

## Malik Osborne Stepping Up While FSU Men's Basketball Team Works Through Early Struggles

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Malik Osborne's versatility has made him one of the most valuable players on the Florida State's men's basketball team.

As a versatile defender, shot blocker, rebounder and creator of offense both at the rim and from the perimeter, Osborne has fit in well playing at any of the five positions on the court throughout his four seasons with the Seminoles.

But with FSU still trying to find its way during a 2-1 start to this season, Osborne has been fulfilling a vital role while the Seminoles figure things out.

Osborne, a 6-foot-9 redshirt senior has been playing center, a role he has played in the past, but made more challenging with FSU's more traditionally-sized frontcourt players still trying to find their footing in the early going of the season.

"Malik is in a very challenging position," FSU coach Leonard Hamilton said.

"The 5 position is probably more important to us than it is for a lot of teams because the center sets a lot of screens, a lot of the angle screens, a lot of slip screens, a lot of ball reversals. And Malik, right now, his strength is his perimeter shooting.

"We had a different team when he played the five before but we also had Dominik Olejniczak and Balsa Koprivica that came in to give us what we call a real, true five position. And so the combination of having two seven footers that were rim protectors, guys that could catch lobs, guys who could were a threat in the paint, the combination of work with those guys backing him up, and him being a more pick and pop guy was a good combination."

Osborne, however, is finding ways to generate offense and maintain a tough presence on defense.

Osborne is averaging 15 points and 9.7 rebounds through the first three games while shooting 61.9 percent from the field. It's a spike in offensive production from last season that's not unexpected after the Seminoles lost four key players from last year's team to the NBA.

While FSU's play on the offensive end has been uneven early on this season - as shown during its road loss at rival Florida and an often sluggish victory over Tulane - Osborne continues to be the stabilizing presence the Seminoles need while they try to fit the pieces in place during this process.

It's left FSU without an experienced traditional center. While FSU added 7-foot-1 freshman John Butler and 7-foot-4 transfer center Naheem McLeod, both are still getting acclimated to playing for the Seminoles and at the Division-I level.

"In order for us to be able to utilize (Osborne's) strengths in relation to this edition to this team, we need the full complement of other guys," Hamilton said. "We need a guy like Naheem to be a little bit more efficient, a little bit better and containing the dribble, which is challenging for a 7-3 guy containing a point guard but that's what our system. Those guys are still learning and growing. But I love their potential. And hopefully, we can use this game to accelerate the learning process more efficient and make it easier for Malik."

Adding to the issue, 7-foot-2 senior center Tanor Ngom only played his first minutes of the season in Wednesday's game against Tulane after missing the first two games while in concussion protocol.

"It's not too challenging other than going up against the tallest and strongest kid on the court. I've had experience with that already," Osborne said. "We play the 5 out sometimes with me on offense so it's really just five position-less basketball players at this point and it's more of a label than anything. I doesn't really classify my game or how they use me.

"I feel like the versatility is what helps us operate and being able to pick and pop and bring the 5 out opens lanes for my teammates who are good drivers."

For Osborne, being a leader is nothing new.

It's something he learned from playing with several veterans in recent years during one of the most successful runs in FSU men's basketball history with the Seminoles making three consecutive Sweet 16 appearances.

"It really started for me when I first came to Florida State seeing the leaders before me like Terrance Mann, Phil Cofer, Trent Forrest, Devin Vassell, RaiQuan Gray, MJ Walker," Osborne said. "Just seeing how they just led the way with the new guys. All I'm doing is just taking the qualities and the techniques they used and applying it to the new guys. And we're starting to gel and come together and I think we're only going to get better as the season goes forward."

Osborne has become a leader both on the court and off the court at Florida State.

Last year, Osborne was asked by former FSU president John Thrasher to join his task force on anti-racism, equality and inclusion. The group consists of students, faculty and alumni who share thoughts and have open dialogues about racism, diversity, and inclusion at the university.

"It's something I took a lot of pride in. I feel like as athletes we have this stage where people respect us and are constantly watching us so it was a great opportunity for me to use my voice as a platform for change," said Osborne, who earned his bachelor's degree in Criminology in April and is currently working on a second bachelor's degree in Humanities with a concentration in Communications.

These days, Osborne is using his voice to help keep FSU on course as the Seminoles look to work their way through their early-season difficulties and regain the form that's made them one of the best in the ACC in recent years. Their next chance begins this weekend when FSU competes in the Jacksonville Classic at the University of North

Florida against Loyola Marymount on Sunday and either SMU or Missouri on Monday.

"I feel like the biggest thing is the mental game. We have all the talent we need. From the neck down, we can compete with anybody. But we have a lot of players who haven't competed in these ACC games or these big time games. It's all really just learning the game experience."