

# Freshmen play big roles in win

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SALT LAKE CITY – A mop-haired kid from rural Scott City and a hardened guard from Chicago. Seemingly different but strikingly similar when displaying the composure needed in the most crucial moments of a game.

Two freshmen, on the court when one of the biggest games in Wichita State history is being decided. That was no accident.

It was the freshmen who had the biggest role in deciding it. It was the freshmen who helped carry WSU to a 76-70 win and a berth in the Shockers' first Sweet 16 since 2006.

Ron Baker, a redshirt freshman who nearly lost a second season at WSU with a foot injury that caused him to miss more than two months, tied for the team lead with 16 points. Freshman Fred Van Vleet, one of coach Gregg Marshall's most decorated recruits, scored 13.

Baker and Van Vleet both made important late baskets, the embodiment of the poise they showed while Gonzaga was crumbling and the confidence Marshall has in them to produce in clutch situations.

"I don't really consider Ron or Fred freshmen," WSU senior guard Malcolm Armstead said. "Even though they're freshmen by classification, but they've been there before. They're very mature, they know how to play the game and they're good."

Van Vleet and Baker made shots at times nothing seemed to be going right for the Shockers. Gonzaga turned a 13-point deficit to one early in the first half before Van Vleet's three-point play gave WSU temporary breathing room.

Baker's first three-pointer of the second half came after Gonzaga took an eight-point lead, its biggest of the game. Gonzaga continued to fight off the Shockers before back-to-back three-pointers cut the Bulldogs' lead to 62-61.

Then, the game's biggest shot. Van Vleet, with the shot clock wound all the way down, pulling up against David Stockton and rattling in a three-pointer. That made it 70-65 and cemented Van Vleet's WSU legacy before the



Fernando Salazar/The Wichita Eagle  
**WSU's Fred Van Vleet drives to the basket against Gonzaga's Drew Barham in the first half on Saturday night in Salt Lake City.**

end of his first season.

Van Vleet played 20 minutes, a total he hasn't exceeded since Feb. 13 and a total he didn't reach in 27 of WSU's 36 games.

"Coach Marshall has had a master plan with me all year," Van Vleet said. "A lot of people in my situation would be wanting to play more, but I feel like he had a plan all year for me to be ready for the big moment. Tonight, I was ready for it."

Baker was just as ready, possibly even more so than Van Vleet or at least more eager. He may have reached this point, anyway – he started WSU's first 10 games and helped the Shockers go 9-1 before his injury – but the trials he endured made his hand in Saturday's win even more sweet.

Baker's usefulness upon his

return was in question as his absence stretched through the end of the calendar year, through all of the Shockers' Missouri Valley Conference games. He returned for the Valley Tournament and spurred WSU to the finals by scoring 15 points in the first round.

"My expected time of recovery was six weeks when I first got hurt," Baker said. When I got back on my feet, the trainer and all the rehab guys at the arena helped me get back in five so I could get back for the Valley Tournament. Those 21 games (missed) were a long 21 games, I'll just say that."

Van Vleet and Baker have three more years, most likely, at Wichita State. They may never have a bigger combined moment than Saturday's and if they do, they might not

come through the way they did against Gonzaga. They combined for 15 points in the final 4:21.

Then again, maybe they might. After watching their confidence-fueled performances in one of the program's biggest wins, it's not difficult to see what Marshall saw in recruiting them and difficult not to think about how good they can be.

A mop-haired kid from Scott City and a hardened guard from Chicago a former Top 100 recruit – leading the Shockers in the present and beyond.

"What does it say about the future of the program," Marshall said. "Those are the two guys making big shots at the end. ...I'm stoked that (Van Vleet), Ron and (sophomore) Tekele (Cotton) are so young in our program."