

Florida State's Leonard Hamilton Is An Elite Recruiter, But His Real Strength Is In Educating His Players

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Leonard Hamilton grew up in the segregated south -- the son of a father who only made it to ninth grade, of a mother who never got past seventh. He was one of eight people living in a four-room house.

"I took my bath in a tin tub in a corner," Hamilton said.

All these decades later, even after years of making millions of dollars as Florida State's consistently successful men's basketball coach, Hamilton can easily, in conversation, drift back to a childhood of poverty. Physically, he's left it behind. But he still very much remembers it -- what it looked like, what it felt like, and the advice his father, an uneducated but intelligent man, provided as the key to breaking a cycle.

"My father would say, 'You have to get your education,'" Hamilton recalled. "All he preached to me, as the oldest of my siblings, was, 'You have to get your education.'"

And so Hamilton did.

He graduated high school, enrolled at Gaston Community College, then finished his degree at UT Martin while becoming the first in his family to achieve such a thing. And, believe it or not, when I got Leonard Hamilton on the phone earlier this week, more or less to discuss the momentum his program has gained thanks to winning last season's ACC regular-season title and backing it with a recruiting class that's currently ranked No. 1 in the nation, this is largely what we talked about instead.

We talked about college.

We talked about breaking cycles.

"Most kids [I recruit] are first-generation college students," Hamilton said. "You change the whole culture, and family structure, when a kid goes to college."

Hamilton neither knows nor really cares where each prospect he's secured is ranked by various recruiting services. He has no idea how many top-10 classes he's assembled in his career. But what he does know is that only two four-year players at Florida State haven't graduated in the 18 years he's been there, and that only five four-year players haven't graduated in his past 28 years as a college coach.

"My biggest reward is when I see them walk across that stage knowing that they are benefitting from the experience just like Leonard Hamilton did," he said. "If all I have is Coach of the Year awards and victories and newspaper clippings, but my kids haven't succeeded, then what have I done? So my reward is when they call me on Christmas, when they send me a Christmas card with their family picture, when they want me to be in their wedding, when they want me to be a god-parent of their child. That's important to me."

Those calls from former players still come regularly, by the way.

On holidays. On birthdays.

One recent call came from ... Michael Ojo.

"My birthday was Aug. 4 -- and I wish you could hear the message that he left me about how appreciative he was for our relationship," said Hamilton, his voice softening, making it apparent he's still coping with the tragic news that Ojo, a former four-year player at Florida State, died last week at the age of 27 after collapsing during a workout.

"I'll keep that recording forever," Hamilton added. "Every time I listen to it, I breakdown. But that's what it's all about. This kid called me on my birthday a few days before he died."

At this point in the conversation, Leonard Hamilton and I are about 20 minutes deep -- and we've still barely talked basketball. But, eventually, we got there. And, yes, Hamilton is excited about his top-ranked recruiting class highlighted by Jalen Warley, Matthew Cleveland and Bryce McGowens, each of whom is ranked in the top 35 of the Class of 2021, according to 247Sports. Also worth noting: the three guards are 6-4 (Warley), 6-5 (McGowens) and 6-6 (Cleveland). So they will someday combine to create another big backcourt at FSU, which just won the ACC with a 6-4 guard (Trent Forrest) and a 6-5 guard (MJ Walker).

This is not a coincidence.

Big guards are a priority at Florida State.

"On the defensive side, we like to take away vision," Hamilton explained. "We think playing with our hands, deflecting balls, getting steals, and taking away vision are important. And plus we switch one through five. So I'm not opposed to taking a small guard. But because we switch one through five, it makes it easier for a bigger guard to defend a post guy."

The 247Sports recruiting data base goes back to 2003. In that time, Hamilton has enrolled seven top-20 recruiting classes that have helped him run the fourth-winningest program in the ACC since the start of the 2005-2006 season. The only three ACC members that have won more in that span are Duke, North Carolina and Virginia three schools coached by men who have combined to win nine national championships.

So Hamilton is in good -- no, make that *great* -- company. And though he's had a number of teams over the years built to make the Final Four, to date, in 32 seasons as a Division I coach, Hamilton remains on the list of best coaches who have not yet advanced to the last weekend of the season.

Does that bother him?

"If all I have is Coach of the Year awards and victories and newspaper clippings, but my kids haven't succeeded, then what have I done?"

Honestly, for much of his career, it really hasn't -- mostly because all three Division I jobs Hamilton has held (Oklahoma State, Miami, Florida State) were a million miles away from competing at the top of the sport before he took over, and none of them can accurately be described as a traditional power. So never advancing to the Final Four isn't something that's bugged him much or felt like a stain.

And it's *not* a stain.

Let's make that clear.

Again, Leonard Hamilton is running the fourth-winningest program in the ACC since the start of the 2005-2006 season, trailing only Duke, North Carolina and Virginia. That's amazing. But, towards the end of our conversation, Hamilton, now 72, did acknowledge he suddenly feels like a Final Four is a missing piece.

He's been to the Elite Eight. He's won the ACC. He's won Coach of the Year awards. He's had a better career than 99.9% of the people who decide they're going to try to be basketball coaches. But, all that said, yes, now more than ever, Leonard Hamilton wants to add a Final Four to his resume.

"For me personally, I have just recently had to accept the fact that ... we owe it to my staff, to our program, to our fans, it's so important for the legacy of our program, that now I am more motivated by the Final Four than ever," Hamilton said. "It's not as much for me personally, but for the program and the players and the fans. They need to feel that sense of accomplishment.

"We have developed a winning tradition," he concluded. "Now it's important that we take that next step."