

Florida State Coaching Staff Should Take Major Bow After 2019 NBA Draft

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June 22, 2019

College basketball teams don't often get to celebrate victories during the summer months, but rest assured that Leonard Hamilton and his Florida State staff are feeling like champions right about now.

Not only were they thrilled to see two of their players selected Thursday night in the NBA Draft, but it was who those players are -- and what they represent -- that made this night even more special.

First, forward Mfiondu Kabengele went in the first round to the L.A. Clippers (by way of the Brooklyn Nets, who originally owned the 27th pick). Then, guard Terance Mann went in the second round to the Clippers with the 48th pick.

"It was a great night for both of them," FSU assistant coach Charlton Young said in a phone interview early Friday morning, after attending celebrations in New York for both players. "It was great because they're both self-made guys. They weren't McDonald's All-Americans. They weren't top-20 recruits. They were guys who trusted J. Leonard Hamilton and his staff, and they came to Florida State to get better.

"They were 100 percent committed to us and improving themselves, and we were 100 percent committed to them. I don't think Coach Ham gets enough credit for developing young people into great players and great young men. He does a great job of developing these guys."

The fact that Young called me back at just past 2 a.m. gives you an idea of how excited the Seminoles are about these two particular selections. And it's not just because it's special for a program like Florida State to produce NBA Draft picks; heck, the Seminoles have now had five players drafted in the last four years. They've had 14 first- or second-round picks during Hamilton's tenure in Tallahassee.

It's where Mann and Kabengele came from that brings them such joy.

This wasn't Jonathan Isaac going from five-star recruit to NBA lottery pick. Or even Dwayne Bacon and Malik Beasley, both of whom were top-50 recruits, getting selected by NBA teams.

Florida State's coaching staff received plenty of credit for recruiting those guys. And rightly so. It's impressive any time FSU can beat out college basketball's "blue bloods," as Hamilton likes to call them, for elite prospects. But everyone knows Hamilton and his assistants are great recruiters.

What Terance Mann and Mfiondu Kabengele prove once again -- along with guys like Bernard James and Ryan Reid before them -- is that the Seminoles' coaching staff also deserves credit for identifying lesser-known talent and bringing out the best in players who are willing to put in the work.

When FSU assistant Dennis Gates spotted Kabengele several years ago and offered him a scholarship, the athletic big man was being recruited by virtually no college programs you've ever heard of. And while Mann ended up being a highly rated prospect by the time he signed with the Seminoles -- he was a consensus four-star -- that wasn't the case when Young started recruiting him back in middle school.

It's also no secret that Mann was almost an afterthought when he came to FSU as part of a five-member signing class that also included Bacon and Beasley.

"Coach Gates did such a great job of evaluating Kabengele, who really was a diamond in the rough," Young said. "And that's hard to do when nobody else is recruiting a kid. This is a guy who wasn't even a top-200 player, and you

believed in him and helped him become a first-round pick. And Terance Mann was the Tito Jackson of his recruiting class (yes, Florida State fans, this is the best reference you'll read this month).

"To see him come to school for four years, get his degree, become the all-time winningest player in school history, start a revolution for Florida State basketball, and then get drafted by a great organization ... it's a storybook thing for him, his family, his parents, his grandparents and everybody who supported him. It's just a dream come true. I started recruiting him when he was a seventh-grader. And for a long time, we thought we were the only two guys who could see it. Now, everybody sees it."

Truth be told, FSU's coaches were actually slightly disappointed with when both players were selected. There was a lot of pre-draft talk that Kabengele might be a top-20 pick, and the FSU coaches had heard whispers that Mann might sneak into the late first round. The Seminoles also thought center Christ Koumadje might go late in the second; he didn't, but he has since reached a deal with the Philadelphia 76ers.

And no one could be upset with where Kabengele and Mann are headed next. They're joining an L.A. Clippers organization that is on the rise, they're staying together, and they'll get to play former FSU great Sam Cassell, who is on the Clippers' coaching staff.

"It's a great situation for both of them," Young said. "They'll be comfortable because they've got each other, plus they're getting to help a winning organization -- a first-class organization."

Not unlike the one they are leaving.

What Thursday night's NBA Draft also showed was how impressive Florida State's 2018-19 season really was, when you consider the type of competition the Seminoles faced en route to their school-record 29 victories and second consecutive NCAA Sweet 16 appearance.

Not only did Hamilton's team compete against eight of the top 11 picks in Thursday's draft last season, but consider this: FSU lost just three of their final 19 games in 2019. One loss came to Duke in the ACC title game ... the Devils had three of Thursday's top 10 picks. One loss came to North Carolina ... the Tar Heels had three first-round picks. And the final loss came in the Sweet 16 to Gonzaga ... the Zags had two first-round picks.

And all three games were essentially road games. The first two were played in North Carolina, and the Gonzaga game was in California.

"We were well aware of who we were playing, but seeing it in the draft definitely confirms it," Young said. "It's a testimony to the program and to what Coach Ham has built. We're a program that isn't just trying to make it to the NCAA Tournament anymore. We have aspirations of winning a national title. You can see it in the way the kids train. How they practice. They try to carry themselves like champions."

After hanging up the phone, Young was hoping to catch a few hours of sleep before heading back on the road recruiting -- perhaps to find the next Mann or Kabengele. The rest wouldn't be long, but likely satisfying.

"Tonight was a great night for Seminole Basketball," Young said. "I think the basketball world is starting to see our consistency, and we feel like we've got some more guys in the program right now that are more than capable of doing the same thing. So we're gonna continue to work and get high-character guys that are motivated to be the best they can be. And we're gonna keep surprising people with two or three guys going on draft night."

Leonard Hamilton has a mantra he repeats frequently during the course of the Seminoles' seasons. When he speaks with the media following big regular-season victories, he'll often try to downplay the moment, saying that he, his staff and players are not ready to take any bows just yet.

On days like this, no one would blame them if they did.