

## **FSU Players Past, Present Grateful For Coach Leonard Hamilton's Support**

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More than 40 years ago, then-Austin Peay assistant coach Leonard Hamilton was told people just weren't ready for a black head coach.

While the conversation hurt him, Hamilton said the slight doesn't fuel him or come to mind often during the high points of his career.

Hamilton is now the head coach at Florida State and in the midst of another strong season. And at age 71, he continues to break down barriers.

As of 2016, just 23.8 percent of Division I basketball coaches were black.

Hamilton has thrived, amassing 325 wins as head coach at FSU. He has been named ACC Coach of the Year twice (2009,2012) and captured the ACC title during the 2011-2012 season.

He won his 144th ACC game when the Seminoles defeated Georgia Tech 69-47 on Saturday.

To Hamilton, these are more fulfilled obligations than accomplishments.

"Maybe I'm not as philosophical to say I have really arrived. Winning the ACC was what my job said I was supposed to do," he said "I'm more concerned about these kids getting degrees, what they're going to be doing five years after they leave me, what kind of husbands and fathers and citizens they're going to be."

Hamilton added the real accomplishment is the relationships he's able to build with all of his players off the court, the personal goals they achieve because of it and the milestones they achieve.

There are numbers that speak to his efficiency as a mentor. Since accepting the head coaching job at FSU before the start of the 2002-2003 season, Hamilton has seen 96 percent of his players earn degrees.

Most recently, Hamilton has prepared Jonathon Isaac, Malik Beasley, and Jeff Peterson for careers in the NBA.

Isaac is continuing to develop into a solid NBA forward with the Orlando Magic, while Beasley is having a breakout year with the Denver Nuggets.

Peterson opted to pursue a career in the front office and is currently the assistant general manager for the Atlanta Hawks. He was a part of Hamilton's ACC title-winning team and though he was only at FSU for one season as a grad transfer, Peterson said Hamilton's genuine concern for him stood him.

"His ability to get the most out of his players is something that, watching from afar, you could kind of tell that," said Peterson, who also stands out as a rare black NBA front office executive.

"But after hopping on the phone with him and talking to him and talking to other people who have been through the program, it became even more apparent."

Before he entered a field where people who look like him are equally rare, Peterson said as a player, the idea of having black male role model played a role his decision to transfer to FSU.

“It was more of a bonus,” he said. “If I didn’t trust in the human regardless of his skin color, I probably wouldn’t have come here. But just his human qualities and characteristics and then to tie it in and know that he’s a black male that’s been through the things he’s been through, that’s what was really, really intriguing to me.”

Hamilton’s story of humble beginnings and rise to coaching prominence has resonated with current players as well. “It was one of the main reasons why I chose to come here,” Senior PJ Savoy said. “You don’t see a lot of African-American coaches coaching at such a high level and doing a great job at it. For what it’s worth, it’s a dream come true.”

Senior Christ Koumadje echoed those sentiments and said it drives players to win.

“He’s somebody you can relate to because of his past and the struggle that he went through,” Koumadje said. “From what he had in the past and for us knowing that every time we play for home, we’ve got to fight for home and it motivates us.”

As much as Hamilton is able to get out of players, Peterson said the way in which he does is also special.

“He has a unique way of delivering his message and you better listen,” Peterson said with a laugh. “And it’s one of those things where I don’t want to disappoint him, so I’m going to try my hardest and work super hard to not do that.”

Peterson added Hamilton’s attention to detail when it comes to his players makes him “more than just a coach.”

“At the end of the day, he just wants what’s best for the kid and each individual player is different,” Peterson said. “Be it Jonathon Issac or Malik Beasley, who were both here a year, or other players who were here multiple years, he does a very good job of analyzing each player’s situation individually. Again, he has so much experience that he can say, ‘Jonathon this is what’s best of you.’ Or, ‘Malik this is what’s best for you.’ Nine times out of 10, maybe 10 times out of 10, he’ll be right.”

His players, past and present, all take heed when he says the ball will stop bouncing some day and are on building a future off the court. Koumadje said one day they’ll really be able to appreciate what it meant to be a part of Hamilton’s team.

“Ten, 20 years from now, we’re going to look back and see it was something big,” Koumadje said. “Right now, we’re young, we don’t really see it, but a couple years from now we’ll see it. It was really something big that we were part of.”