

How Florida State Coach Leonard Hamilton Inspired Former Staffer Jared Lynn To Beat Cancer

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Jared Lynn already could recognize Leonard Hamilton from afar based on what he described as his distinct way of walking.

But the longtime Florida State men's basketball coach made himself even more of a dead giveaway to Lynn with what he wore on that March 6 night in Ohio. Hamilton sported a black FSU hat and a black jumpsuit of sorts, which Lynn said is often his attire when he is in public.

Lynn, one of Hamilton's graduate assistants for the last two seasons, had been almost one month removed from being diagnosed with stage four non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a type of cancer that starts in the lymphatic system. He planned that night to watch Tom House, a star basketball player for Centerville (Ohio) High at the time who is now a freshman guard for the Seminoles.

The House family invited Lynn to watch the game with them. What Lynn did not know, though, was that Hamilton and his associate head coach, Stan Jones, also were invited and coordinated with the Houses to surprise him.

Because of his cancer treatment, Lynn missed out on FSU's final home game of the regular season that Saturday. So Hamilton and Jones brought Senior Day to Lynn, giving him his commemorative spear, basketball and team awards. "I was absolutely shocked," Lynn told the Democrat. "We are midseason. There is not a lot of time outside of basketball. They really went out of their way to make time for me, which was so nice. It meant so much."

Last Friday, Hamilton received the prestigious Joe Lapchick Character Award in New York City. The Joe Lapchick Character Award Foundation explains its mission for the honor as, "committed to encouraging and promoting good character in the sport of basketball."

How Hamilton inspired Lynn to beat cancer is one of many examples why he deserved that recognition.

On April 15, Lynn learned he was cancer free. He remembers his first phone call to deliver the news going to Hamilton. Lynn credited his support system as one of the biggest reasons why he recovered. That support system included Hamilton, who continued to encourage him after his surprise trip to Ohio.

"It does make so much of a difference, having those people around you," Lynn said. "And Ham doing that for me, it really, really helped."

For Hamilton, cancer hits close to home.

"I lost my grandmother to cancer. I lost my father to cancer. My mother and both of my brothers. I know what it is like," Hamilton said. "I have tremendous respect and empathy for people who are going through what he was going through.

"So it was part of what I believed needed to be done. It was not anything that I was doing special that I thought I needed to do other than trying to have a family atmosphere where we support one another. ...

"That's what we tried to give him. It wasn't anything that we thought. It was just a reaction about what the Lapchick Award is about. Just trying to do what was right."

Leonard Hamilton supported Jared Lynn

Dr. Todd Hewitt might have saved Lynn's life.

Lynn started experiencing pain in his left hip in December but did not think enough of it to receive extensive medical attention. Hewitt, who assists the FSU men's basketball team, quickly noticed Lynn was limping and decided to take action.

What began as a precautionary examination eventually led to Lynn learning of his disease on Feb. 9.

"Honestly, that day was kind of a blur," Lynn said. "You are going through everything. You are thinking through everything. All you are thinking about is, 'Oh my gosh, am I going to die?'"

After Lynn officially left the team, he underwent six three-week cycles of chemotherapy in Cincinnati. Midway through his treatment plan, Lynn learned that he was in remission. But he still needed to complete his remaining cycles.

Not until last month did Lynn stop feeling poorly from his final round of chemo.

"The actual chemo day is where you sit in the hospital, you are hooked up to an IV, and you are getting all of the drugs put into you all day," Lynn said. "I don't remember any of those days at all, because you are so drugged up. You just try to block it out of your head. It is so rough, those days. ..."

"The chemo is what kills you. The cancer does not make you feel as bad as the chemo does."

On his worst days, Lynn felt nauseous and did not want to be around anyone. Hamilton helped him push through those tough times with his support and advice. He even gave Lynn some suggestions that he believed would help, like cutting out sugar and carbs.

"He was trying to help me nonstop throughout it, which I'm so thankful for," Lynn said. "I could tell that I was always in his thoughts. He said his wife had his prayer group praying for me, which I appreciated. It was very thoughtful." Maybe the biggest impact Hamilton had on Lynn came during one of his postgame press conferences last season.

FSU had just defeated Clemson, 81-80, despite being without several key players in the Feb. 15 game. An emotional Hamilton started his postgame interview with the media with a heartfelt tribute to Lynn. He credited Lynn – who had recently shared the news of his status with the team – for their inspired play against the Tigers.

"To get that love publicly meant a lot to me," Lynn said. "I know my parents appreciated it so much. It was so nice to hear."

And Hamilton's support didn't end there.

"We just wanted him to know that we were thinking about him," Hamilton said. "He was part of our family. It was only the natural thing to do, because we cared about the youngster. He worked his fanny off for us."

"And at the most vulnerable time in his life, we wanted to be there for him to support him. So there wasn't any thought process. It was just, 'We've got to see him, because he is going to be there.'"

"And that is what we do. That is what families do. Family will support each other like that. He means an awful lot to us."

Hamilton 'overwhelmed' after receiving Joe Lapchick Character Award

Stan Jones didn't seem surprised to hear about the recommendations Hamilton gave Lynn.

It's not the first time he heard about Hamilton offering advice to someone with cancer.

“My wife, five or six years ago, she went through breast cancer,” Jones told the Democrat. “I’ve heard those same conversations with me and her, making sure that she was OK.

“To know that he was doing that with Jared – he lost two of his sibling brothers, he lost his father to cancer and he is a very health-conscious person anyway. So he researches. He studies.

“He wants to try to make everything as positive as he can for the people that he works with, the people that he loves, family and players. That is just a huge, extended family for him.

“I don’t know how he puts the man hours in for all of the people he tries to help. And how it never seems to wear him down.”

Hamilton has received a long list of awards throughout his 34 seasons as a college basketball coach, including Big East Coach of the Year (1995, 1999), ACC Coach of the Year (2009, 2012, 2020), National Coach of the Year from various entities (1995, 2000, 2009, 2018) and the Ben Jobe National Minority Coach of the Year (2021).

Now, Hamilton has a reputable award that recognizes who he is off the hardwood. Those who have been around him know it is well deserved.

“I was honored to be mentioned in the same sentence with Joe Lapchick,” Hamilton said. “If you know anything about his career, he has always been a guy fighting for what he thought was right, for representing sometimes the underserved, sometimes the disadvantaged, for women’s rights, for inclusion of all people in different areas. ...

“Nobody starts out as a coach saying, ‘I want to win the Joe Lapchick Character Award.’ That is not on the table. So to look back on my career and realize we have done something similar to what Mr. Lapchick has done, it is really an honor, a privilege, and I’m kind of overwhelmed by the fact that we are at this point where this came out of nowhere. “I think about all the coaches that I have worked with and players that I have worked with, that have created this culture that allowed us to be at this point and to accept an award of this nature.”