

Basketball

Minnesota's Fowles staking her claim in the WNBA MVP race

By JON KRAWCZYNSKI
Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Blood poured from the nose of Sylvia Fowles after an elbow from an Atlanta Dream player caught her in the face.

As she kept chasing after the loose ball, longtime friend and teammate Simone Augustus just shook her head.

"She gets beat down every game," Augustus said on Thursday. "She's had a broken nose, jammed fingers. If you pay attention to the games and see the defenses she has to go through, other players in her position may get the little ticky-tack fouls."

"Sylvia's got to fight through an arm bar. She's doing dumbbell curls with players out there. It's been impressive to see her getting through those things."

Fowles has done so much more than just get through the punishment this season. She is averaging 20.7 points and 10.0 rebounds and shooting 68.2 percent from the field to

lead the Minnesota Lynx to a WNBA-best 21-3 record heading into a WNBA Finals rematch with the Los Angeles Sparks on Friday and has cemented herself as the runaway favorite for the MVP three-quarters of the way through the season.

Long one of the most skilled centers in the league, Fowles has been more dominant than ever in her 10th season. She insists that there have been no major adjustments, no special workouts or different approaches this season.

"I'm just poised and consistent," Fowles said. "Back then, if I got bumped and got hit, I would probably shy away from where I'm used to scoring or I would pass the ball more. This year, coach is just like if you can go through three people, go through three people."

In much the same way that Shaquille O'Neal made it difficult on officials to recognize fouls committed on his hulking frame,



Fowles

the 6-foot-6, 212-pound Fowles is often a victim of her own strength and size. A foul that would cause a smaller player to tumble to the court barely makes Fowles flinch as she powers to the basket.

"You know that you're going to get hit and get popped and every third foul is probably going to get called," she said.

"It gets you prepared mentally to just let stuff roll off and not to click within those moments. That's been a key for me this year, playing through all the negative, the good, the bad and the ugly."

Fowles shot 58 percent from the free throw line as a rookie, but is shooting a career-high 79.7 percent this year, inflicting her own kind of pain on the opponents when the play gets rowdy.

"People are going to do everything in their power to stop me, whether it's just playing hard defense or playing

dirty defense," Fowles said. "You've just got to keep the mindset that you're just going to keep going."

Another big factor in Fowles' career season has been a meeting of the minds with coach Cheryl Reeve. Before the season started the fiery Reeve listened to an interview in which Fowles stated that she didn't need to be yelled at for motivation.

Fowles prefers more measured conversation with the coach, and Reeve has made the adjustment and better understood how to get through to Fowles when she grows frustrated.

"I wanted to keep her in a place where she's focused," Reeve said. "If I get to a spot where I'm needling her and not talking to her, then she's going to lose her focus and have to handle me and go handle what is happening to her out there."

Since arriving midseason in 2015, Fowles has gradually become a bigger and bigger part of the Lynx offense.

With Augustus, Lindsay Whalen and Maya Moore, Minnesota used

to rely more on its athleticism and quickness on the perimeter. But Fowles' presence has changed the dynamic entirely, so much so that Reeve is still haunted by her inability to get the center more involved down the stretch in Game 5 against the Sparks.

Fowles had 10 points on just 10 field goal attempts — and no free throws — in a game that came down to the final possession.

"We vowed that we're not going to have the best center in the league and not be able to use her," Reeve said. "So we completely switched the focus."

That, Reeve said, is the definition of an MVP.

"I'm not going to lie, it crosses my mind," Fowles said with a smile. "But I don't get too consumed by it because we have about 10 more games to go. Once we handle business in these games, then I'll start focusing on the next part of that. If that's what it is, I'd be happy and grateful. We shall see."

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