

Leonard Hamilton, Anthony Grant And The Final Four We Missed

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It's not exactly the Final Four that Florida State's Leonard Hamilton and Dayton's Anthony Grant hoped to make back in October when college basketball practices began.

But it's one that should be celebrated nonetheless.

Hamilton and Grant make up half of the four finalists for the Werner Ladder Naismith Men's Coach of the Year Award to be presented on April 5 by the Atlanta Tipoff Club.

Only four black coaches in the award's history have won the honor, which was first presented in 1987. For its first two years the award was given to the coach of the national champion. Tubby Smith was the last black coach to win the honor way back at Kentucky in 2003. Others to win the award were Randy Ayers (Ohio State, 1991), Nolan Richardson (Arkansas, 1994) and Rod Barnes (Mississippi, 2001).

Baylor's Scott Drew and San Diego Brian Dutcher are also finalists. The award was set to coincide with the NCAA tournament's Final Four weekend April 4-6. It was very possible that Hamilton and Grant could have been leading their respective teams for a showdown in Atlanta's Mercedes-Benz Stadium on Monday with the NCAA title on the line, but the coronavirus put a stop to it all.

The ending can't erase their journeys. Grant led Dayton to a historic season. The Flyers finished on a 20-game winning streak, including a perfect 18-0 in Atlantic 10 Conference play. It matched the longest single-season win streak in program history. Their No. 3 ranking in the Associated Press Top 25 Poll also tied the 1955-56 team for the best in program history.

"He had the right mixture of talent, skills and a superstar that allowed him to captivate the imagination of the entire country," Hamilton told The Undefeated about Grant's team.

The two coaches first met when Hamilton took over as head coach at the University of Miami and was making his rounds introducing himself locally in the early 1990s. Grant was at his first job as an assistant coach at Miami Senior High School. He said Hamilton made an impression with his ability to communicate and build relationships, but most of all, "he was just a tireless worker. He hit the gym, not only our gym, but just every place in Miami."

That work ethic remains, which is how Hamilton, 71, guided Florida State to its first regular-season ACC title in program history. More program firsts followed, such as being ranked No. 4 in the final AP poll, which marked the second straight season the Seminoles finished in the top 10. That had never happened in Tallahassee, Florida, before the arrival of Hamilton, who has coached at Florida State for 18 seasons.

Smith said he viewed Hamilton as a role model when he became the first black assistant coach at Kentucky, laying the foundation for Smith to later be its first black head coach. He marvels at what Hamilton has done at what most people tag a "football school."

"You really didn't pay much attention to Florida State basketball because of its football program," said Smith, who is now the head coach at High Point University in North Carolina. "And he's made it a national powerhouse."

Neither Florida State nor Dayton began the season ranked in the AP poll. Both finished in the top five of the final AP poll, which marked the first time since the 2011-12 season that two black coaches had top-10 teams in the final rankings — when Hamilton's Seminoles were joined by Frank Haith and Missouri in accomplishing the feat.

Although the season will forever be marked with an asterisk for the way it abruptly ended, it could also be looked at as a watershed moment at Florida State, which finished 26-5, and Dayton, which ended up 29-2.

The Seminoles' leading scorer this season, sophomore guard Devin Vassell, only averaged 12.7 points per game. He declared for the NBA draft March 23 and is a projected first-rounder, by most accounts. Freshman forward Patrick Williams, who averaged 9.2 points, also declared and could possibly be taken higher than Vassell. Hamilton was able to blend them into his rotation together, get them to accept their roles, and the result was 26 wins, which tied a school record for the most regular-season victories in program history.

"This team has set a standard by which all other Florida State men's basketball teams will be judged by," said Hamilton, who added that the team had "tremendous chemistry" that allowed them to be successful despite "not necessarily being the most talented team that we've had at Florida State."

The Seminoles have arguably had better talent — or at least bigger stars — on their teams. Mfiondu Kabengele was taken with the 27th overall pick in last year's NBA draft, followed by Terance Mann at pick No. 48. Jonathan Isaac was the sixth selection and Dwayne Bacon 40th in 2017. Malik Beasley went 19th overall in 2016.

Hamilton's regular rotation went 11 players deep. That's a lot of egos to manage, but senior guard Trent Forrest said Hamilton got the team to buy into the system so much that they reveled in each other's success. During a home win over Louisville, Hamilton looked to substitute sophomore forward RaiQuan Gray and Forrest declined.

"We did that all the time last year," Forrest said. "[Hamilton] does a good job of recruiting guys who don't care about getting the credit, they just want to win."

There's a reason that the NCAA has kept Dayton as the host site for its First Four to open the tournament. Dayton has a rich basketball tradition. The Flyers were a win away from reaching the Final Four in 2014 as a No. 11 seed, and is generally viewed as a good program. Grant made them great this season. Their only two losses came to Kansas and Colorado by a combined eight points, and both games went to overtime.

"This is probably the greatest team in history of Dayton basketball," Smith said. "They won 20 straight games, they were on a roll. Like Florida State, they absolutely could have won it all."