

Leonard Hamilton's Emphasis On Academics Leads To FSU's impressive Graduate Rate

By Curt Weiler

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In a college basketball world that concerns itself with the next level and advancing ahead with the opportunity to play professionally, academics can often be pushed to the side.

The addition of the one-and-done rule in 2005 -- which required all draft-eligible players to be 19 and one year removed from high school -- unintentionally furthered the notion among these players that school is secondary to basketball.

All of this makes the hit rate with which Florida State men's basketball coach Leonard Hamilton has seen his players graduate across his tenure in Tallahassee all the more impressive.

Since Hamilton took the FSU job ahead of the 2002-03 season, 61 of the 63 players (96.8 percent) that have enrolled and played for the Seminoles for at least four seasons left with their degrees.

The only two that didn't, former FSU players Al Thornton (2003-2007) and Solomon Alabi (2007-2010), have both reached out to FSU about finishing their degrees with online coursework as their playing careers wind down.

While this may seem impressive to many, Hamilton just views it as an expectation of someone in his position.

"It's part of our responsibility to take young men when they're teenagers and usher them into young adulthood," Hamilton told the *Tallahassee Democrat*.

"When you're a teenager, 17 or 18 years old, sometimes you're not in a position to make worldly decisions even though you might think that you are. I think that what we have always done is just set certain boundaries and certain expectations, try to hold everybody accountable to the things that we believe are important in the overall development of a young man, not as a basketball player but as an individual.

"What we've always tried to do is just treat everything like we would treat it if it was our own children. That's the way we look at it and so everything that we do totally in our program -- not only in academics but in everything that we do -- we try to treat it as such."

This is a belief that traces back to Hamilton's time as an assistant coach at Kentucky, where he won a national championship in 1978.

"That was part of my responsibility as a young assistant coach at the University of Kentucky for 12 years to make sure that I stay on top of the kids' academically," Hamilton said.

"I was at an institution that really placed a lot of emphasis on making sure that the kids not only played well, but they graduated."

With all the success the No. 10 Seminoles (8-1) have found early this season -- making the program's earliest appearance in the Top 10 since 1992 -- Hamilton sees the bigger picture when reflecting on his success at FSU.

"We truly believe that when you look around in my office and you see all those NCAA rings and watches and memorabilia, trophies, coach of the year awards, if that's where you place all the emphasis -- the fact that we have won a certain number of basketball games -- then I think we're very shallow in the big picture," Hamilton said.

"The most important thing we do is take young men and try to be a part during this period of life when you're taking them from teenagers to young adults. That is by far the most important thing we do as coaches.

"Now, there's no question that we need to win. That's part of the process, that's part of the job. But if we win and fail in the development of young people, in helping them grow in developing the tools that are going to give them a chance to be successful in life, we have failed."

A significant subset of this group of graduates are people who became the first in their direct family to attend or graduate from college.

Hamilton is quite aware of the fact that athletic scholarships could be the only means of some of his players earning college degrees and doesn't take that responsibility lightly.

"A lot of them will be the first people who have gone to college in their families. This is important because they many times change the whole culture of their family by them having academic success that compliments what most people want in athletic success," Hamilton said.

"Our rewards come five, six, seven, eight years after a kid has left us and what are they doing with their lives and their families and their careers. That's when our great report comes in.

"I'm hoping that as a staff when we hang our whistles up and we look ourselves in the mirror, that we will be able to say that we have done everything possible to help the young people that have been a part of our journey to have a place in our society that's meaningful and that they're not only proud of the fact that they represented the school, Florida State, but that we had the kind of relationships that they feel helped them become who they are in the next part of their lives."