

PLAYER FEATURE

OKARO WHITE

The senior forward opens up about his youth, family and being a student athlete at Florida State

BY BONNIE HOLUB // PHOTOS BY MIKE OLIVELLA

Basketball phenom Okaro White is not the first star athlete in his family. His mother, Charmine White, holds that distinction. “Mom ran track for the Jamaican National Team back in her day,” said Okaro. “She’s an inspiration to me, the way she geared up and made a better life for herself and her family by using her athletic skills. I want to do that, make a good life for my family using my athletic abilities.”

Okaro’s plan is to play professional basketball in the NBA or possibly overseas.

One look at Okaro’s track record, and no one would doubt he is working hard to realize that dream. He enters his FSU senior season ranked sixth in school history with a .799 free throw shooting percentage. He is ranked 19th in school history with 267 career free throws made. He is ranked 21st in school history with 67

career blocked shots. And he needs only 88 points to become the 43rd player in school history to score 1,000 or more career points.

“Okaro has done everything we have asked of him since he became part of the basketball team as a freshman,” said Leonard Hamilton, FSU men’s head basketball coach. “He has worked hard and matured every year he has been at Florida State and has been an integral part of our success. He has been a starter on two NCAA Tournament teams and helped us win the first ACC Championship in school history.”

During the first three seasons of his college career, Okaro, who plays forward,

has exhibited his athletic domination on both ends of the court, able to switch back and forth between key positions during each game and sometimes during each play.

“Okaro is one of the most athletic players in the country and he is going to open up games for us because he has improved his shooting so much during his career,” said senior guard teammate Ian Miller. “He is also learning how to play the guard position and is only adding to his repertoire by improving another aspect to his game. He is an up-tempo type of player who brings leadership through his energy while also becoming more of a vocal leader coming into his senior season.”

Okaro’s abilities earned him a spot on the cover of the college basketball preview magazine, *The Sporting News*. Editors of the magazine noted, “His ability to punish opponents inside and occasionally on the perimeter ensures that he’ll be a centerpiece as a senior.”

EARLY YEARS

Okaro was born in Brooklyn, N. Y., on Aug. 13, 1992, joining a six-year-old brother and two-year-old sister. At age “10 or 12” his family moved to Clearwater to be near Okaro’s grandmother. Moving from a northern big city to the less urbanized, slower paced South took a bit of getting used to for Okaro. At first, it seemed very rural and too hot. “I was used to seeing a lot of big buildings and snow.” Getting comfortable in the new environment took some time, although Okaro said shedding his





White was a nationally recruited player out of high school and chose Florida State for what he describes as the genuine people and that it offered a better total college experience.

Brooklyn accent was quick. "I think I lost it within a couple of months."

While Okaro dealt early on with the feeling of being out of his familiar world, he would soon have to handle an "out of body" experience as well. Up until he was in the 8th grade he was, by his estimate, normal height. But that all changed during the summer between 7th and 8th grade.

Okaro spent that summer with other family members in New York. On his return home, he was physically a different person. His family in Clearwater was as surprised as he was by what was happening. "I grew five and a half inches all in that one summer," said Okaro. "And it hurt. My knees hurt. I'm told the growth plates were shifting." His current height is 6-foot-8, but he is not the tallest in his genealogy. His grandfather (on his father's side) was 7 feet tall.

During Okaro's upper elementary and early middle school years he tried track, football and eventually basket-

ball in Clearwater's local youth clubs. He was more interested in football, playing quarterback and free safety, but was recruited to play basketball by one of the coaches because of his outstanding athletic abilities.

"I was horrible at basketball." When asked by whose definition Okaro responded, "By everyone's! I was horrible. I was too aggressive and fouled out all the time." But his mom gave him encouragement to focus on basketball; by Okaro's account, it was a better fit for him physically than the other sports. "By 10th grade, I made huge improvements in the game," he said. Indeed he did. As a senior at Clearwater High, Okaro was named the Pinellas County Player of the Year.

WHY FSU

Okaro was courted by Florida, Georgia Tech, Indiana, Miami and Clemson, but only Florida teams made his first cut. "I wanted to play in Florida so my Mom and grandmother could more easily attend games." The choice eventually narrowed to FSU and UF.

FSU became his pick because, "They were genuine. FSU has a family atmosphere. It is a better total college experience with diverse opportunities in Tallahassee."

And the Seminoles are happy, too, that Okaro chose FSU. "He is a very important part of all of our accomplishments and has helped us change the culture of our program and helped make our team the third winningest program in the ACC during his career," said Hamilton.

ADVICE TO YOUNGER RECRUITS

Okaro urges younger athletes to enjoy the college experience, take advantage of what Tallahassee has to offer and get out and interact with people. "These are probably some of the best years of your life."

He said former FSU player Bernard James offered good advice when he encouraged him to communicate with a wide range of people within the university

system and throughout the community. Although the scholarship to FSU was always very important to Okaro, he said, "I didn't understand all the pieces and parts that go into making it happen until I started communicating more with others. The light started to click on when I got out to meet and talk with more people. That's when it hit me that other people are willing to pay for (me) to have an opportunity in life. And I am grateful. I'll pinch off of what Bernard told me. Always be thankful. Don't take anything for granted."

THANK YOU FROM OKARO

"I want to thank everyone who is involved with Florida State Athletics," said Okaro. "FSU has everything down pat for setting a platform for athletes to be successful. We have a very good team of coaches, staff, boosters and academic departments."

Okaro especially wants to thank Coach Hamilton for being a father figure in his life. For being genuine. "Whenever I need someone to talk to, he takes time out of his busy days."

FROM COACH HAMILTON

"Okaro is special because he has played exceptional basketball for us throughout his career. We have relied on him to play at a couple of different positions, excel both offensively and defensively and to be a leader on and off the court. He has filled all of those roles and continues to get better as a player. He has been very solid and we expect that his senior season will be the best of his career as a Seminole. We are excited about Okaro in the upcoming season because he has prepared for success."

Okaro was recently talking with teammates about their time at FSU. "The time has shot by, it's just shot by. I know at the senior banquet there will be tears," he reflected.

No doubt there will be. There will be tears from the graduating athletes and tears from Okaro's proud FSU family who will watch him move forward onto the larger court of his future. **SB**