

Leonard Hamilton Is Florida State's All-Time Wins Leader, Co-Founder Of Gospel Music Label

By Theo Lawson
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LOS ANGELES – Into the Sweet 16 for just the sixth time in program history, the Florida State Seminoles have been producing some sweet music this March. That's something their leader, 16th-year coach Leonard Hamilton, knows a thing or two about.

Most identify Hamilton as the man who's guided the Seminoles to 10 seasons of 20-plus wins. Or the one who resurrected Miami's basketball program in the 1990s, taking the Hurricanes to three straight NCAA Tournaments from 1997-2000 following a 40-year drought.

Nobody at FSU has won more games than Hamilton (326) and it took Jim Larranga seven seasons at Miami to surpass the 141 victories Hamilton amassed with the Canes.

What he's accomplished between two baselines is no secret, but the FSU coach is also a co-founder of gospel music label Five Oceans. Despite Hamilton's roaring success at the highest level of college basketball, most still haven't.

"I hadn't heard about it," Florida State freshman center Ike Obiagu said. "He's never mentioned it."

The life of a college basketball coach is a hectic one and Hamilton's in the midst of the season's most taxing/rewarding/stress-inducing phase. His ninth-seeded Seminoles face off with fourth-seeded Gonzaga Thursday in a Sweet 16 matchup at the Staples Center.

Coaches find different methods of relief through the long, rugged basketball season. Not many of them, if any at all, can say they kick back by strapping on their headphones and drowning in the tunes and melodies of musical artists they've signed.

Hamilton is unique in that way, but the FSU coach insists this isn't a self-serving mission. He's aiming to reach others – that's the part he finds most satisfying.

"I do have a record label," he said Wednesday at the Staples Center, "but it's not as much as an income producer for me as to try and provide people with access to opportunity and hopefully help them do what I feel like is important to them – spreading the word, spreading the gospel."

That's what drove Hamilton and musical producer Kyle Bynoe to collaborate and create Five Oceans in the summer of 2015. The label, which is officially called "Five Ocean Music Group, LLC" is distributed by New Day Christian in partnership with RED Distribution, a division of Sony Music Entertainment.

Hamilton's in the know when it comes to what's happening with the label, but his partner handles all of the day-to-day operations.

"Having an opportunity to express themselves in song has always been a part of my life," he said, "and I always try to work hard to encourage other people who want to do that, to do it, and it's kind of my way of giving back."

Hamilton grew up in Gastonia, North Carolina, and for the first 20 years of his life, he never lived farther than "50 yards from a church." The blare of church bells sounded through his bedroom window – "every time (it) rang, I could hear it" he said – and whenever a churchgoer tapped the keys of the piano or strummed the strings of the organ, Hamilton said "I could really sing with the songs in my bedroom."

Faith was a staple of the Hamilton household and weekly basketball practices were supplemented by Sunday School, choir practice, Easter programs, BTU, vacation bible school, Christmas programs and Easter egg hunts.

“All those things were part of who we were and what I’ve become as an individual,” he said. “I remember even as a youngster going every Sunday night with my grandmother to a different church in town. So I kind of grew up with that. I enjoy it. It’s part of who I am. I enjoy it.”

The lesser-known side of FSU’s all-time wins leader, perhaps, but not necessarily less meaningful.