

Unselfishness, Toughness Help Vault FSU Into Associated Press Top-5 In Men's Basketball

By Jim Henry

Tallahassee Democrat

January 20, 2020

Hugh Durham believes two qualities best exemplify the Florida State men's basketball team:

Unselfishness and toughness.

Durham, who led FSU to the 1972 NCAA Championship game and the team's last top-5 ranking during the 1972-73 season, says that's a difficult balance. He credits Seminoles coach Leonard Hamilton for the ability to get players - including those with their sights on the NBA - to commit to his system.

"Players accept their roles," Durham said Monday from his Jacksonville hometown.

"When you turn on the television, that's not what you see all the time. The perception might be this guy is not putting the team first. I think that's what is unusual about Florida State. Somehow, Leonard is able to get his players to buy in. I think that, along with the talent he recruits, he gets the talent buying into that concept."

FSU (16-2 overall, 6-1 ACC) continued its surge under Hamilton Monday, when it vaulted to No. 5 in The Associated Press men's college basketball poll.

It's the Seminoles' highest ranking since they were No. 2 in the opening weeks of the 1972-73 season under Durham. FSU was also ranked No. 6 in Monday's USA Today Coaches Poll.

The Seminoles haven't missed a beat from last season's Sweet 16 team that featured two NBA Draft picks.

Since its season-opening defeat at Pittsburgh, FSU has won 16 of 17 and is riding a nine-game win streak.

The Seminoles, who haven't lost since playing Indiana in the Big Ten-ACC Challenge the first week of December, are also in a first-place tie with Louisville in the ACC standings. Their next game is Saturday at home against Notre Dame (11-6, 2-4).

To say craziness abounds this season is an understatement.

Baylor, at No. 1 this week in the AP poll, is the seventh team on top this season. That matches the record set in 1983 for the most No. 1s in the history of the poll, which dates to the 1948-49 season.

"It's the first time when you can clearly say there are no favorites to win the NCAA Tournament," former FSU coach Pat Kennedy said Monday from his New Jersey home.

"It's not so much people getting beat, but how they are getting beat. This is one of Leonard's best overall teams I think since he has been there. They have tremendous experience. These kids are confident."

Seven top-25 teams in the Associated Press poll lost last Saturday, including three of the top-5. Six were steamrolled by double digits by unranked opponents.

FSU, meanwhile, jumped four spots in the poll after it beat reigning national champion Virginia at home and survived overtime at Miami, rallying from a nine-point deficit with five minutes remaining. The Seminoles won despite shooting 42 percent and committing 16 turnovers.

They may not always rely on style points, but it's difficult to argue with the results.

“When you watch them, they are tough, they are versatile, they are gritty – they get the job done,” former Seminole (1988-93) and Tallahassee resident Byron Wells said.

“To me, it seems like somebody different is stepping up every game. When you think about our teams compared to this one. ... we didn’t play defense like this one. The game was different when I played. It’s so much more physical now.”

Sophomore 6-foot-7 guard Devin Vassell has emerged as the Seminoles’ go-to player. He is averaging 17.2 points, 7.2 rebounds and 1.8 steals while shooting 39.1% from 3-point range in the past five games. He finished with 23 points, 11 rebounds, 5 assists, 2 blocks and 3 steals in the overtime victory over the Hurricanes.

Still, FSU has relied on the toughness and unselfishness Durham stressed.

Ten players are averaging double-digit minutes played. Three are averaging in double figures, led by Vassell at 13.2 points per game, followed by Trent Forrest (11.8) and M.J. Walker (11.6).

The Seminoles are outscoring opponents by 11.9 points per game (75.5 to 63.6) to rank third in the ACC behind Duke and Louisville. They are also 9-0 at home, 59-3 in their last 62 games.

NCAA Tournament bracket projections have pegged the Seminoles as high as a No. 2 seed. FSU has never won a national title in men’s basketball.

“Leonard’s team is one that always seems to find a way to win games,” said Kennedy, who led the Seminoles to the Elite Eight in 1992-93. “Look what’s already happened this season. Florida State is going to have a good shot at it (national title).”

Hamilton, in his 18th season at FSU, hasn’t shown any signs of slowing down at age 71. FSU Athletics Director David Coburn told the Democrat last week that the school is working toward a contract extension for the winningest head coach in in program history. Hamilton’s contract expires in April.

“Leonard looks like he’s 40,” Wells said and laughed.

“We are blessed to have him here. I am so proud of the type of kids he has in the program. They represent the university so well. He has done such an amazing job of putting his program together and keeping it going.”