

## The Moments That Matter Most To FSU's Leonard Hamilton Aren't The Wins

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HARTFORD, Conn. — The locker room is practically empty, the players long gone and the Florida State assistant coaches picking up the remnants of gear and snacks left behind by their Sweet 16 bound squad. Leonard Hamilton sits down on a folding chair, admitting he's both mentally and emotionally exhausted.

It's approaching 9 p.m., and he has a 4 a.m. wakeup scheduled so he can fly home with senior Phil Cofer, whose father, Mike, died on Thursday. Phil found out immediately after the Seminoles had defeated Vermont in the first round of the NCAA Tournament. It had been a hard few days filled with immeasurable grief.

This flight, this aspect of being a Division I head coach, is the part you don't often hear about — the early mornings required to truly be there for your players in the worst moments of their lives. But it also is, as Hamilton will explain, where the real value of a coach lies — and it often goes unnoticed.

"The things that I enjoy more than anything else are when the kids call you on Father's Day," Hamilton says quietly. "Or they want you to come be in their wedding. They want to send you pictures of their kids. When they have serious decisions to make in their life, they want to call you for advice. Those things are so much more valuable than thinking, 'Where are my awards?'"

"If all I have at the end of my career would be awards and press conferences and recognition, and my kids that helped me do that are not being successful, then what level of success can I feel good about?"

That line of thinking is refreshing. It is also understated — much like Hamilton's program as a whole — which partly explains how a program making back-to-back Sweet 16 appearances for just the second time in its history is doing so with very little fanfare. This Seminoles roster doesn't feature household names, and their dunks don't immediately go viral.

"When you have guys like Zion, Ja, guys all over the ACC who have so much buzz about them, they tend to forget about us," junior guard Trent Forrest says.

Forrest says this with no malice; he is simply stating a fact. But it may be time to start paying attention.

Or, at the very least, time to start listening to Leonard Hamilton.

"Everyone always makes such a big deal out of my age," Hamilton says. "What am I missing?"

Hamilton chuckles. He's 70, if you can believe it. (Most don't.) He doesn't look it, and he doesn't feel it. He has given some thought to what he might want to do when he stops coaching, but he's not quite ready to do any of it yet. He does want to help people, maybe work in the ministry or teach. Or both.

But for the past three decades and for the foreseeable future, he gets to help young men each and every year through basketball, and through basketball, education. Hamilton was the first in his family to attend college; doing so ensured his younger siblings and their kids would too. "You change the whole culture by getting an education," he says.

"A lot of the guys we get, the players in our program, are guys who are first-generation college students," Hamilton says. "That's more important than anything else that we do." He says in the course of his tenure at Florida State, he has graduated all but two of his players. He's immensely proud of this.

That's not to say Hamilton doesn't understand that he, as a basketball coach, oversees teams that win and lose games. He knows the on-court product matters, which is why he's a relentless recruiter. But he also gets Florida State and its place in the college hoops hierarchy. He's in his 17th season at the helm, after all, and he's the winningest coach in FSU history, with 354 victories and a 62.2 winning percentage. He's one win, against 1-seed Gonzaga on Thursday in Anaheim, Calif., from taking the fourth-seeded Seminoles to back-to-back Elite Eights for the first time in program history.

He knows how much that would mean. He knows how much this has already meant.

"We've enjoyed certain levels of success; we have not enjoyed the elite level of success," Hamilton says. "Maybe I'll start feeling a lot better when we are put at that level, but you're competing with some of the top basketball programs in the history of college basketball, just think about that. North Carolina's the third, Duke's the fourth, Syracuse is the sixth, Notre Dame is eighth and Louisville is the 10th. There's no conference that has a collection like that. Everybody else has been to the Final Four.

"We'll just kind of chip away at that. We're in our rightful place. That's my mindset as opposed to imagining there's always an uphill climb. You are competing with college basketball's elite. We're trying to get there. We're not there yet."

His players echo the same message. Sophomore Mfiondu Kabengele says he's grateful to be part of a team that is an NCAA Tournament regular, a true threat in the ACC. "We're not the traditional blue blood," Kabengele says.

"Our coaching staff does a great job of harping on player development. We get better every single year. We have to make up for this lost time."

Hamilton says reaching that elite status is essentially like chasing a moving target — because the programs that Florida State competes against continue to win as well. "It's like you run a mile, and they've started a half-mile ahead of you," he says. "You've just got to hope that somewhere along the line they take a break, so you can keep racing and catch up. That's the way I feel all the time.

"I'm always working. There's never a level of satisfaction."

When Pat Kennedy interviewed for — and eventually landed — the Florida State job in 1986, he asked to speak to football coach Bobby Bowden.

"They thought I was screwy," Kennedy recalled this week. "They said, 'You don't even know the man. What do you want to talk to him for?' I said, 'Well, if I don't have his support, there's no way I'm going to build a basketball program because I need his high school principals. I need the boosters around the state. I need him.' Bobby Bowden was never at a basketball game in his life until we got there.

"I needed him, and my ego was such that I didn't care. I was only 33 years old. I just wanted to build a national program."

Kennedy took the Seminoles to three NCAA Tournaments as members of the Metro Conference, and then he took 'em to the Sweet 16 and the Elite Eight in back-to-back seasons as members of the ACC in 1992 and '93. Back then and even now, he understands why Florida State basketball — no matter how successful it is — would be underappreciated, both by its fan base and the national audience.

"There's a very easy answer for that and it's football, football, football," Kennedy says. "If you do that at Auburn, if you do it at Alabama, you can have a little flash in the pan, but when you get back to your home turf, what is it about? It's about football."

Which means it takes a certain type of person, a certain level (and absence) of ego, to coach basketball at a football-first institution. Hamilton is the perfect example of that, says Kennedy, who left for DePaul in 1997. Billy Donovan, during his long tenure at Florida, is another.

“Billy Donovan had just gotten to the Final Four; they had just made it, the next week they were going to go to the Final Four,” Kennedy says. “I was recruiting down there for DePaul University, and as I drove through Gainesville I turned on the local ESPN sports channel and they were talking about the backup offensive guard for the football team in spring training.

“That Sunday, they had won the game to get a trip to the Final Four. So on Monday you would think that the airwaves would be going crazy with the fact that they were going to the Final Four, and they were talking not about the starting offensive guard — it was the backup. It’s a tough place to get that recognition.”

Throughout the Southeast, it’s still largely like that. Auburn is through to its first Sweet 16, but spring football is underway, and can the Tigers win the Iron Bowl? How hot is Gus Mahlzan’s seat? At Florida State, the questions are coming fast and furious about second-year coach Willie Taggart; the Seminoles’ 36-year bowl streak was snapped last season, which didn’t sit well.

Tallahassee will always be football-first. But is there room to embrace basketball — even just a bit?

“You can see the standard changing at Florida State,” Forrest says. “For a while it was all football, football, football. But with basketball, we’ve been doing well these last couple of years. It just goes to show how hard Coach Ham has been working on the recruiting trail, getting guys that can come in and change it.”

Florida State recruits at a high level, but not quite like Duke, Kentucky or even North Carolina. The Seminoles love length and athleticism, but they also love sharing minutes and dividing duties. This limits the pool of potential prospects a bit. Kabengele, the team’s leading scorer, comes off the bench and plays just 21.4 minutes per game. Only two players average in double figures, but eight score at least five points per game. That’s the culture — and the system — Hamilton and his staff are asking kids to buy into. He likes to have a handful of seniors on his roster each season for this reason too.

“As a senior in high school, you probably get all the minutes, all the shots,” Kabengele says. “To adjust to this program where your minutes are limited and you have to play as hard as you can because the guy behind you or in front of you is just as good. It hits you first, and there’s definitely a rough patch you have to go through. But players are getting better, and you understand that winning is the ultimate goal. When you win, everyone gets taken care of.”

Says Forrest, “We’re not all five-stars but we’re good in what we do. They wouldn’t have recruited us if they didn’t think we could play at this level. We’re just as good as the guys that people are talking about.”

Certainly, that is true when they play together, as a unit. They root for each other; they pull for each other. Hamilton says this is unusual these days, “when everybody’s trying to get numbers to impress people.”

He’s not wrong. But when a coach prioritizes — and actually sticks to — values, the entire program begins to reflect them. If Hamilton doesn’t care much about recognition, it makes sense that his players don’t either.

Some will end up in the NBA. The rest won’t. It’s not the main selling point at Florida State. It’s not the be-all, end-all.

“I’m excited about all my kids graduating,” Hamilton says. “That is what’s important because the basketball is going to stop bouncing. And I’m more concerned about them being prepared to be good husbands, fathers, neighbors, citizens, leaders in their family, leaders in their community. Because without that education, at some point when you start competing in the real world, you’ll soon find out that no one is asking how many points you scored. They want to know if you are qualified to do a job.”

That is his job, getting his kids prepared to land their own. It is wholly daunting and much more significant than any one win or loss. It is what keeps him going each day, and it is what helps him sleep each night. It is measured in phone calls and photos, weddings and funerals.

And those are the records Leonard Hamilton would like to keep.