

Florida State's Green Team The Unsung Hero Of Seminoles' Success

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Even those with an intimate knowledge of the Florida State men's basketball team may not immediately recognize the names or faces of Travis Light, Justin Lindner, Harrison Prieto and Will Miles.

During games, the four walk-on players can be found sitting at the end of the bench, rarely getting taking the chance to take the court unless its the closing minutes of a game in which the result is well in hand.

But ask anyone within the program and they'll tell you how crucial each of the four -- and the walk-on players that preceded them -- have been to what the Seminoles have built in Tallahassee as members of the "Green Team" or "Green Vipers" as they've come to be known.

"From top to bottom, we have the best walk-on program in the country, I would say. You underestimate it, but I have not been a part of a walk-on program in my 15-plus years coaching like we have here. It separates every team that I have coached," FSU assistant coach Dennis Gates told the *Tallahassee Democrat*.

"They're more a part of our success than signing a five-star sometimes. You love to get a Jonathan Isaac, Dwayne Bacon, Malik Beasley, Terance Mann, but you'd better be getting some Travis, Justin Lindner, Brandon Allen, even (former walk-ons) Joey Moreau and Rafael Portuondo, those guys were a part of the ACC Championship."

While some other high-profile programs employ their younger scholarship players as their scout team, FSU head coach Leonard Hamilton has a different approach. He uses these walk-ons to allow the entire scholarship roster to practice against a scout team implementing the game plan of whoever FSU's next opponent is.

"We've kind of accepted that we may not get to play, but we like our role and we can cook the starters. That's what we like to do," Lindner told the *Tallahassee Democrat*.

Each of the four arrived together at FSU ahead of the 2016-17 season, but took quite different paths both to the school and the basketball program.

Miles is an FSU legacy and always knew he wanted to be a Seminole, finding himself lucky enough to also find a role on the basketball team.

Prieto wants to be a future meteorologist and chose FSU to be able to major in that.

Light took a prep school year at Montverde Academy after high school and was invited onto the team through a connection between a high school and Hamilton.

Lindner, like the others, had interest from smaller schools, but wanted to go to a bigger school and earned a tryout thanks to a connection between a high school coach of his from Memphis and FSU assistant Stan Jones.

The varied skill-set of the walk-ons on the Green Team paired with whoever is redshirting that year -- Malik Osborne this year, forced to sit out after transferring from Rice last offseason -- creates a unique challenge in helping the Seminoles prepare for each opponent.

"We have to mimic other teams' players and what they do and I think we do that really well because of how versatile we are."

Added Prieto, "All four of us and whoever else is on the green team that year, we're all pretty competitive people so I think whenever we are in practice and we're running another team's offense and they're trying to stop us or we're playing defense and they're running offense, we want to score on the starters, scholarship guys as much as we can.

"It kind of works out to where we have an edge and want to be the best we can be and give them the best look that they've got."

Lindner and Light expressed interest in pursuing careers in coaching after their time at FSU ends. This experience of learning and executing every offense and defense that FSU will face in a practice setting prepares them well for the challenges of coaching.

"They give us a great look," FSU senior guard Terance Mann said of the Green Team.

"They're always going full speed and they make it speed up for us in practice so in the game it slows down. They do a great job of executing."

While the Green Team -- so named for the green jerseys they wear in practice -- may never see the floor during a meaningful moment for the Seminoles, that's the only thing separating them from the scholarship players.

"They are as much as a part of our program as any of the players," Hamilton said.

"That's the way it's always been with me. There's no distinction between walk-ons and scholarship players. If they're on the team, they're on the team and they're treated as such.

Hamilton makes sure that each of the four travels with the team to every away game. During games, the walk-ons are assigned a player to discuss what isn't going well on the court.

"Whenever coach Jones was bringing me on the team, one of the things he said was, 'You're going to do everything the team does. If we have dinner at night, you're there. If we have conditioning in the morning, you're there. You are the same,'" Prieto said.

"We know we're walk-ons and we know our roles in that respect, but at the same time, the guys don't treat us any differently just because our school's not paid for because of basketball."

One story stands out as evidence of that. Light was hospitalized this summer when he had to have a testicle removed. While there, he received a visit from former FSU player and current member of the Orlando Magic, Jonathan Isaac, who spent the night with him in the hospital.

"He just kind of popped up and surprised me," Light said.

"I think it was really cool of him, just from going to prep school together for a year and then coming here for a year together and then being apart for a year with him with the Magic and then coming back. It was really cool."

Added Jones, "(Light) was a walk-on that didn't really play at all when Jonathan was here, played maybe two or three games. That's how close those guys are in the locker room, in the apartments, on campus and in life now."

The quartet is quite aware of the program building they've had a courtside seat to watch. Arriving at an unranked team ahead of their freshman seasons, they now have had the chance to prepare and watch a team that made its first Elite Eight in 25 years last season and currently sits at No. 9 in the polls.

"I'd say we're just lucky just to come in. Obviously, we contribute to the success, but all the cards aligning of every year we've been here, we've been in March Madness," Miles said.

"Especially with the position we're in this year where we're competing for a national championship, it's just great timing to be here."

Added Lindner, "When you're growing up, you watch college basketball on TV and it seems like it's so out of reach...Nowadays it's just normal to me."