

Gospel Music Aside, Hamilton's FSU Hoops Team Also In Harmony

By Gene Frenette
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TALLAHASSEE – The sixth-longest tenured Division I basketball coach among Power 6 conference schools has no real hobbies. He's not an exercise freak, doesn't fish or play golf, though a set of never-used clubs has sat untouched in his garage for about 20 years.

Other than his 49-year marriage to wife Claudette, the love connection with his two adult children, and a 24/7 commitment to Florida State's hoops program for the past 17 seasons, Leonard Hamilton has just one passion: gospel music.

Growing up in Gastonia, N.C., his house was an easy wedge from Mount Zion Baptist Church. Deep inside the 70-year-old Hamilton, he still feeds the impact from the sounds inside that church to this day.

"I grew up in the church. When the organist played or a soloist performed, I could hear it from my bedroom," Hamilton said. " [Gospel music] is part of who I am."

About five years ago, Hamilton expanded that interest by acquiring a gospel music label, naming it Five Oceans.

With two artists on the label, Hamilton lets other people run the operation as he's too busy with FSU basketball to be hanging out in a recording studio.

"It's not a business venture so much as a ministry," said Hamilton. "I enjoy helping people who worship the Lord in song and have a chance to express themselves."

As for the name Five Oceans, he adds: "I wanted my music to touch all parts of the world, and five oceans touch just about every part. The ocean is one of the most consistent phenomenas. The tide comes in and goes out every day. I want my music to be consistent, refreshing in the morning and relaxing in the evening."

More than anything, his musical taste appeals to Hamilton's desire for a soothing, balanced life in a chaotic profession.

"That's his pressure-valve release," said FSU assistant coach Stan Jones. "It allows [Hamilton] to go into another element outside of coaching, recruiting and dealing with university administration. It gives him peace."

It's helped him survive an up-and-down coaching journey over 48 years, which took Hamilton to the high of a national championship as a Kentucky assistant in 1978. But he's also been through the difficult grind of trying to fix struggling programs at Oklahoma State, Miami and FSU, plus a brief failed NBA fling with the Washington Wizards.

Finally, in what figures to be his last coaching chapter, Hamilton has probably done his best work. He survived the tumultuous part of his FSU tenure during the first six years – no NCAA tournament bid, a 37-59 ACC record – and the administration's remarkable patience continues to be rewarded.

FSU has shown no sign of tailing off from its success of the past two seasons, which includes an NCAA run to the 2018 Elite Eight (lost 58-54 to Michigan in the West regional finals) and a second-place ACC finish the preceding year. With the No. 18-ranked Seminoles' 78-73 triumph Saturday over North Carolina State at Donald Tucker Civic Center, it upped their win total to 72 wins over the past three years, the best of any stretch in the program's 71-year history. "Most rebuilding programs have the potential to do what we've become, they just don't get there in two or three years," Hamilton said. "This hasn't been easy. We don't even own the facility we play in and our league has some of the top winningest programs in college basketball."

Despite being in a hoops furnace with the likes of Duke, North Carolina and Syracuse, the Seminoles have survived quite well since the 2008-09 season, going 109-79 in ACC regular-season games, the third-best league mark.

Hamilton's teams have gradually become a national player, going 7-6 in the NCAA tournament over that span and also won the ACC tournament in 2012.

But none of those accomplishments seem to truly excite Hamilton. He talks more like a life coach than a basketball coach. While others measure success by rankings and a March Madness resume, Hamilton always points to player development off the court.

"I have a lot of trophies, awards and rings, but what I enjoy most is attending [player] weddings, getting calls on Father's Day, guys seeking advice on major decisions. Those are the coaching rewards," Hamilton said. "If I only evaluate my success with NCAA trips and Coach of the Year awards, then I can't look at myself in the mirror. If I'm not impacting young men to grow with the tools I've been given, I haven't done my job.

"You're taking people at the most important part of their life – teenagers going into adulthood – and trying to develop not just basketball players, but good husbands, fathers and citizens. That part of the process goes unnoticed."

During his tenure, 61 of 63 players who became seniors have earned degrees. This year's senior class – Phil Cofer, David Nichols, Christ Koumadje, PJ Savoy, and Terrance Mann – are all on track for a diploma. No player on Hamilton's watch has ever been forced to leave the program for disciplinary reasons.

Mann, the 2015 New Hampshire Player of the Year, appreciates Hamilton's approach. With a mother, Daynia La-Force, serving as head coach at the University of Rhode Island, the 6-foot-7 guard sees value in a college experience not incessantly consumed by playing ball and game preparation.

"Coach Ham talks more to us about life than basketball definitely," said Mann. "He'll have a few things to say about the game, about practice. Other than that, it's always about how we should carry ourselves, how we should be careful. He's always telling us stories about student-athletes who were in the same position as us and didn't make it out because they made not-smart decisions. He's always coaching us on life."

Jones has been with Hamilton for 24 seasons, since his boss hired the former Mississippi high school coach to join his Miami Hurricanes staff as a non-recruiting assistant. Jones is now Hamilton's most trusted adviser, having spent more time with him than any working colleague.

While some may see Hamilton's emphasis on cultivating life skills for his players as a public relations/recruiting ploy, Jones insists the boss' nurturing side is a reflection of how he acts behind the scenes.

"From working with him day to day, I can tell you that's a genuine article human being, that's legit," Jones said. "It's not a pat line, bullet point or spin-cycle-give-to-the-media. That is legitimately his soul.

"As good as a basketball coach and mind that he is, he's a better molder of people. He helps you through situations so that you will grow, including the coaching staff. He's more concerned about your well-being after you leave him."

Still, life on the court for Hamilton – a two-time Coach of the Year recipient in both the Big East and ACC -- is pretty good. Unlike many ACC coaches, he kept his job after six mediocre years because the athletic director who hired him, former Alabama basketball player Dave Hart, felt FSU was close enough to a hoops breakthrough to warrant keeping Hamilton.

Ironically, once Hart was forced out by president T.K. Wetherell in 2009, the 'Noles started making significant gains with four consecutive top-4 ACC finishes and an NCAA Sweet 16 appearance in 2011.

“It’s not like we ever became totally irrelevant or weren’t competitive, we just always seemed to be one win short of making the NCAAs in those early years,” said Jones.

That’s no longer an issue, and Saturday’s tight contest with NC State was further evidence that FSU (23-6, 11-5) should again be a tough out in March. The Wolfpack trailed by single digits virtually the whole game, tied it up 63-63 with under seven minutes left, but Hamilton’s team always had an answer in critical moments.

“We’ve been through the Elite Eight and so many close games,” said Mann. “If it’s a three-point game with three minutes left and you’re going against a team like us, we’re very hard to beat because we know how to manage situations very well.”

Part of that might well be a reflection of Hamilton. As much as he’d like to get to the Final Four as a head coach, the message to his players is always about winning in life.

Away from the college basketball pressure-cooker, Leonard Hamilton needs the joy that comes from listening to gospel music. Looking at what his team is doing on the court, the Seminoles are also striking the right chord.