

## Walsh gets reacquainted with Gators, vice versa

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GAINESVILLE - Four to six weeks simply was unacceptable.

When Florida junior guard Matt Walsh was diagnosed with a severe high ankle sprain and ligament damage, the idea of sitting out for up to six weeks was almost more than he could handle.

Watching from the sideline was more painful than the swelling and throbbing in his left ankle.

"I hate that," Walsh said. "It's brutal. I don't know how else to say it. I tried to be as vocal as I could from the sidelines, cheering my teammates on and stuff. But I wanted to play so bad."

He was determined to return much sooner, subjecting himself to intense treatment nearly 24 hours a day - his best friend becoming a boot with ice and water in it to decrease the swelling and ease the pain.

"I think I probably did more treatment on my ankle in the first two weeks than anyone has ever done on one ankle," Walsh said. "We had this machine called the Game Ready, which compressed your ankle and made it real cold. It's a machine that our trainer had, so I took it home with me every night and had treatment every hour."

Walsh returned to the Florida lineup Wednesday against Tennessee, just 20 days after he was injured. He scored six points in 13 minutes in the overtime loss, but after almost a week off, Walsh and the Gators expect to be much stronger when they host Georgia in a nationally televised game tonight on ESPN2.

"It's good to get Matt back, get his timing back and have him playing again," Florida coach Billy Donovan said. "I think he was put in a difficult situation against Tennessee because he had only one day of practice before the game. Our team had to learn to play without Matt while he was out, and now we are getting used to playing with him again."

"Matt's attitude has been terrific. He has worked hard, and the fact that he has gotten himself back to playing without restrictions is a positive."

Walsh's return might be awkward for some, particularly sophomore guard Lee Humphrey, who played well in Walsh's absence, and freshmen Corey Brewer and Al Horford, who have gotten used to a lineup without Walsh. But in many ways, it should be a huge boost for junior guard Anthony Roberson.

When Walsh hurt his ankle Dec.30 in practice, he was averaging a team-high 16.9 points. In four conference games, Roberson is averaging 26.3 points, and his overall average of 18.4 points is the highest for a Gator since Vernon Maxwell in 1985-86.

Roberson has scored 90 in the past three games and taken 72 shots in four games compared with 93 by the rest of the starters.

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Meanwhile, senior forward David Lee is averaging 12.3 points in SEC games and the other starters 37.6.

With the 6-foot-6, 205-pound Walsh on the court, even if he's not at full speed, opponents have to respect the threat of another scorer.

"When we've got two or three guys clicking in one night or we've got more than one or two people a night (scoring), I think it makes it easier on everybody," Roberson said. "I know any time (Matt's) on the court, he's going to play hard. ... That's just what Matt gives you.

"Come (tonight), if it's a close one, I think he'll be in there at the end. I think he's back where he was, and he really wants to help this team."

Careful with the expectations, Donovan said.

"I think sometimes peoples' viewpoint is, "Okay, Matt's back off of injury. Therefore, he will pick up right where he left off,"" he said. "I don't think that's fair to Matt to have that (pressure) on him. He has done a great job getting himself back to playing, but at the same point, it's going to take Matt some time.

"I hope that he can get back, but I also know in talking to the doctors that the type of injury he had can linger for a long period of time. ... It will be a process for him. He has to help our team win any way he can."

That is precisely what Walsh plans to do. After all, sitting out can do wonders for a player's attitude.

"It did cross my mind that I could be done for the year," he said. "It felt like I broke my ankle when I went down. Sitting there watching, it definitely gives you a different perspective."

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