

Gonzaga's bamboo big man; Sacre sprouts a finesse game, and blossoms into a low-post force

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Every day, in the summer swelter of Spokane, Robert Sacre woke up early, went into the gym and got beaten up one-on-one by a parade of some of the best big men in Gonzaga University's basketball history.

One morning it would be Casey Calvary, another it would be Cory Violette and another it would be Richard Fox.

They pounded on the North Vancouver native, a seven-foot Zags redshirt sophomore centre, forced him to stand his ground and worked with him on developing a new repertoire of post moves, left-handed and right-handed shots soft as snow.

And while they got physical, Sacre found finesse. He developed a sweetness to his game. He grew into a force, a new weapon in Gonzaga's awesome arsenal.

"We needed him to score this year," Gonzaga coach Mark Few said after Saturday's 103-91 win over Davidson at KeyArena. "We needed him to develop a low-post game. Prior to this year, he never really had a whole lot of go-to moves.

"He's worked on his game harder than anybody on our team this summer, and it's great when you can see tangible evidence of it. It helps all our guys. He's a treasure."

Sacre stayed in Spokane this summer, wrote a workout schedule and stayed at it with a monk's devotion.

This season he has started all 10 games for the 8-2 Zags and is averaging 13 points and 5.5 rebounds per game.

"It was one of those things where I just forced myself, whether I was tired or not, to get in the gym every morning," Sacre said. "I just got in the gym with a lot of ex-Zags and we would just play basketball, hard. These were big men who had been in my spot and knew what the system was all about.

"I played against Casey and that was like playing against a rock, and I played with [administrative assistant] Alex Hernandez. I think he was the dirtiest player in college basketball when he played, and he just beat on me and beat on me. I think that really got me ready."

Sacre is a new man this season. Last year he averaged 2.9 points in 28 games, playing fewer than 10 minutes per game. But, against Davidson, he played 25 minutes, didn't miss any of his six field-goal attempts, took 18 free throws and scored 23 points.

"We heard a quote yesterday about a bamboo plant," Sacre said. "You know, with a bamboo plant, you plant that bamboo and you just water it for three years and nothing will happen, nothing will happen and then the fourth year, it will grow 90 feet.

"That's how I feel about my game. You just have to keep working at it and working at it, and this just shows you that if you just work hard, good things will happen."

Few said he saw the first signs of a reconstructed Sacre in fall workouts when Sacre would run skeleton drills, post up and drop soft hook shots, one after the other, with a regularity he had never had before.

"Last year, he was very mechanical and he had no touch," Few said. "His ball just didn't go in. That's the most impressive thing about this for me, he's actually developed a touch. He's got a soft ball now. It goes in almost like [former Zags big man J.P.] Batista's."

Part of the benefit of a program as rich with history as Gonzaga's is the dedication and commitment of its alumni hoopsters. They return to the school, from the NBA and from European leagues, every summer to work on their games and help the Zags' underclassmen work on theirs.

The bamboo big man has sprouted. From the hot summer mornings in Spokane, Robert Sacre has emerged as a new-found force in the middle. – Former St. George's star Bol Kong of Vancouver put up nine points and four rebounds for the Zags in Saturday's game, while freshman Kelly Olynyk of Kamloops served up a season-high four assists to go with three rebounds.

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