

By Scott Kindberg

Post-Journal

February 3, 2002

Gael Force

Wofford Finally Taking MAAC Opponents By Storm

Niagara assistant coach John Coffino's voice could be heard throughout the Gallagher center.

"Maceo, Maceo, Maceo," he yelled, a warning to his Purple Eagles what was likely to come.

But Coffino's exhortations didn't matter.

Wofford, the Iona Gaels' junior guard, worked his way to the corner and promptly drilled a 3-pointer, hitting nothing but net. The trey was the first of four for the former Jamestown High School star Friday night on his way to 16 points in the Gaels' 84-74 Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference loss to Niagara.

The setback dropped Iona to 10-13 overall and 7-5 in the MAAC, punctuating a wildly inconsistent and disappointing season thus far for the two-time defending tournament champs.

Yet for as unpredictable as the Gaels have been, the one constant has been the play of Wofford, who has transformed himself from a role player and defensive specialist his first two seasons as point guard into Iona's second-leading scorer at shooting guard.

Against the Purple Eagles, Wofford connected on 5-of-9 shots from the floor, including 4-of-7 from beyond the arc, and had three rebounds, two assists and two steals in 39 minutes. His four treys gave him 41 for the season and 81 for his career, moving him into seventh place on Iona's all-time list. Remarkably, Wofford has hit 30 of his last 54 3-point attempts and has scored in double figures in 12 of his last 17 games, including three games with at least 20 points.

"He's just playing with so much confidence," said Iona associate head coach Craig Holcomb. "When he shoots it, you expect it to go in."

+++

Iona's season was hanging in the balance in their MAAC opener at Fairfield.

It was only early December, but the Gaels were minutes away from going 0-7.

“We were in a lot of trouble,” said Holcomb, a former Jamestown resident.

Enter Wofford, who until that point was averaging just five points per game.

“For some reason, the light went on,” Holcomb said.

In the next 3 ½ minutes of regulation, Wofford erupted for 15 points to force the game into overtime and the Gaels went on to win, 82-78.

“They weren’t guarding me,” Wofford said. “I said, ‘OK, if they’re not going to guard me, I’m going to make them pay.’”

He did in a big way, finishing with a then career-high 19 points, four steals and two rebounds in only 14 minutes.

When the game was over, Iona head coach Jeff Ruland embraced Wofford at mid-court.

“I grabbed him and said, ‘That’s what we’ve been waiting for,’” the former NBA all-star said. “That’s the Maceo we recruited. He’s always been, for the most part, one of the best defensive players in the league. He’s got offensive talent. He’s a great shooter, one of the stronger guys in the league and he can get to the rim. I don’t know, he just seemed to wake up there and it’s kind of carried over.”

Since that game, Wofford has averaged 12.6 points and shot 48.8 percent from the field (60-of-123), including 52.1 percent from beyond the arc (37-of-71), and 83.6 percent from the foul line (46-of-55).

And in MAAC games, the numbers are equally impressive.

After Wednesday’s 61-60 victory at Canisius, Wofford was 10th in the conference in scoring (13.5), 11th in field-goal percentage (.475), 4th in free throw percentage (.854), tied for 11th in steals (1.5), 2nd in three-point field goal percentage (24-of-47) and 2nd in three-point goals made (24).

Even after Friday night’s loss at Niagara dropped Iona to sixth in the MAAC, the pre-season pick to win the conference, is still a dangerous team when it is hitting on all cylinders.

Wofford, whom is averaging 10.6 points overall, is one of the reasons for their opponents’ uneasiness.

“For some reason, he’s just turned it on,” Holcomb said. “Confidence, whatever, nobody knows. He hasn’t stopped... He went from averaging five points a game to being our second-leading scorer in about 15 games. That’s hard to do.”

Holcomb said Wofford’s resurgence should earn him some kind of conference postseason honors.

"I would be shocked if he doesn't," Holcomb said. "Coming into the Canisius game, he was fourth or fifth in conference scoring. He's got a lot of respect from the other coaches as far as his defense. He shuts down the best guard. To get 10,11,12 points from him, that's a pretty good player all-around."

Wofford said, "I can say I've stepped up big for our team and helped us win games. If that comes to me being an all-conference candidate, it was me doing what I was raised to do."

Ruland believes that Wofford can be even better. In his first two seasons, he almost always deferred to teammates like Tariq Kirksay, Nakiea Miller, and Earl Johnson, and didn't shoot nearly enough to satisfy the coaching staff. In fact, he began the season with a career scoring average of 4.8 points on just .373 shooting from the floor. Still, Ruland maintains, he always encouraged, even implored, Wofford to keep firing away. Even then, Wofford was often reluctant to do that.

"We've never, ever, told him not to shoot the basketball," Ruland said. "We've told him just the opposite."

And it seems to be finally sinking in.

"We want him to shoot even more," Ruland said, "He's been stroking it."

Added Wofford, "The first couple of years I was kind of timid and there's no particular reason why. That's just the way I was playing. Now I'm never going to stop shooting. If guys aren't respecting me, I'm going to let it go, and if they're overplaying the jump shot, I'm going to the basket."

+++

When Wofford walked into the media interview room at the Koessler Athletic Center on Wednesday night, teammate Courtney Fields tried to hand him a stat sheet from the Gaels' one-point win over Canisius.

Wofford shook his head. He wanted no part of it.

"Tonight wasn't my best shooting night," he said.

In addition to battling foul trouble, Wofford couldn't find the range as he hit just 2-of-10 attempts from the field and finished with six points.

But unlike his first two seasons in New Rochelle, the sub-par offensive performance was the exception rather than the rule in what has turned into a break-out year for the junior guard.

"He's a big part of what we're trying to do," Ruland said.

And, as it's becoming increasingly clear, bigger and bigger with every game.