



Gavin Schilling believes he's ready to finally show who he really is



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DIMONDALE -- Like any other pro-am summer basketball league in the country, the Moneyball league in Lansing is more about exhibition than exertion.

Players on-hand -- coming from high-major programs like Michigan and Michigan State down to low-major schools and community colleges -- are there to put on a show. Dunks are required. Defense is optional. Effort? Eh, it's more a matter of having fun putting on a show.

And yet there was Gavin Schilling on Thursday night, walking out of the locker room last after his game at the Aim High gymnasium. The Michigan State senior was still dripping sweat. Twenty minutes after posting 14 points and five rebounds in a losing effort, he looked like he was wiping his brow from a Big Ten battle.

It feels good to be back.

"I feel lean and I feel like I've got that explosion back and I've got my bounce back," Schilling said.

Schilling's three-year career at Michigan State has always seemed one foot short of the next step. Last season, the 6-foot-9 forward missed the first 13 games with a torn ligament in his right toe. He returned to the lineup and, while trying to catch up, was promptly hit by back problems. He spent most of the second half of the season dealing with a bulging disc in his lower back.

The result: Schilling's playing time and production dropped. He went from averaging 5.1 points and 3.8 rebounds in 16.9 minutes per game as a sophomore to 3.8 points and 3.1 rebounds in 12.5 minutes per game as a junior.

Despite the Spartans' successes, for Schilling, the year was mostly a wash.

"Those injuries, they'll set you back mentally sometimes and it's kind of hard to get over that mental hump," he said Thursday. "I struggled with that last year. I was never 100 percent healthy all year long. That hindered me, but I can't look back now."

Looking forward since then, Schilling has worked to transform himself. Since leaving campus at roughly 250 pounds, he's slimmed down 238. He's jumping higher, running faster and looking stronger.

To hear him explain it, everything has changed.

"I'm mentally strong now," Schilling said. "I've gotten my confidence back and I'm better than the player I ever was."

Which means Schilling might be ready to show the player he really is. For one, he believes that's the case.

"I haven't shown anything (as a college player), really, to be honest," Schilling said. "This year, I feel so much better and so much more confident. I feel great and I think people are going to see a whole new player this year."

The improvements coming: "I plan on being better defensively, staying out of foul trouble and staying on the court, contributing way more offensively and making way more of an impact."

As a sophomore and junior, Schilling had a penchant for entering games as a substitute, picking up two quick fouls and immediately returning to the bench. As if the injury woes weren't enough, he's continually limited his own ability to stay on the floor.

When at his best, Schilling is the Spartans' top interior defender. He can guard the ball-screen, pick up one-on-one against both guards and forwards and is athletic enough to defend the rim. On both ends of the court, that athleticism translates to an ability to get up and down the floor, running rim-to-rim.

Offensively, there are limitations. Schilling's scoring has often only amounted to open dunks.

That could be changing.

As the summer progresses, signs of improvement are starting to emerge. Schilling says an expanded offensive skill set is "starting to become second-nature."

"He's shooting the ball better and he's making a lot more post moves," Michigan State point guard Tum Tum Nairn said. "I still think he's got to take his time a little bit more in the post, but he just looks better to me offensively than he has been."

Earlier in the offseason, Schilling spent five weeks working out in Indianapolis. Two or three times per day for five days per week, he went through skill work and conditioning training. At the same time, he saw a physical therapist to continue work on his lower back.

That training, Schilling says, has led him to this point.

Now he sees a perfect storm is brewing.

"I am starting to feel it," Schilling said. "It's all coming together for me right now. Coach is expecting a lot out of me this season. He's told me that -- I'm a senior now so I have to lead. But I'm ready. I'm ready."