

Hofstra's Speedy response: Sophomore star Loren Stokes

Jack Styczynski

HEMPSTEAD, N.Y. – Five years after Speedy Claxton graduated and moved on to the NBA, there's another "stat-sheet stuffer" wearing the blue and gold at Hofstra University.

His name is Loren Stokes, the younger brother of former Cincinnati star Leonard Stokes.

Impressive enough that Loren, like Claxton before him, paced Hofstra in scoring, assists, and steals as a sophomore, but even more amazing is that he led the team in rebounds at 6-foot-3 and 170 pounds—measurements that, if anything, are probably a little inflated.

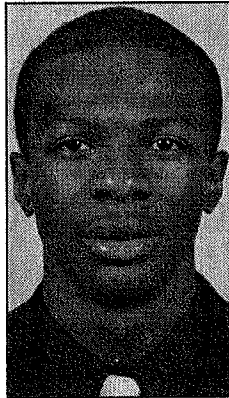
With the help of Stokes, Hofstra finally appears to have overcome the simultaneous departures from the America East conference to the Colonial Athletic Association and of former head coach Jay Wright to Villanova in 2001. Three losing seasons followed, but this year, the team went 21-9 and earned a trip to the NIT. Erase a mid-season swoon that seemingly began with a close loss at Syracuse, and the record was even more stellar.

Stokes led Hofstra to a 9-0 start and a strong finish before and after the team's slump, averaging 18.3 ppg and placing second behind Old Dominion's Alex Loughton in CAA player-of-the-year balloting. His consistency was remarkable throughout the season, as he scored at least 10 points in every contest except two. Stokes was one of only three players in the nation who ranked in the top 10 in their conference in scoring, rebounding, assists and steals. He was named first team all-CAA and was chosen to the league's all-defensive squad as well. The NABC and USBWA also selected him to all-district teams.

Despite having a brother starring at Cincinnati, Stokes was not very highly recruited. Hofstra head coach Tom Pecora first saw the wiry slasher playing AAU ball when he was in high school at Turner-Carroll in Buffalo. "He was this little scrawny kid at the time, still wearing glasses when he was playing – and they'd get knocked off all the time, but he competed," remembers Pecora. "People were scared off by his slightness, but I saw a kid a few years prior to him and it was Speedy. Speedy was this little skinny kid, but just competed and played hard as heck. The thing that impressed me the most is what he continues to do – he fills up a box score."

After taking home Western New York player-of-the-year honors at Turner-Carroll, Stokes prepped for a year at St. Thomas More in Connecticut, where he played for Pecora's long-time friend, Jere Quinn. That's when Stokes picked Hofstra over Rhode Island, St. Bonaventure and George Mason, ignoring the team's struggles at the time. "My coach from prep school said the guys here were good," says Stokes of Hofstra. "I came on a visit and the coaching staff was good. Everybody treated me with respect – so I figured this would be a good fit. I wasn't worried about 'how big' or anything like that."

Talking to Stokes, his humility is noticeable. "He's got no ego, and that's very similar to Speedy as well," Pecora says. "I mean, on the court, he's got one. He's got an edge, plays with an edge, but off the floor he's as nice as they come."



Loren Stokes



Antoine Agudio

The "edge" probably originates from his childhood days on the court with older brother Leonard, who once tallied 39 points and 10 rebounds against UCLA in the NCAA Tournament. "He always roughed me up when we played when I was little, so that got me tougher and ready to battle with bigger people," recalls the younger Stokes, who obviously has no qualms now about hitting the boards, never mind his size. "I just try and get in there – big men boxing out and the rebound is bouncing around – and I just try and get down there and get 'em."

Old Dominion coach Blaine Taylor – the 2005 CAA coach of the year – is effusive in his praise of Stokes. "He's a handful," says Taylor. "He really is very elusive, particularly off the dribble and attacking the basket. He's so long and lanky and rangy."

"I made a comment after our game here that he reminded me of Jason Terry," continues the former Stanford assistant, who got an up close look at the Arizona All-American during his time there. "His ability to board the ball, his ability to guard, his athleticism in all respects reminded me a little bit of Jason."

George Mason's Jim Larranaga was one of the unlucky coaches who failed to land Stokes. "We tried to get involved with Loren, but he committed to Hofstra pretty quickly," explains Larranaga before comparing Stokes to 2004 CAA player of the year Domonic Jones of Virginia Commonwealth. "He led VCU to the championship last year, was MVP of the tournament, and was a terrific, multi-dimensional player – played the point for them at times, played the two, scored, distributed the ball, defended, rebounded, assisted, played every part of the game of basketball. I think Loren is very, very much like him and probably a little more explosive offensively because of the way Hofstra plays offense. They've moved him to the point now and have given him the opportunity to attack from the time he catches the ball."

Pecora joins Taylor and Larranaga in using the 'A' word to describe Stokes. "He attacks the rim, he drives, and he's got that great mid-range game. That's something that's lost now. Guys either take it to the rim and dunk it or they make threes – they don't do in-between. He can pull up and make those 8 to 12 foot floaters, and those are tough shots to defend. People don't know they're coming."

Even with all his talents, Stokes still has a few things to work on before he can be considered on a par with Claxton. "Speedy was more of a true point guard; Loren is learning to play the point a little more," notes Pecora. Additionally, Stokes doesn't convert enough of his many free-throw attempts. "And he's got to work a little bit on his jumper, which is something Speedy had to do as well, but the sky's the limit for him because he works so damn hard. He's in here in the morning shooting extra. He's in here at night. Truly a gym rat."

Lastly, Leonard's "little brother" admits to working on one more thing.

"I just want to get to the tournament and win games."

There could be no better backcourt complement to Loren Stokes than Antoine Agudio – the unanimous choice for 2005 CAA rookie of the year.

While Stokes does most of his damage on the drive, Agudio is a cold-blooded 3-point marksman who hit a Hofstra-record 82 treys.

"I like playing with Antoine," says Stokes. "He knocks down open shots when I penetrate and teams try and help off."

"I think he's the best 3-point shooter in the conference," adds Pecora. "He shows great poise in getting shots. He doesn't take a lot of bad shots. He's patient."

Agudio made 42.3 percent of his attempts from beyond the arc as a freshman and averaged 15.1 ppg. Like Stokes, he was extremely consistent, scoring fewer than 10 points just twice. He was the first Hofstra freshman since Claxton to start every contest.

Stokes and Agudio were actually part of the same recruiting class, but Agudio was red-shirted for the 2003-04 season after breaking a finger in Hofstra's first exhibition game. When the teammates got back together in the summer of 2004 for the Empire State Games, they helped Long Island capture the gold medal with a perfect 4-0 record, as each averaged better than 20 ppg.

Unlike Stokes, Agudio is a Long Island native playing close to home. "We really sold him on the fact he'd be a star right here on Long Island," says Pecora.

"Coach told me you'll come in, get your education and have a great four years, so I couldn't let this go by," says Agudio. "And it was local, so I loved it."

The local aspect allows Agudio's father Alex to attend his games. Alex Agudio was a Division I star at Niagara a generation ago, averaging 17 ppg, shooting almost 54 percent from the field and setting a single-season school record for steals while playing on the Purple Eagles 1987 NIT squad. Today, the son is all too happy to have Dad around.

"It helps a lot because I have somebody who went through the experience and can tell me the ins and outs of the game, like where to pick my shots and be smarter too," explains Antoine.

And Pecora might be even happier to have a pair of young guards with such great bloodlines.

"Pedigree, man ... it works for race horses, you know?"

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