

Atlantic Coast Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Friday, March 12, 2021

Greensboro, North Carolina, USA

Florida State Seminoles

Leonard Hamilton

Postgame Press Conference



Florida State 69, North Carolina 66

LEONARD HAMILTON: Not going to lie, it was a tremendously challenging team for us because of their ability to always have two big, strong, physical guys in the post. There was a time in the second half where I thought that they just were playing ping-pong in the lane -- not ping-pong, but volleyball in the lane with every shot that was missed.

So it was a tremendous challenge for our guys to keep the ball away from them. But we got -- there was a part there in the second half where I thought they defended a little better, and we got some consecutive stops and we were able to move the ball and get some timely scores.

They overplay you and pressure you as well as anybody we've played, and it was challenging game for our guys. It seemed as though we made enough plays, got enough stops there late in the game, hit enough free throws to pull away a very important victory.

Q. Do you think your guys maybe learned a lesson from the last time you played those guys, the way you guys battled back after they took the lead?

LEONARD HAMILTON: Well, there's no doubt that the second half in the last -- in the game that we lost to them, they came back with a lot more energy. They did a much better job of executing their offense, and they pounded us on the boards. They had 20 offensive rebounds. I don't know what the rebounding total was today, but I think we kind of neutralized them.

Well, not really. They got 21 offensive rebounds tonight. Thank God, they didn't get 22. But this is a very challenging team. They keep you off your guard because they're so big, strong, physical and athletic. They have a knack for rebounding, and that's the strength of this team.

But we got enough rebounds to pull away, but gosh, I didn't realize that we really did a nice job. We held them to 42 rebounds. (Laughs.)

Q. I wanted to ask you about your three-point defense. It seemed like Carolina was able to hit some big time shots in the second half.

LEONARD HAMILTON: Well, once again, Walton is such a tremendous shooter that it's a challenge when he hits his hand, he gets us off so fast, he's so accurate. But what did they end up shooting the second half from three? Let me see.

Wow, they were 5 of 11 from three. Gosh, that will get you beat. Like I said earlier, though, it was one of those games where guys had to step up. I thought Balsa getting 11 rebounds, 17 points, and four blocked shots, you know, they were all timely. Gave us a little breathing room. In other words, there were a couple of times that the game could have gone the other way, but for those timely blocks.

I thought we got to the free-throw line a little better the second half than we did the first half. We hit some free throws. And we had some guys make some big shots there. Calhoun's three was very, very important. Scottie's pushing and finishing at the basket, I thought was very, very important. There was a lot of guys stepped up that gave us the opportunity to come away with a victory.

Whenever you play against a team as talented as Carolina, it's a grind, and we were fortunate enough tonight to make a couple plays there toward the end that gave us a chance to win.

Q. I wanted to ask your reaction to teams like Duke and Virginia being knocked out due to COVID this close to the NCAA Tournament.

LEONARD HAMILTON: Well, I've told our guys all along, you have to prepare yourself for the unexpected. This is a different kind of year. It just shows that regardless of what you're doing, you've got to be a little lucky. Regardless of

how much you're washing your hands, wearing masks, practicing all the safety rules and regulations that we've been practicing all year long, and then you come up there at the end and something unfortunately happens.

You really don't even know where it came from and how it happened. That's just the nature of what we're dealing with. This is one of those years where we've just got to be grateful and prepare yourself for the unexpected and hope that you're not affected by it, and if you're not affected by it, then you've got to consider yourself very fortunate.

Q. Can you talk about Anthony Polite especially on the defensive end as well as the big three he hit in front of the bench to give you guys the lead?

LEONARD HAMILTON: Well, there's no doubt that Anthony -- I think he got hurt there in the first half a little bit. He turned his ankle, and that was a big three that he made there, late there in the second half. We really needed that one because the game was kind of in doubt there. I think we might have been coming back from a little deficit.

It gave us a little breathing room, not much. But in a game like this, three points is a huge lead for you to have when you're playing against a team that's capable of scoring points in bunches like Carolina.

But Anthony, I thought did a great job defensively. I thought he held his own. In the first half, his rebounding was important for us. I thought he might have had four or five rebounds there in the first half. I can't say enough about the contributions he made. We had everybody making plays in this particular game. We needed everybody keeping the ball alive because this game could have gone either way.

Q. Scottie had 11, 5, and 4, but how important was his defense down the stretch over those final couple minutes?

LEONARD HAMILTON: No doubt. We did a very nice job getting the stops. I think they might have scored one out of the last eight possessions, I believe, something like that, and we were defending very well. Those long arms and contested shots I thought were very, very important to us down the stretch.

Q. What do you want to see from this team heading into tomorrow night against Georgia Tech?

LEONARD HAMILTON: I want to be ahead.

No, this is a scrappy team. I mean, they have exceeded everybody's expectations. They're tough. They execute

very well. They've got the Player of the Year and the defensive Player of the Year on the same team. I believe Alvarado was defensive Player of the Year, correct?

Q. Yes, sir.

LEONARD HAMILTON: Okay. And Wright was Player of the Year, right?

Q. Yes, correct.

LEONARD HAMILTON: There's no doubt that they bring a lot of talent to the table. They play a different brand of zone defense, and they are as good a solid man-to-man defensive team as we'll face all year. We got our hat handed to us at their place, and we've got a tremendous amount of respect for them. And we know we need to be at our best in order to win tomorrow.

Q. Turnovers were a pretty big part of why this game was as close as it was, why UNC was able to get back into the game in the second half. Do you attribute that to the matchup issues, the size difference that you mentioned before? And how can the team get better at playing against similar teams heading into the tournament?

LEONARD HAMILTON: Well, I just think that we both play aggressive man-to-man defense. We've got long-armed athletes that get deflections and steals, and they forced us into some turnovers, we forced them into some. That's the nature of teams that play a very aggressive man-to-man style of defense.

I thought we defended ourselves pretty well. We defended them. We didn't get enough -- we didn't force enough turnovers. They only had 12. Looked like to me we had 8 -- is it 18? A lot of that is because they're very, very good defensively. And then we made some poor decisions. But a lot of that is because North Carolina is known for their pressure defense.

Q. Did you give any consideration to not wanting to play today in light of the Virginia news? I know what you've said about this is the world we live in, but did it cause you any hesitation about playing?

LEONARD HAMILTON: Are you serious?

Q. Just like the risk of the NCAA Tournament kind of thing that Virginia has talked about.

LEONARD HAMILTON: Excuse me? I mean, in other words, these kids have made such a tremendous sacrifice all year -- and our kids have been tremendous. For me to

not want to play because of somebody else's unfortunate challenge, I thought would be tremendously unfair and disrespectful to the ACC and to the team, North Carolina, who wanted to play, and for the sacrifices that our players have made.

I mean, give me a reason why I should even consider that, just so I won't be disrespectful to that question.

Q. I'm only asking in light of the certainty that's now for Virginia with the NCAA Tournament, not that you should or shouldn't --

LEONARD HAMILTON: But what does that have to do with us?

Q. Well, I was just asking if it caused you any pause. Clearly it didn't. That's all I wanted to know.

LEONARD HAMILTON: I mean, should it? I want to understand why you think that's relevant to the situation. I don't want to disrespect you, so just for my benefit and maybe for everybody else on the line, maybe it might help us all understand why you feel that that's a possibility that should have been under consideration.

Q. I'm not saying it should have been, sir, I just was wondering if it caused you -- just if you did, sorry.

LEONARD HAMILTON: Okay. I understand. You just asked a question.

Anybody else?

Q. After the game at Chapel Hill and the game with Notre Dame and how the team kind of faltered at times when it got tough, how pleasing was it tonight to see them rise to the occasion?

LEONARD HAMILTON: Well, we had some challenges that we probably didn't say a whole lot about. M.J. didn't practice before the Pittsburgh game. Scottie hadn't practiced before the Pittsburgh game because they had little ankle turns, a little tendonitis that most players have. We went through a period there where Polite wasn't practicing, only playing, M.J. was only playing. Scottie missed a game or two and then Malik.

So we just kind of got out of rhythm. We didn't talk a lot about it because I didn't want to make any excuses. Well, to be honest with you, I didn't think we were as sharp as we should have been coming into toward the end of the season.

And then we're still growing in terms of learning how to

prepare ourselves mentally, emotionally to play for a championship. And I thought that we didn't respond appropriately to the -- the right way to approach the Notre Dame game. And then you've got to give Notre Dame credit, they probably played the best game of the year for them, and that was a bad combination. But we're learning from each time we falter. I think we're growing up.

This team has the ability to bounce back, and I like where we are. It's not because of anything other than that's part of the growth, the maturity that it takes to continue to keep getting your program better and better.

Q. They were one of six in the final minute and 45 minutes. Could you just talk a little bit about the clutchness there of the defense?

LEONARD HAMILTON: Well, I thought that our whole team stepped up and turned it up a notch from a defensive standpoint. They gave us a chance to get some stops, and I thought probably was the determining factor in the game. And they had some good shots. They had several shots there in the lane where they came up a little short.

And we've done that a lot this year ourselves, but I thought we contested shots, we were physical inside, we were at least challenging them, and I thought that had a lot to do with it. But this is one of those games where you look back and you point toward that last part, ending of the game, but there was a lot of good plays that led up to that. That's why I'm so proud of the effort that our players gave.

Q. How difficult is it to play a team a third time after already playing them twice?

LEONARD HAMILTON: Well, that's kind of part of what you expect when you play in a conference like the ACC. I mean, you expect that. I mean, that's the way it is. You don't worry about it. You don't give it a whole lot of thought. That's just the challenge of playing in the conference. You play against really good teams that prepare themselves very well and are loaded with talent, that are very well-coached. It's just a challenge and you have to prepare yourself appropriately.

Q. You've played Georgia Tech twice, but I'm wondering to what degree does their defense when they go with the 1-3-1 complicate your preparation and for your guys to be ready for that tomorrow night.

LEONARD HAMILTON: Well, there's no doubt in my opinion they probably -- I thought that the job that they did was phenomenal. I thought Josh being picked wherever they were, and for him to come out and lose the first two games and then be where he is now for the top full season



in the ACC, that says a lot about the quality of his leadership and his coaching staff, keeping those kids together. And they seem to have been getting better and better with each game.

The execution of their game plans have been just tremendous, and then when you watch them play, they're giving every ounce of ability -- effort that they have in their bodies. And what can you say about the little man, defensive Player of the Year? No one would have thought that Wright would have been the Player of the Year. That says a lot about their ability to develop kids and to have a system that takes advantage of who they are.

They play seven, maybe eight players most of the year, and I'm sure they've had the same aches and pains that most of us have had. But for them to gut it out and be playing for the championship game says a lot about the coaching staff and the fantastic job that they've done and a lot about the character of the players on the team.

Q. Everything paused before you got anything going, you came out to Greensboro, and the world changed and everything stopped. To move forward to the championship game, just what you can say about this past year, what it's done for you as a coach and what it means to you that these kids get to play these games moving forward.

LEONARD HAMILTON: Well, I have to give the NCAA, the ACC, and our players, the universities, the schools that participate in the ACC a tremendous amount of credit for being on top of all the protocols, all the testing. And the leadership that we've gotten has been tremendous. And the sacrifices the players have had to -- just cutting down on the social activities, staying in their own little unique bubble, where they eat, where they sleep, where they go, who they associate with, it's been a lot of sacrifice on everybody's part. And the leadership that has come from the ACC, obviously you have to tip your hat to them.

So to be here playing for the championship game is somewhat rewarding, but we don't want to start taking any bows now. We missed out on this opportunity last year, and we want to make sure we go tomorrow and prepare to see that we can come away with a victory.

Q. As you look at tonight's stat line, was the fact of -- Carolina has a bunch of seven-footers, and the fact that you outscored them 36-4 in the paint or the fact that you held Carolina to only 24 points in the paint with all that talent in the big spots?

LEONARD HAMILTON: Well, to be very honest with you, it was a lot of different tactics that went into the game

tonight. I'm just proud of the fact that we were able to gut it out, get the necessary stops, make the plays and hit the free throws that gave us a chance to win. When you play against a team like Carolina, you can say it's the rebound, you can say it's the defense, you can say it's the free throws. But it's the combination of a lot of things because they're a great team, well-coached. I thought they executed very well. We just had a few more positive plays than they did tonight.

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