display already this season.

"He's worked hard on that. Really hard," Ralph said. "When he decides, 'This is a skill that I want to develop,' he works on it."

It's a mindset Cleveland has possessed for as long as anyone can remember.

It served him well when he was young and not even the strongest player in some of his youth leagues. And also last season, when he was widely regarded as one of the premier high school players in the country.

The self-described "underdog," who vividly remembers being doubted as a youth, maintained that same dogged determination when opposing prep teams focused on taking down the hot-shot Florida State signee.

"It didn't really matter if they were coming at me, because I was coming right back at them," he said.

And more often than not, he came out on top.

Cleveland led Pace Academy to Georgia state championships as a junior and senior. He averaged 22.8 points, 10.6 rebounds, 2.6 assists and 2.0 steals during his final season, and he followed that up by participating in the prestigious Allen Iverson Roundball Classic, a postseason All-America game in Philadelphia.

Then once he got back home to Atlanta, it was back in the weight room three days a week with a strength trainer, and in the gym two or three days a week with his skills trainer.

The work never stopped.

When asked in the early summer what he was spending time on specifically, Cleveland offered a lengthy list: "Shooting. Shooting off the dribble. Change of direction in the half-court game. Finishing. And defense."

As a player who patterns his game after NBA stars like Kevin Durant, Jayson Tatum and Bradley Beal, there's a chance Cleveland could be the next Florida State standout to make a splash as a professional.

He doesn't have quite the same size of Scottie Barnes and Patrick Williams -- both of whom were one-and-done players at FSU and No. 4 picks in the 2021 and 2020 drafts, respectively -- but he isn't far off. And his statistics are actually slightly more impressive.

Whether the time comes for Cleveland to test the NBA waters sooner or later, Ralph insisted his son is in no hurry. He said Matthew didn't come to Tallahassee with preconceived notions of how long that process would take, and he's not going to leave until he's certain that he's ready.

"I think he views himself as clearly having the ability to play at the next level," Ralph said. "He just recognizes that he's got to put in the work. Just keep developing. Keep getting better. When the time is right, you're gonna know it. You don't have to rush it. It will be there for you.

"But the main focus for us has always been -- and will always be -- continued growth and development. That is one thing that I think has really served Matthew well. He is really bought in to that. He is really bought in to, 'What do I have to do to get better?' And then he goes and does it."