

Mills' Creativity a Driving Force For FSU

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (seminoles.com) Caleb Mills couldn't stay away from the basketball court growing up in Arden, N.C.

"At that time, my granddad had built a park for the neighborhood," Mills said. "Before my dad hurt his knee, we used to play one-on-one every day usually. Me, him and my little brother. We used to go out so early, there would be dew on the grass. And we would stay out there until the street lights came on and we had to get in the house."

Mills' love for basketball was evident early. His game may have evolved from the playground of his hometown, just a few miles south of Asheville, and taken him first to Houston and now Tallahassee. But he's a gym rat and is in love with the game.

When Mills was asked what prompted him to come back to the Donald L. Tucker Center court after 11 p.m., following Florida State's overtime victory over Boston University on Thanksgiving Eve, he shrugs it off. He recalls staying at the Tucker Center until 3 a.m. after the Tulane game, too.

"I find peace playing basketball," Mills said. "When we're not practicing, I'm here by myself or with one of the managers. Getting shots up. ... I just have high expectations for myself."

Mills has high expectations and so do FSU's coaches. He has been quite productive through FSU's first eight games, leading the team in scoring (12.6) and leading the ACC in steals (2.4) per game. Mills is quick to the basket, able to create his own shot — which has been necessary as the Seminoles have at times struggled with efficiency in the half-court offense.

"He's more like (former FSU guard) Toney Douglas, he's capable of creating shots not only for his teammates but for himself," FSU coach Leonard Hamilton said of Mills. "He's going through a period of adjustment himself. He is trying to develop the skills of creating for his teammates, he understands the importance of that, playing tremendously unselfish. He's adjusting to a ball-movement-type system, that everybody gets touches in the half court. So it's a little bit of an adjustment for him. But because he's a little older, more experienced, he's capable of being who he is."

Who Mills is, through eight games, is a player who is productive on both ends of the floor and is not lacking confidence when it comes to taking (and making) contested drives or difficult off-balance shots. While the Seminoles (5-3) have suffered through an inconsistent start, in part due to injuries that have affected the rotation, Mills has scored eight or more points and grabbed two or more steals in each of the last six games.

Mills' ability to change directions, start and stop and still gauge the touch of a shot with the right depth perception is a "gift," Hamilton said. In Mills' view, it has also developed over time on the court as well as knowing when to take the shot or pass because his dribble-drive has drawn attention.

"Over time, a lot of teams have the same kind of rotation defensively, if somebody gets downhill, the weak side will rotate over and usually the pass is open the opposite of where you drove," Mills said. "Just knowing that beforehand. But the hard part is getting by your defender."

Mills has settled in well in Tallahassee following his transfer from Houston. He's majoring in Social Science and, beyond aspirations of playing pro basketball, he would like to help his family one day expand their ownership of real estate in North Carolina. Family and friends will also get a chance to see him play often in the coming months,

from Sunday's game against South Carolina in Rock Hill (noon on ESPN2) to early January games at NC State and Wake Forest as well as February games at Duke and North Carolina.

Hamilton and the FSU staff recruited Mills out of high school only to watch him go to Houston. But when he jumped in the portal, Mills felt a connection with the FSU coaches. The decision to come to FSU was one that has helped him achieve his on-court goals.

"I was looking to play somewhat closer home but also play under a system that I knew I would develop over time," Mills said. "And that's what it's been since day one, just developing my game overall."

With every game, and every late-night, empty-gym shooting session, Mills' game continues to take shape.