

Florida State's Big Men Ready For A Big Season

By Jim Crosby
Unconquered Magazine

Sometimes when you step back and survey the sports landscape some very interesting facts emerge. In the case of Florida State Seminole basketball one of the relevant measures of the program's recent success can be found in this nugget of information.

Under Coach Leonard Hamilton's leadership the Seminoles have become the third winningest program in the ACC since the 2005-06 season with 196 wins. Coach Hamilton says, "That shows we are making progress, but as true competitors we are not satisfied with being third."

The Seminoles have even higher goals in mind and they are taking aim in a "bigger" way. This bigness comes not only from the lofty aspirations, but in the size of the weapons they have to wage these roundball battles.

Three of these "big" weapons are seven-footers. Three on the same team is very unusual in the college basketball ranks. In fact, according to Associate Head Coach Stan Jones, this is fairly rare in society. He points out that "only 3% of the world is 6'6" or bigger."

Fighting the backboard battles from the heights for FSU will be: 6th-year redshirt graduate Kiel Turpin (7'0") back from a medical rehab season; Junior Michael Ojo (7'1") from Nigeria; and the tallest player ever to don a Seminole uniform, 7'3" Junior Boris Bojanovsky from Slovak Republic.

While pleased with this unprecedented success in recruiting "big guys" Coach Hamilton is quick to point out: "We must have the right complement of players to give us the opportunity to be successful. We want to be versatile enough to play big when we have to and to play small when we have to." Obviously none of the Seminole opponents will be able to play as big as they will.

Why is that? How has the current coaching staff been able to coax these big guys into coming to Florida State?

"As a staff we have developed a formula that works in the development of big guys. So we are able to promote, market and sell this success story and the big players find it appealing," Hamilton said.

Bojanovsky is a player who crossed not only states, but continents to play basketball at FSU. "Coach Hamilton came to see me practice. They were playing some big men, so I knew I would get to play. I definitely liked the coaches after I met them," he said.

When Bojanovsky said that Hamilton came to see him practice it wasn't like the Coach jumped in a car and drove a few miles. Coach Ham boarded a plane and flew to the Canary Islands, a distance of 4,080 miles.

While this might have been an unusual recruiting coup it was not atypical. Coach Jones recalls "a former player of pro caliber had seen Boris over in Europe, called Coach and said he thought Boris could be a good player," he added. "Coach Hamilton is one of those guys who when someone calls to recommend a player he doesn't take that idly. He will go see him play."

So why isn't everybody overcrowding the field for these giant players? Coach Jones says, "Sometimes in recruiting, these big players have not totally had their talent emerge to the surface of the game yet. They are still in, not only a growing cycle, but a confidence-building cycle. So some coaches will look at these guys and say they are not very good right now."

Often the key to getting these diamonds-in-the-rough and having them sparkle is simply patience. "We are patient with some of the big guys. Sometimes people try to evaluate them like they would a smaller, more agile guy

who might be progressing a little faster. But we have been very pleased with the way our big guys have progressed and moved our program along,” said Hamilton.

In addition to patience, success with these or any recruits requires vision. This was evident in the signing of Michael Ojo who had only played about 15 games of basketball in his life. It is a well-known story that he had not even dunked a basketball because they only had one basket in his home town in Nigeria and didn’t want to take a chance on breaking it and leaving them basketball-less.

“Coach Hamilton looked at him and saw his strength, ability to run, his ability to catch and his intelligence level. He realized that Ojo could be a guy who could help us win games down the line,” said Coach Jones.

Another example of Hamilton’s pulling off a coup, because of his willingness to follow up on every lead, was Bernard James. He was playing in a Military Tournament that was using ACC refs. One of the refs was impressed with James and notified three or four ACC coaches. Only Hamilton followed up.

As they say, the rest is history. James became a shining star at Florida State not only because of his ability and character, but the courage he had displayed as a Staff Sergeant in the Air Force 9th Security Force Squadron where he deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan.

When it comes to the patience factor Hamilton and Jones come by it honestly. “When we went to Miami they hadn’t even had a basketball program for 13 years. We had to develop a program without having all the amenities or the most talent in the league,” said Hamilton. The Hurricanes went from 0-18 to tying---Connecticut--- for the most victories in their final five seasons.

Hamilton and Jones have now coached together for 19 years. Hamilton remembers hiring him from a high school coaching position in Jackson, Mississippi. “I was really very patient in searching for an assistant. I wanted someone who understood the importance of developing young players from a fundamental aspect.”

The ability of Jones to develop proper footwork, shooting, catching and passing the basketball has been invaluable in helping the Seminole’s big men sharpen their game.

Hamilton also points out the work of Strength and Conditioning Coach Michael Bradley who is starting his 13th season at Florida State. “Coach Bradley has probably been as instrumental as anyone in our success. He helps them, not only develop their physical bodies, but the mentality that it takes to get in top condition.”

There have been dramatic examples of Bradley’s influence. Kiel Turpin, who grew 8-inches between his junior and senior years in high school and came in weighing 206 is up to 240. Another example of superior conditioning that helped make him a star was Al Thornton who added muscle and weight. He came in at 187 lbs and left weighing 227.

Teamwork is one of the most important ingredients in success for a basketball team. Not only the players but the coaches must work together as one unit. As Florida State prepares for an even tougher road to ACC riches, with Louisville joining all the tradition-rich schools in the league, the big pieces of that puzzle continue to come together in Tallahassee.

With the 18th win this season Coach Leonard Hamilton will become the All-Time Career Leader in wins at Florida State. Don’t expect him to take time to acknowledge the honor. He will be too busy coaching the team and its big guys to even greater heights.