

Florida State's Leonard Hamilton Is Creating History Helping Players Reach NBA Potential

By Marc Spears

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. -- Many may think of the traditional schools such as Duke, Kansas, and Kentucky as the renowned programs that produced the top NBA players. One school that should also be in that conversation is Florida State and its head coach Leonard Hamilton.

Florida State is tied for fourth with Villanova and Washington for total draft selections over the past five years, behind only Kentucky, Duke and North Carolina according to ESPN Stats and Information. Florida State has seven draft selections since 2016, including first-rounders Patrick Williams, Devin Vassell, Mfiondu Kabengele, Jonathan Isaac and Malik Beasley.

"The public is very disrespectful of Leonard's achievements, former college basketball coach George Raveling told The Undeclared. "It could be for lack of awareness or whatever, but it's a real conundrum. How the hell can this guy do all of this and not be well known? And, here we are in 2021, and if it were a TV show, it'd be called Hidden Secrets. I don't understand. It's right there in the history books."

During the 2021 NBA Draft Thursday night, the Seminoles will have four players available: Scottie Barnes, RaiQuan Gray, M.J. Walker and Balsa Koprivica. The first Seminole chosen will account for Hamilton's 20th overall NBA Draft selection during his coaching career at Florida State, Miami and Oklahoma, according to Florida State. If Barnes is selected fifth overall by the Orlando Magic, as projected by ESPN.com, Florida State will be the only college with two top-five selections in the 2020 and 2021 NBA Drafts.

"It means that we are creating an atmosphere for them to reach their potential, Hamilton said of his Seminole players making it to the NBA. "I'm happy for them. I'm equally happy for them to graduate. The main thing is that they get to reach their potential. I am excited about kids reaching their potential and their dreams."

So what has been the key to Hamilton's players getting drafted by the NBA?

One longtime NBA scout told The Undeclared Hamilton's players are attractive to the NBA because they are athletic, play defense, have a team mentality, and they know how to win. Another scout said Hamilton fosters an environment that encourages his players to become mature and humble, a huge advantage in the NBA.

Hamilton certainly knows what his players can expect in the NBA, too, as he was the head coach of the Washington Wizards during the 2000-21 season with Michael Jordan as the team's president of basketball operations. That NBA experience helped Hamilton run his college basketball program the same way and NBA franchise is run.

"He sets up his Florida State basketball program as if it were an NBA team, which makes the transition to the NBA easy," Scottie Barnes said. "For example, for the rotational standpoint to developing our minds mentally to so scouting game plans for other teams. It helps us mature and will help the transition to the NBA and get prepared for the next level."

Kabengele, now with the Cleveland Cavaliers said: "Coach Hamilton prepared me for the NBA by telling me stories and experiences from himself and other players and what they faced. He alerted me to the little nuances of the league that I didn't know before, and that helped."

Hamilton, 72, is also one of the most successful coaches in NCAA Division I history with 579 wins over 33 seasons. He ranks 75th all-time in NCAA Division I history according to the NCAA. The only active African American NCAA Division I coach with more wins is High Point's Tubby Smith. Hamilton is the winningest coach in Florida State

men's basketball history and signed an extension through the 2024-25 season on March 1. The three-time Atlantic Coast Conference Coach of the Year has won two ACC titles and eight NCAA Tournament appearances over 19 years.

Raveling, a long-time mentor to Hamilton, believes the 72-year old Hamilton should be in the Basketball Hall of Fame. Raveling also said Hamilton does a lot behind the scenes to help African American get college basketball coaching jobs.

"Leonard has always been one of those guys who has led from behind," Raveling told *The Undefeated*. "And so as a result, I think people see him, but don't see him, and he's just continued to go about achieving success on every level. Every single program. If you look at what they were doing before he got there, he took the program to a higher level of achievement. But to tell the story of Leonard Hamilton, the coach, is to miss the overall essence of him as a person because Leonard, he's far more than a coach.

"The first thing he does is he's a leader, and the second thing he does is he's a manager, and then the third thing is that he's a coach because he's been able to lead this programs forward and to do that they have to manage the people within those systems, and the ultimate things and the coaching."

One example of Hamilton being far more than a coach is the high percentage of players that he graduates.

Ten Florida State men's basketball players graduated with either a bachelor's or master's degree in April. Hamilton has graduated 71 of 73 players at Florida State who played through their senior seasons. He also graduated 28 of 31 players at the University of Miami who played through their senior seasons.

Walker is a likely late second-round prospect in Thursday's NBA Draft, and he also earned a degree from Florida State in social sciences.

"Coach Ham is like your grandfather," Walker said. "He cares more about you off the court than on the court. He recruits guys that are talented. But he's looking more down the road and wants everyone to have successful lives. It feels like we are going to do well basketball-wise, but he is more concerned about our lives."

Hamilton is well aware that most of his players won't be playing in the NBA, and cares about their futures off the court and stays in touch with most of them. It's not uncommon for him to get a phone call when a former player is trying to make a major life decision.

"Five or six years after a kid has left you, what kind of husband, father, neighbor, what kind of citizen are you," Hamilton said. "What kind of neighbor is he? How did he benefit from his journey, or from being part of your tutelage? That's what's important. And as happy as I am, 98 percent of my players won't be playing in the NBA."

Hamilton's former players love their father-son type of relationship with the coach.

"Coach Hamilton is a man of integrity because he always does what he says he is going to do," Barnes said. "He's a father figure away from home and someone that I can always turn to no matter how far it is down my career. He generally cares about his players' futures and his willingness to help us achieve our dreams."

Said Kabengele: "Coach Ham is like a wide godfather, his outlook on the big picture made you more poised in tough times. I just saw that way he carries himself everyday makes you want to be like him because it works."

Hamilton will not be in the green room with Barnes during the NBA Draft Thursday. Although he has joined his players in the green room in the past, he says he prefers the spotlight be on the players and their families on their big night.

But as Florida State continues to send more players to the NBA, Hamilton deserves more respect for getting them prepared for the pros and for life after basketball.

“We all have a purpose in life on this earth to fulfil,” Hamilton said. ‘And in the Bible, it says when you are fulfilling the purpose that we have on earth, there is a peace of understanding that comes over you. You feel good about what you are doing every day. And that’s the way I feel. Every day, I’m at peace with what I do. And I think I’m supposed to take young people and nurture them into young adulthood. That’s the most important thing I do.”

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