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SPORTS

THE CURIOUS CASE OF DAINAN SWOOPE

SPORTS COLUMN

What should Elon men's basketball do with its sidelined senior guard?

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COMING INTO THE 2018-2019 campaign, Elon University men's basketball team knew there were going to be some changes. With a four-person recruiting class coming in, the lineup shuffle was inevitable. One of the places that the team thought they were going to be strong at was at the guard position with senior guard Dainan Swoope.

It's not unfair to assume that Elon was going to have an anchor in the backcourt with Swoope for the season. Swoope has been a mainstay in the Phoenix lineup, playing in 96 games and starting 53 of them. Swoope is the second-highest scorer on the team with 1,090 points, behind only senior forward Tyler Seibring (1,370 points). Last year Swoope clocked in career-highs in several meaningful categories, including averaging more than 33 minutes played per game, and new career highs in shots made, three pointers made, assists and blocks. Swoope was someone the team was looking to lead the way this year.

At the end of last season, something didn't seem quite right with the guard. He seemed to be in pain while moving around the court. Unsure of when or where it took place, Swoope — at least to the naked eye — was playing with an injured ankle, but still played every game last year. The ball-handling guard was not going to let this ankle get in the way of a team that was already at the time dealing with the injury of Brian Dawkins.

At the end of last year, it looked as though some rest and relaxation could have done the Sunrise Christian Academy graduate some good. The physical hindrance seemed to be one that could be solved by a sedentary summer. But when Swoope stepped back on campus in the fall, he was seen walking the bricks with his teammates and a boot. It seemed to be becoming clear that whatever he was dealing with was more

CAREER POINTS

1,090

total career points for senior guard Dainan Swoope as of publication.

than a rolled ankle.

Fast forward to the beginning of this season and Swoope takes the floor with the rest of the team for their exhibition against Randolph College. He had 11 points in the game, but was moving gingerly. It seemed as though the rest he had over the summer had not done as much as the team would have hoped. Regardless, Swoope still started the first five games of the season for Elon. Fourteen points against Manhattan College in the opening game of the season, 12 against Milligan College and the guard seemed to be on track to have another good year. The only concerning stat on his line may be the most telling.

Swoope — in the five games he played — only averaged 23 minutes per game, way down from what he was used to playing in the past. The last time Swoope's average time on the court was that low was when he was a freshman. In the last two games Swoope played Swoope played a combined 41 minutes, including just 12 minutes against Abilene Christian taking only two shots from the floor. Swoope took the last game of the Tiger Thanksgiving Classic against Pacific University off, and he has not been back on the floor in a game since.

Following Elon's 92-59 win over Central Penn, head coach Matt Matheny addressed Swoope's absence on the court.

"His ankle just is not getting any better," Matheny said. "There's going to be some pretty intense conversations in the near future about what's the plan. He didn't tweak it again, he didn't roll it but he's struggling to go back-to-back days, back-to-back practices and we did three games in three days so ... I'm concerned about him."

Matheny went on to clarify that these "intense conversations" with Swoope would be about making a decision if they are "going to try to gut this thing out or if we're going to end it. If we're

going to get a doctor to go in and do surgery and how intense is that."

The game following that comment, Swoope sat out against Boston University, marking the third game in a row he had missed. So where does the team go from here?

Option 1: Swoope "guts it out"

The leadership and floor command Swoope brings to the Phoenix is indispensable. His knowledge of how to direct traffic on the court and make plays is something that Matheny will not find in anyone else on the roster at the same position. Swoope making the commitment to play the rest of the year would give Elon a confident, well-versed guard that can play on or off the ball and create shots for himself and other players on the floor.

Swoope making the decision to stay and play his senior year would be a compromise, taking a players brain over his possibly less-than-perfect health. The question that Swoope needs to answer on his own is whether he would be physically able to compete to some extent for the next 20+ games and be effective. Matheny needs to answer that same question, and if he comes to the conclusion with Swoope that it is time for him to pull the plug and focus on his health, then Matheny is left with an even bigger question to answer: Who takes Swoope's place?

Option 2: The Nathan Priddy solution

In the absence of Swoope this year, Matheny has turned to sophomore guard Nathan Priddy to help. Priddy played 29 minutes against Pacific and has gotten the start in the following two games for Elon.

Does Priddy have the raw talent that is missing without Swoope? No. At least not yet. But what Priddy has shown so far is that he has the ability to be a role player. "They've been doing it for four years and I'm just getting into it so I'm just trying to fit in well," Priddy said after the game against Central Penn.

Senior guard Steven Santa Ana was praiseworthy of his teammate after the Central Penn game. "He brings a dif-

ferent dynamic to the game," Santa Ana said. "He speeds it up a lot, he makes things quick, he makes us push the ball a lot, which is what we need, we work a lot better when we're pushing the ball. He brings a certain edge and energy on defense. He's looking to get us the ball and he's brought a whole different dynamic to this team."

Though it is in an athlete's blood to always want to compete, Elon has to stick with Priddy. As much as I would enjoy watching Swoope get to play out the rest of his time at Elon and not sitting in a suit on the bench, ending it is the only reasonable option. Putting an athlete in harm's way or risking further injuring himself, which would create issues beyond basketball, would be irresponsible. Priddy is enough of a role player to fit into Matheny's coaching system and be an effective player.

Top: Senior guard Dainan Swoope leads the Phoenix off the court following the home opening loss to University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 116-67.

Bottom right: Sophomore guard Nathan Priddy drives to the basket against Boston University on Saturday, Dec. 1.

ELON VS. FURMAN

Swoope did not play during the game against Furman University on Dec. 4.



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