

FSU Hoops Succeeds With Unselfish Players Putting Team First

By Gene Frenette
Florida Times Union
January 10, 2019

Florida State's basketball program doesn't need a star to carry its program. The 10th-ranked Seminoles are succeeding by committee and doing things the way coach Leonard Hamilton wants them.

For a stretch of three-plus minutes to start the second half Wednesday against Wake Forest, the most annoying college basketball team in the country to play against did everything wrong.

They turned the ball over on three consecutive possessions. They missed all five field goal attempts. They were out of whack defensively, which led to Wake Forest going on a 11-0 run on its home floor and taking a 45-41 lead.

But as Florida State is wont to do, Leonard Hamilton's starless team awakened by using its athleticism and length, allowing the Seminoles to permanently regain control of the game they eventually won, 78-68. Just as it did in a 78-65 road win at Louisville four days earlier, FSU snapped out of a funk and went on a 17-5 run, never allowing its opponent to feel comfortable the rest of the game.

This is the FSU way. The Seminoles are an eminently beatable team in spurts, often aided by their own self-destruction, but outplaying them over 40 minutes is a difficult chore. They have a tendency to wear people down with a suffocating defense that clogs passing lanes, causing opponents to often rush shots and taking them out of their game plan.

FSU's current success — a seven-game win streak, going a league-best 16-2 in ACC games since last January — didn't happen overnight. It took Hamilton more than a decade of 18 seasons in Tallahassee for his game-winning formula to evolve, but the No. 10-ranked Seminoles (14-2, 4-1 in ACC) are on a pretty good roll now.

They come at opponents in waves, playing 10 or more players each game. You never know from one minute to the next whether guards Trent Forrest, M.J. Walker, Devin Vassell or a relatively unknown player will be the cold-blooded assassin.

That's because Hamilton trusts the second guy near the end of the bench almost as much as his starters on the floor.

Case in point: when FSU's frontcourt ran into early foul trouble at Wake Forest, he put seldom-used, walk-on Harrison Prieto in the game. Playing a career-high 10 minutes, the 6-foot-8 junior contributed two offensive rebound buckets and a steal that led to a Vassell three-pointer.

At that point, Prieto had played only 12 minutes all season in blowout wins. Yet Hamilton sent him out there in an ACC road game because he needed a big body to hold the fort until Patrick Williams, Malik Osborne and Dominik Olejniczak could return.

"We win by committee and most teams feature people," Hamilton said Thursday in a phone interview. "We don't feature one particular person. We let the game come to them. We have a system where we get everybody involved. I think that makes us more challenging to play. The go-to person is the guy with the highest percentage shot. Our guys all feel equal.

"We don't have a Zion Williamson that makes you [media] guys tickle your fancy. We're not quite as sexy. We are different. We're not like everybody else."

That's part of the appeal in Hamilton's recruiting pitch. He and top assistant Stan Jones — who has been with Hamilton for 25 years, dating back to his coaching stints with the NBA Washington Wizards and the University of Miami — have convinced players to accept their role. Even if it means reduced playing time.

Over the last four seasons, where FSU is 92-31 overall and 38-21 in ACC play, Hamilton's system has taken the 'Noles to three consecutive NCAA tournaments and a potential top-4 seed this year.

After a Sweet 16 and Elite Eight appearance the past two seasons, FSU again looks like someone nobody wants to play because Hamilton has a team — six of the top eight players by playing time are freshmen or sophomores — performing better than the sum of its parts.

"It's the vision the coaches have for us," said Forrest, a senior and the team's leading scorer at 12.1 points per game.

"Part of the reason you come to FSU is because you know you're going to play with other unselfish guys. It's a credit to the coaches for recruiting those players and then the players for buying into it.

"So far, everything they've said about this program has happened. It doesn't matter how you get the win. That's how we play. Some days, you play great. Other days, you can play the sorriest team in D-I and they can go on a run, but it's how you respond to it that matters."

The players tend to reflect Hamilton's unflappable sideline demeanor. When things go haywire, like it did briefly against Wake Forest, the Seminoles appear unfazed and just go about their business.

"You look over and see [Hamilton] calm, cool and collected," said Forrest. "That's a reason a lot of us don't get worried too much when we hit adversity."

The Seminoles certainly don't get rattled in tight games coming down to the final minute. Since winning at Duke on Michael Snaer's buzzer-beater in January 2012, FSU is 36-8 in games decided by one possession or overtime, where it has won eight straight the last three years.

Under Hamilton, 71, the fifth-longest tenured coach at any Power 5 school, FSU has gradually made the climb in recent years to challenge the ACC bluebloods, where Duke, North Carolina, Virginia, Louisville and Syracuse have long established traditions.

"When you're in a conference with rich programs that have Hall of Fame coaches, it challenges every fiber you have to compete at a consistent level," said Hamilton. "We've kind of figured out how to maintain who we are.

"There's a reason why all programs are where they are. Florida State had been inconsistent for a long time. The reality is nobody cares about the challenges you face. The bottom line is to get it done."

In the twilight of his coaching career, Hamilton — tied with Maryland's Lefty Driesell as the sixth-winningest coach in ACC history with 348 victories — has FSU basketball in a good place.

Just like Hamilton's milestone marriage to wife Claudette, with their 50th anniversary approaching in September, the patience he and the FSU administration have had with each other is now bearing fruit.

Not many ACC coaches would have survived going their first six years without making the NCAA tournament. Hamilton has taken his share of criticism over the years for in-game strategy and simply not winning enough.

His critics have quieted down, especially now that Hamilton is experiencing the kind of consistent success Seminoles' fans wish they could get back to in football.

FSU doesn't need a star player who can carry the program. It's doing just fine the Leonard Hamilton way.