

Sophomores Stepping Up For Florida State During Stretch Run

By Joe Reedy

Associated Press

February 17, 2018

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Florida State's 2016 basketball recruiting class is showing that it shouldn't be defined by just one person.

Jonathan Isaac garnered most of the attention last season before deciding to leave college after one year for the NBA, where he was the sixth overall selection by Orlando. With Isaac's departure, sophomore guards CJ Walker and Trent Forrest along with redshirt freshman Mfiondu Kabengele are making solid contributions for the 18-8 Seminoles.

Florida State heads into Sunday's game against Pittsburgh with a 7-7 record in Atlantic Coast Conference play.

"I can see the growth," coach Leonard Hamilton said. "They are more invested; they talk more and are more confident."

The class was rated fourth nationally by 247 Sports, but Isaac garnered the lion's share of attention as he was considered one of the top recruits in program history. He averaged 12.0 points and 7.8 rebounds while Walker and Forrest, who were rated as four-star recruits, had limited roles off the bench.

Walker, who can play either guard spot, has started every game this season after coming off the bench last year. The 6-foot-1 Indianapolis native is averaging 9.4 points per game but has scored in double figures in three of the last six games. He is also shooting 68 per cent from the field (15 of 22) over the past four games.

Walker has seen his minutes more than double to 25.7 per game this year. With the Seminoles preparing to enter the stretch drive of the regular season, Walker said the important thing at this stage is trying to make sure he is better prepared mentally.

"Coming in as a freshman you want to do everything but when it gets to the last quarter of the season you need to watch more film and be more focused instead of relying on being just physical," he said.

Forrest, who grew up nearby in Chipley, Florida, has come off the bench and run the floor as the point guard. He has been content to create opportunities for teammates for most of the season but scored a career-high 16 points in Wednesday's overtime win over No. 11 Clemson. The 6-5 Forrest scored eight of the Seminoles' last 13 points, including the game-winning basket.

"I feel real good where my game is. I've been playing off my teammates," said Forrest, who is averaging 6.4 points. "I have to continue to be aggressive."

Kabengele was a guard until the end of his junior year in high school, when he grew three inches to 6-7. After redshirting last season, the Burlington, Ontario, native — who is the nephew of former NBA standout Dikembe Mutombo — is acclimating to the college game, averaging 8.2 points.

"I feel like I'm king of getting the pace of the game," Kabengele said. "The way the referees are going to officiate and what I can do and what I can't do. I'm just waiting for my spots to be aggressive by being more observant on the court."

Isaac, who has had an injury-plagued rookie season for the Magic, is on campus this weekend as most of the NBA is off for the All-Star Game. Isaac, who is averaging 5.3 points and 3.7 rebounds, still keeps in regular contact with his former teammates and has been pleased with seeing them take the next step.

"It's amazing to see them progress and come into their own," Isaac said. "To watch them playing great is fun to see."