

Sports

Sophomores adjust to new leadership roles for the Lady Vols

-pencil TaylorVortherms / By Taylor Vortherms taylorv@thedailytimes.com

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KNOXVILLE – Evina Westbrook and Rennia Davis despised being seen as freshmen last season on the Tennessee women's basketball team.

“We hated being called ‘the newbies,’” Westbrook said. “I was like, ‘Hey, just say our names. Call me No. 2, call me Westbrook – just anything else.’”

Westbrook and Davis are thrilled to have shed that dreaded label heading into this season, which will tip off Monday night when the Lady Vols host Carson-Newman at Thompson-Boling Arena in their lone exhibition game.

Seven of 11 players on Tennessee’s roster are freshmen or sophomores. Given the youth on the team, Westbrook and Davis were quickly thrust into leadership roles as two of the three returning starters. That has come naturally to Westbrook, who has always been an outspoken presence on and off the court. Davis, on the other hand, is a little more reserved.

A guard and forward, Davis is the top returning scorer and rebounder from last season when she averaged 12 points and 7.6 rebounds.

“Definitely the vocal side of it – I’m still trying every day to get better at that,” Davis said. “Evina is the complete opposite.”

For that reason, Westbrook has always thrived at the point-guard position. She started in all 33 games last season, and her 4.3-assist average ranks second among freshmen in program history.

Westbrook seems comfortable being in charge again this season.

“I kind of already know, especially being a point guard on the team, that this is my team,” Westbrook said. “My leadership role is more powerful than ever.”

Coach Holly Warlick knows that, too.

“At times, I feel like she is a senior because of the load that she has carried from last year,” Warlick said. “This year, she has been an unbelievable leader ... pulling kids aside, making sure they understand, putting her arm around them. She has been tremendous.”

Cheridene Green, one of three seniors, also said Westbrook has never acted like a freshman. A brief exchange between the two during a news conference on Oct. 25 offered a glimpse into what their relationship looks like behind the scenes.

It happened when Green, a forward, fielded a question about what she had worked on during the off-season.

“I have worked on my shot a lot, facing up, and also being more confident in myself and not overthinking,” Green said, looking to Westbrook with raised brows and a grin as she delivered this answer.

In response, Westbrook threw up and index finger and pointed it in Green’s direction, as if to say, “Exactly.”

“She looked at me because I stress that to her all the time,” Westbrook said after the press conference. “I can just tell looking at her face like, ‘Girl, you’re thinking way too much.’”

Westbrook said she sometimes sees Green’s tendency to overthink play out on the court, when she gets the ball and freezes as if she’s “trying to process what to do.”

Green confirmed it’s something with which she struggles.

“Sometimes, I even think about the fact that I’m overthinking, which is just like progressive overload,” Green said. “(Westbrook) has done a really good job of reading my face and reading me without me saying anything. That’s a really difficult thing to do.”

Westbrook said she refused Green’s request to give her “practice questions” before the news conference.

“I was like, ‘No! It’s going to be fine. Like, you know how to talk.’” Westbrook said. “She doesn’t give a lot of credit to herself and what she can do, but she’s a really intelligent player and a great person, and she just needs to embrace it.”

To Westbrook, that’s what she said leadership means: Knowing your teammates, and getting the best out of them.

But to Davis, it’s a little more subtle.

“I’ve always been the type to just lead by example,” Davis said. “If there’s a situation, I would rather just show you than tell you. That’s just a lot easier for me.”

That hasn’t escaped the notice of Warlick, who said Davis has been a consistent presence in the gym during the off-season.

“Rennia Davis, who’s really not a natural-born leader, she has stepped up her game,” Warlick said. “She has really gotten stronger and is becoming a better ball-handler – just a complete player. We need her to be. She needs to be our go-to player.”

Westbrook and Davis might be different in their styles of leadership, but don't try to tell either one of them that being a freshman is justification for mediocrity. After all, both were named to last season's SEC All-Freshman team.

"You're technically a freshman but, after a certain point in the season, that's an excuse," Davis said. "We're a young team. That's not an excuse for us to not play hard, not give effort, and not be out there doing what Lady Vols do."

No longer the "newbies," Davis and Westbrook got to decide what to call the four freshmen on the team.

"We call them 'our babies,'" Westbrook said. "Those are our children — innocence."

Davis and Westbrook don't treat them like babies, though.

"It's like, 'Hey, you're a freshman,'" Westbrook said. "Step it up."