

The Victory Lap That FSU's Leonard Hamilton Won't Get To Take This Year

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TALLAHASSEE — Someone would have asked about the church, and the crowded room would have grown silent. Leonard Hamilton would keep the story short, because that's his way, but he would dutifully recall the church located 50 yards from his childhood home and the nights on the front steps singing gospel songs with the choir in Gastonia, N.C., in the 1950s.

Later, they would ask about the early years as an assistant at Kentucky. The challenge of being the first black basketball coach at a program that pretty much set the standard for resisting integration in sports in the 1960s.

Chances are, this is how the Final Four news conference would have sounded if the games had been played as scheduled in Atlanta this weekend. With any luck, Florida State would have been there. With any justice, Leonard Hamilton would have been the star.

He has been coaching for nearly 50 years, a fixture on the periphery of college basketball's grandest stages. He has been a head coach in the Big Eight, the Big East, the NBA and now the ACC. Always respected, but rarely celebrated. Hamilton, now 71, came into March with a 26-5 record and the ACC regular-season championship in his hip pocket.

Finally, this was his time.

Until it wasn't.

On the list of heartaches caused by the coronavirus pandemic, the cancellation of the NCAA basketball tournament is fittingly near the bottom. And yet, if you know anything about Leonard Hamilton, there is a certain cruelty to the timing.

The Seminoles were a good team, seemingly getting better by the hour. In the final Associated Press poll of the regular season, Florida State was ranked No. 4 and likely heading to Tampa for first-round games as a No. 1 or 2 seed.

Dick Vitale later tweeted that FSU would have been his pick to win the national championship, and Hamilton was his choice for national coach of the year.

Of course, we'll never know for sure how March Madness would have played out.

But I'm pretty sure America would have fallen for Hamilton.

"He's the mother hen of all mother hens of college coaches," said FSU assistant Stan Jones, who has worked beside Hamilton for 24 years. "He cares nothing about the spotlight, he cares nothing about getting accolades, he couldn't tell you his overall record. He doesn't think in those terms. When he first got the job here, his wife made him bring down the NCAA watches and championships rings he got at Kentucky, and the Coach of the Year awards and display them in the cabinet. He didn't even know what boxes they were in.

"I tell every parent during the recruiting process, 'Your son may not come play for us, but within five minutes of talking to Coach, you'll feel very confident that you can trust him with your child.'"

It's hard to believe Hamilton has been at FSU for 18 seasons, and stunning to realize he's won three ACC Coach of the Year awards to go along with his two Big East Coach of the Year awards. Mind you, this has all happened while coaching against legends such as John Thompson, Lou Carnesecca, Jim Boeheim, Mike Krzyzewski and Roy Williams.

The difference, of course, is that Hamilton has never won a national championship as a head coach. Never even reached the Final Four. But he has also coached at one school (Miami) that didn't even have a basketball program six years before he arrived and another school (FSU) that used to consider basketball as an appetizer to spring football practice.

Every coach talks about academics and character and happiness, but somehow it doesn't feel like a sales pitch from Hamilton. Maybe it's because he grew up dirt poor, and understands how rare opportunities can be. Maybe it's because he was the first African-American player at Tennessee-Martin and the first black head coach in the Big Eight while at Oklahoma State.

Maybe it's just who he is.

"When I hang up my whistle, I want to look back and see what kind of neighbors, husbands, fathers, citizens these guys have become," Hamilton said in his office last month. "What are they doing with their lives? Yes, I want to win basketball games, but if that's all we have done then how are we going to look at ourselves in the mirror and feel we have fulfilled our obligation as coaches?"

He pauses for a moment as if alarmed by his own seriousness, then quietly laughs.

"I just hope and pray we win enough games along the way that I can continue doing what I love."

By now, the way he has won is familiar but no less impressive. He's never been a head coach at a program that is automatically going to attract five-star recruits, so Hamilton has perfected the art of building deep rosters.

He finds players willing to sacrifice individual glory for the sake of winning, and then he uses a dozen players to wear down teams that are top-heavy with superstars. It's a fine line to walk when you're talking about recruiting. Players have to be good enough to survive in the nation's best conferences, but also unselfish enough to know they won't be averaging 30 minutes of playing time.

That's how Mfiondu Kabengele can play two years at FSU without ever starting a game, and still end up in the NBA. That's why Wyatt Wilkes spent last summer teaching incoming freshman Patrick Williams the ins and outs of Hamilton's system, even while knowing it would cost him playing time. That how the Seminoles have won nine consecutive overtime games. That's why FSU was the only team in the ACC with more than 10 players topping 250 minutes of playing time this season.

"I don't know how the coaches do it," said Williams, who didn't start a game as a freshman but was fourth on the team in scoring. "Coming out of high school you want to go somewhere that you can play immediately. You have to switch your mindset here. You're no longer the guy who is getting the ball all the time, so how do I make a role for myself? The coaches teach us to play like a star no matter what your role is. You could be the defensive stopper or the guy hitting threes from the corner, and by the time you're through here you'll be a great player."

He's not a screamer, and he's not a butt kisser. You won't often see him hobnobbing with the guys on pre-game shows, or showing up on the *SportsCenter* highlights because he kicked a chair. And more than 95 percent of the kids he has recruited have graduated from FSU if they stayed on campus for at least four years.

His humor is subtle, his dance steps are dated and his office is more like a living room than a CEO's refuge. Ask him about his singing voice, and he references the psalm about making a joyful noise. He makes an awful noise, he says, but there is joy in his heart.

And that's how I choose to remember Leonard Hamilton in 2020.

Not as a coach who may have missed out on the chance of a lifetime, but rather a man who made the most of a lifetime.

"My journey has been different from some others. I didn't go from a great program as an assistant to another great program as a head coach. I have been in places that needed work, retooling, developing, and that's what I enjoy doing," he said. "I don't concern myself with recognition. What good does that do? The types of things that please me are not things that may please other people. I don't need to be patted on the back. I just want to be true to myself and to the parents who send their kids to me."

Amen, Leonard.