

Back Where Leonard Hamilton Belongs

By Josh Robbins
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TALLAHASSEE — Florida State basketball coach Leonard Hamilton barely sleeps. His motor always runs.

By his own admission, he never could sleep much past 6 a.m., even growing up in Gastonia, N.C. No wonder he arrives at his office between 7 and 8 a.m. every day. But how on earth does he often stay there until 10 p.m.?

"I've never been fatigued," he said. "I don't quite know what that is."

Maybe it's the lure of a challenge. Hamilton rebuilt programs at Oklahoma State and Miami, and now has another project. The Seminoles lost at least 17 games in each of the past four seasons and have become an Atlantic Coast Conference bottom-feeder. Named FSU's coach just over eight months ago, Hamilton will make his official debut as the Seminoles' coach today when this team hosts Savannah State in its season opener.

"I think that eventually you're going to see Leonard have that club in the first division [in the ACC]," ESPN analyst Dick Vitale said. "Leonard is the perfect choice. He fits that puzzle to perfection."

Hamilton, 54, belongs on the basketball court and the recruiting trail. If he doubted that before, he doesn't now after a one-year hiatus following one unsuccessful season with the NBA's Washington Wizards.

"I tried to go to a couple of [University of] Miami games, and that was just excruciating," Hamilton said. "It was painful just to be there and try to act like you're not a coach, to try to enjoy a game watching youngsters that you had recruited. ... I found myself just kind of living and dying with every play."

He took morning walks with his wife, Claudette. He taught his daughter, Allison, how to drive. He worked at his church. He enjoyed his time off, but he didn't feel satisfied.

"I think just mentioning the word 'basketball' starts my husband's juices flowing, and he gets very motivated," Claudette said.

Hard worker

Motivation never has been a problem for Hamilton.

He started his college coaching career in 1971, taking an assistant's job at Austin Peay. From the beginning, he acted differently than most other coaches on the recruiting trail.

Bill Bolton, an assistant at FSU during the early 1970s, remembers hearing Hamilton's name for the first time. Bolton frequently faced off against schools such as North Carolina, Louisville and Kentucky for recruits. Occasionally, some potential recruits also said they were considering Austin Peay.

"Every now and then I'd run into people, and they'd name maybe a couple of the big schools and then they'd come up with this darn Austin Peay," Bolton said. "And I said, 'How in the heck? Who is this guy?'"

Bolton finally met Hamilton one year at the NCAA Tournament. When most coaches were socializing, catching up on trade gossip and trading Xs-and-Os, Hamilton worked.

"The reason he's a good recruiter is he's full of enthusiasm," Bolton said. "He's one of the damndest, hard-nosed competitors that I've ever seen. He'll work 24 hours a day."

Kentucky Coach Joe B. Hall hired Hamilton as an assistant in 1974. That's where Hamilton stayed, excelling as a recruiter, until 1986, when he took over Oklahoma State's moribund program.

Hamilton had the Cowboys in the NIT in his third and fourth seasons, the first consecutive postseason appearances for OSU since 1954. Miami became his next challenge.

Off to Miami

He took over at UM in 1990. The school didn't have an arena of its own, a fan base or a winning tradition. Hamilton bristles when asked if taking over FSU's program approximates his task at Miami in 1990.

"I think that there will never be another situation like Miami because not very many programs will come back from 13 years of non-existence," Hamilton said. "I'm not real sure there is any relevance to comparing the situations."

Hamilton's 10-year tenure at Miami ended with six consecutive winning seasons and three consecutive appearances in the NCAA Tournament.

Florida State hasn't reached the NAAs since the 1997-98 season, Steve Robinson's first as the Seminoles coach. Robinson reached the tournament with players recruited by Pat Kennedy, his predecessor.

Kennedy left after differences with FSU's administration arose. Now the coach at Montana, Kennedy says there's no reason FSU can't be successful in the ACC as long as Hamilton receives support from the administration.

As proof, Kennedy pointed out that he led FSU to five NCAA Tournaments during his 11-year tenure.

"There's no doubt you can win there," Kennedy said. "It comes down to recruiting. You can't win in the ACC without quality players."

Vitale believes Hamilton will be able to recruit against ACC powers, especially with a new, \$10 million basketball-only practice facility.

"There are a lot of outstanding basketball players in the South, and I think that Florida State can be an attractive school to them," Vitale said. "I think that he's a master at utilizing football as a positive."

Strong recruiter

Hamilton already has lured talented players to Tallahassee. During this month's early signing period, he signed three highly regarded players, including 6-foot-5 wing Vakeaton "Von" Wafer of Cleveland, Texas, considered one of the country's top 20 high school seniors.

"He's really aggressive," Virginia coach Pete Gillen said of Hamilton. "He's tough. He'll do a great job there and make my life miserable."

Florida State senior post player Mike Mathews was recruited by Hamilton during Hamilton's days at UM. Mathews said he chose FSU over Miami, in part, because he heard Hamilton might go to the NBA.

Still, Hamilton made a favorable impression on Mathews' family. Even though Mathews attended Fork Union Military Academy in Virginia, Hamilton visited Mathews' parents at their church in Gretna, a North Florida town Mathews described as being "in the middle of nowhere."

"He was persistent. He was enthused when he was talking to me," Mathews said. "You could just tell he was about business." Other FSU players point to one word when they describe their new coach: intense. That label applies even though Hamilton is not a screamer during practices or games.

"You can just see it in his eyes, just the way he walks," sophomore guard Andrew Wilson said. "It's hard to describe. If you've ever talked to him, when you walk away you'll know he's just an intense guy."

Still, this season likely will prove difficult. The top four scorers from last season are gone, and most prognosticators expect the Seminoles to finish last in the nine-team ACC.

For Hamilton, that simply ratchets up his drive to rebuild the program.

"I might be putting in more hours now than I ever have in my entire life," he said. "I just enjoy doing what I'm doing. I think when you enjoy something as much as I do enjoy coaching, I'm not sure that you feel that fatigue."