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Paschall adjusts to life under Villanova's bright lights

By Eugene Rapay

Eric Paschall has met President Obama, sat elbow-to-elbow with athletes LeBron James, Dwyane Wade, and Reggie Miller, visited Spain, and been a part of a victory tour of National Championship proportions. Yet through all the fanfare, glitz, and glamour, the 20-year-old is happiest about "Just being able to play this year."

Paschall, a former basketball standout at Dobbs Ferry, waited with excitement for the 2016-17 college basketball season to begin. According to the NCAA's transfer rules, a player has to sit out a year, should the athlete decide to leave school and enroll at another Division I school to play basketball. After spending a successful year at Fordham, where he averaged 15.9 points per game and 5.5 rebounds per game en route to Atlantic 10 Rookie of the Year honors, he transferred to Villanova University and had to sit out all of last season.

He chose to attend the Philadelphia-area school for a number of reasons, citing the proximity to home, the level of basketball, the community feel of the campus, and the school's reputation for academics.

Paschall arrived at Villanova at the right time too, as the Wildcats won the National Championship earlier this year. They beat the North Carolina Tar Heels, 77-74, after a buzzer-beating three solidified their place in the history books. Although he couldn't play in any of the games during the title run, he participated in practices and is satisfied with his behind-the-scenes role in the journey toward the university's first NCAA championship in 31 years.

"It made me a lot hungrier," Paschall said of his redshirt season. "Last year, I still felt like I helped the team by simulating the best players on the other teams, and it helped me work on my defense as well, so last year was a great year for me. I feel like I was a part of it. Me and Donte [DiVincenzo, a fellow red-shirted player] did a lot in practice that a lot of people didn't get to see, so it's preparing everybody else for the games."

The wait has been worth it, as the former



COURTESY OF VILLANOVA ATHLETICS

Former Dobbs Ferry standout Eric Paschall has become a key player off the bench for Villanova.

Dobbs Ferry star and Westchester County's Mr. Basketball is now a steady contributor in Villanova's rotation, and the Wildcats are currently the No. 1-ranked team in the nation. Paschall played his freshman, sophomore and junior years at Dobbs Ferry.

"He's really developing for us; I think he can get a lot better," said Villanova head coach Jay Wright. "He's very versatile. He's learning his way, but while he's learning, he's impactful defensively; he's impactful on the glass. As a post player, offensively, I think he's got a lot of better basketball ahead of him, but he's still impacting our team."

So far, so good for the redshirt sophomore this season, who's producing 7.8 points per game and 4.0 rebounds per game, while averaging 18.8 minutes per game.

While he was a star player and focal point for opponents all throughout his previous stops — at Fordham, St. Thomas More School, and Dobbs Ferry, from where he transferred to the Oakdale, Conn., boarding school after completing his junior year in 2013 — the diminished role to a rotational player off the bench isn't a problem.

"I like it — I can bring energy to the team in different ways, mostly defensively and

rebounding," Paschall said. "I have great players around me. That's why I transferred, just to play with great people."

His playing time isn't the only facet of his game that has changed. Those who remember him lighting up the scoreboard for the Eagles as a skinny shooting guard or small forward won't recognize the player that he is today.

Paschall now stands at 6-foot-7 and a bulked-up 250 pounds, a staple in Villanova's frontcourt. However, his guard skills and shooting ability makes him an all-around

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threat, despite his size. It's a transition that's been as smooth as everything else.

"When I was younger, I used to play the five, too," Paschall said. "So I could develop guard skills, but always have big-man skills. The switch to four or five doesn't bother me, especially the way coach Wright plays."

His blend of skills has served him well, as he's finding his niche within the team. His versatility is an excellent fit for Wright's system at Villanova, one that's filled with multifaceted players.

While he's situated in his new home, he's still getting accustomed to playing in front of sold-out crowds and on national television. At the same time, the small-town native welcomes the experience with open arms.

"Not this high," he said, smiling, when asked about imagining playing on a bigger stage. "I hoped to play D-I when I was younger, but to be at this level is a blessing. It's definitely a blessing."