

Atlantic Coast Conference Men's Basketball Championship

Tuesday, March 11, 2025

Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

Spectrum Center

Florida State Seminoles Coach Leonard Hamilton Jamir Watkins

Postgame Press Conference



Syracuse 66, Florida State 62.

LEONARD HAMILTON: I thought Syracuse started the game with an extreme amount of energy, and as the game started, I could just tell that they really, really wanted to win this game. That's a credit to the coaching staff and the team for getting in the mindset that it takes to go into a tournament like the ACC and be successful. It kind of knocked us back on our heels a little bit.

Obviously their plan was to drive the ball and take us off the dribble, and they were successful with that, and we did a poor job, I thought, containing the dribble in the first half.

We got down by 16, and then I thought our guys kind of came alive a little bit. We put some different combinations on the floor. I think we had about three freshmen out there at one time, which is not something that we've been accustomed to doing. I thought they responded very well, were much more aggressive, and played with a lot more desperation during that period, and we were very fortunate to put ourselves in a position to have a chance to win the game.

I thought we made some ill-advised mistakes. I thought we acted like a team that wasn't quite as experienced as we really are. But I'm proud of our team. I thought they gave tremendous effort. I thought the game could have got away from us. But it shows a little bit about the character and the maturity and the progress they've made during the course of the year.

We never like to lose a game in a tournament like this. It takes away all your opportunities. But I've got to give Syracuse the credit because I thought that they were extremely prepared, played with a lot of desperation, a lot

of intensity, and they were a little bit better than we were today.

Q. Jamir, talk about the rally, you cut it to three. How confident were you you could still win the game even when you were down 16?

JAMIR WATKINS: I think we had a lot of young guys in, and we just was going hard, fighting. I think that's one thing we hold our hats on is fighting back. We kind of dug ourselves in a hole in the first half, but I'm proud of us for fighting back and cutting the lead down.

Q. Jamir, it felt like you went quiet for a bit and then all of a sudden there was this burst of energy and next thing you know, they couldn't keep you out of the paint, they couldn't keep you off the boards. What happened in the second half to get you lit up again?

JAMIR WATKINS: I felt like we got off to a slow start in the first half. We weren't moving the ball as we normally do, and it kind of led to us digging ourselves in a hole.

In the second half, I just felt like myself and a couple other guys that get downhill, low, we just needed that burst out of each other, and we talked about it in the halftime.

Q. Jamir, what's the greatest lesson you've learned from Hamilton over the last couple seasons?

JAMIR WATKINS: I would say just to stay humble and not to put too much pressure on yourself. Basketball is a childhood game that we all enjoy playing, that we all grew up playing, not to put too much pressure on yourself. And it starts really off the court, getting academics done and stuff like that. That's way more important than basketball. Really just that.

Q. Jamir, you decided to come back after testing the waters last off-season. How beneficial was your extra year at FSU for you?

JAMIR WATKINS: I believe it was real beneficial. I think I learned a lot from the new guys that we have, a lot of young guys. They taught me a lot of things. Transfers,



they taught me a lot. Really coming back, I just wanted to graduate and pick Coach Ham's brain a little bit, along with the rest of the staff, and just help me for the future.

Q. Jamir, over the last month with Coach Ham announcing he was going to step down after the season, what's that been like for you guys, and have you noticed any difference in Coach Ham, or is he still coaching the same way he's always coached you?

JAMIR WATKINS: I think Coach Ham is always going to coach the way he coaches no matter what. I think it changed our mindset a little bit just knowing that we've got to put it on the line for Coach Ham, along with doing it for ourselves.

I think us coming together as a new group, we've got 10 new guys, so we all just want to put forth our best effort.

Q. Jamir, you've known this moment was coming at some point, that it would be the end for Coach Ham. What did he tell you guys in the locker room afterward, and what did you guys say to him?

JAMIR WATKINS: I would say Coach Ham is a selfless guy, so he doesn't want anything to be about himself. He just told us to go out there and play hard and just be the best version of yourself.

Q. Coaching for as long as you have, what has been the best thing that being a head coach over all these years has brought you?

LEONARD HAMILTON: I think cause of my upbringing and the emphasis that my family insisted that I put on getting my degree, I wasn't thinking about professional basketball. I was thinking about setting the table for my brothers and sisters I adopted, Willie, Barry and Pam, and my other brother John, he was too old for me to adopt. They went to college, they married people who went to college, and their kids went to college. So me getting my education changed the whole culture of my family.

Most of the guys that we recruited over the years, and it's a lot of them, they were first-generation college students. Most of the time most of them were the first person to go to college in their family. I've never lost sight of that, and I've made it an emphasis wherever I've been.

I was at University of Miami for 10 years, and we had three kids that didn't graduate, and I think I've been 23 years at Florida State. So in the 33 years I think I've had maybe four or five kids not graduate. That is probably the biggest satisfaction I've received, just knowing that we've created an atmosphere that youngsters I think will have an

opportunity to be successful in life.

One of the greatest moments for me is normally when they walk across the stage and President Thrasher will always have their diploma and a basketball. He would always throw them a basketball and hand them their papers, and that was always a fun time for me.

But I try to tell our players -- I was almost embarrassed last Saturday when I walked in the locker room and they all had shirts on with my picture on the front of it. I told them, I don't know quite how to deal with this because I don't want it to be about me. I want it to be about the name on the front of their real jersey. I want them to go out and play for Seminole Nation and represent them. And I think our kids did a really good job of that against SMU, even though we probably was the underdogs going into that game.

I just want these guys to grow and mature and have a better life. Probably if you asked -- all 380 schools -- in the locker room, how many of you guys want to play in the NBA, you'd probably have 95 percent of them that will raise their hand. Well, you've only got about 550, maybe 600 jobs for everybody in the world. So that percentage goes down a lot. But that's not what they think. You have walk-ons that think they've got a chance to go to the NBA.

So that's the mindset of these youngsters. You have to realistically at some point bring them down to earth and just be realistic with them so they can have a better way of life. It helped me, and that's probably my biggest motivation.

Q. 23 years ago when you were hired, you talked about what you wanted to accomplish at the university. As you walked off the court the last time tonight in your home state, how do you feel about everything you did over those two-plus decades?

LEONARD HAMILTON: Well, I'm going to have to let someone else evaluate that. I've done the very best I could. That's part of my makeup. Regardless of what circumstances I've been dealing with, I've always wanted to do the very best I could with the ability that God has blessed me with, and I've lived my life by that.

I'm comfortable that I've given all I have, and I hope people appreciate it and I hope they feel that we've left it in pretty good shape.

But I'll let someone else judge my work because I did the very best I could.

Q. You mentioned being here. How much of a full-circle moment is it to have your last game as a

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coach 25 miles away from your hometown?

LEONARD HAMILTON: Everyone asks me those kind of questions. I feel like maybe something must be wrong with me because I really try to stay focused on just preparing for the game. I don't call a lot of relatives. I don't answer the phone when some of my friends call wanting tickets.

I just try to stay focused because that's my responsibility.

The jobs that I've had over the years, they've all needed a little fixing up, with the exception of Kentucky. That was job maintaining because they had such history. But Oklahoma State hadn't been to the postseason tournament in 27 years. Miami was without basketball for 13 years, and Florida State. So I've never had the luxury of all those other mindsets. Every day for me has been a workday and trying to do what my father told me, don't let anybody outwork me and don't make any excuses.

When you have that kind of mindset and you grow up with that -- see, a lot of folks want to make progress, but they don't embrace the process. There's so much learning, so much growing, so much confidence in the process that the process becomes what I focus on, and I worry about the progress at the end of the day.

If your process is correct and you do the very best you can and you handle it that way, then you're not really in control of the progress and what level you make. You just have to do the very best you can with what you can control, and that's your focus and your effort.

Q. With all the emphasis you put on getting an education, as you depart Florida State, do you feel college basketball is in a good place, and if not, why not?

LEONARD HAMILTON: You know the answer to that, but if you're going to ask me a question, I'm going to have to give you an answer.

You'll probably have 3,000 kids put their name in the portal. Somewhere close to 40 percent of those kids who are in the portal, because they had scholarships at certain places, won't get a scholarship offer. So what's the percentage of that -- somebody tell me. What's 40 percent of 300? Come on.

Okay, so that's 1,200, right? That's what we're talking about. Times five is what? So in five years we've going to have 6,000 kids without having an opportunity to get their education. 85 percent of those kids are probably going to be African-American or Black kids who cannot afford not to get their education.

Now, there was a time when if you didn't have the right graduation rate, you couldn't play in the NCAA Tournament. Now, I haven't heard anybody talk about academics in the last three or four years. It's all been about the other things that we're dealing with.

I am concerned about what are those kids supposed to do, and what are we as administrators and coaches supposed to do when we're creating this type of challenge for guys to overcome, and everybody has been led that the grass is always greener on the other side.

Just having the opportunity to make those mistakes is something that I think we could possibly have avoided, but I'm sure that the framers or whoever came up with this philosophy and what we're dealing with had a better way.

But I'm concerned academically are we moving forward or are we moving backwards.

Q. You mentioned the jobs you had, every day had to be a workday. Every day doesn't have to be a workday now. What's next for you?

LEONARD HAMILTON: I have a lot of things in mind, no doubt about that. I'm probably going to do some ministry, and I'll probably do something educational. Probably do some humanitarian things that I'm interested in getting involved with.

I'm hoping that I'll be able to mentor some young coaches because I've had so many people help me along the way. I was very fortunate to work for Lake Kelly my first job, and it was just such a blessing because he was such a fine man. I learned how to treat kids, how to treat people, and in a classy way.

Obviously going to Kentucky, learning how to run, learning how to be involved with a top program, then having the opportunity to go to Oklahoma State and Miami. Those things have always been challenges that I've embraced.

But I'm sure I might have some challenges missing the game. But I'm going to be okay because I know I've done the very best I could with what God has blessed me with.

But I told my wife, I'm going to take voice lessons. I'm going to learn how to play the piano. I'm going to learn how to play a guitar.

Now, I'm probably going to have to move into the garage (laughter), but I'm sure I'll find something. But I'm not going to -- I'm going to plan it out. I'm not going to rush into anything. I'm going to think things through. I just want



to find a way to contribute to some way of helping people who are less fortunate who just need help.

I used to have two mentors in John Thompson and George Raveling. Whenever anybody got in a tough spot of something I hadn't dealt with as a head coach, I would always call them, and they would impart wisdom on me before I did something stupid. I hope that I could be that mentor to some other coaches, as well.

Q. After they hit the free throws to go up four, there's .9 seconds left, you guys are inbounding the ball and you're still trying to tell the guys where to go on that play. Is that just because you're not ready to be done or is that because you wanted to win this game that bad?

LEONARD HAMILTON: I was focused -- I'm not talking about the future. I'm in the moment. I was hoping he'd miss one, and I wanted to see could we get the ball down the court and get us a dynamic three and go into overtime, but he hit the fourth one. But you try and play until the horn sounds, and that's the way I've always been.

Q. As a man of faith, how has faith played a role in your coaching career over the years? And as you leave the stage today as a coach, what is one piece of advice from your journey that you can give young coaches who you'd like to mentor who are trying to make a mark in this league?

LEONARD HAMILTON: Well, I'm going to answer your last question first. Whenever I talk to some young coaches who are just getting started in the business, I always tell them, don't get so caught up with all the responsibilities that they forget their family. I tell them they need to call their kids every night if they're out of town. They need to pray with them in the morning when they wake up, pray with them at night if they can after they put them in bed.

And they need to hug them every day, tell them how much they love them, and don't allow yourself to get so caught up with the responsibilities and the pressure that coaches work under that you forget that your main responsibility is your family.

From a faith standpoint, I just am who I am. I don't walk around with a Bible in my hand standing on the street corner preaching, but I was just raised in an environment, I never lived more than 30, 40 yards from my church. And every time the door opened, we were in it in some capacity. We enjoyed it. Actually we loved it. My mother would give me a dime to pay in collection and a nickel to pay in Sunday school. That was my way of tithing when I didn't know what tithing was.

My point is that was part of our culture. I don't know if I can remember a Sunday of not going to church. I don't ever remember not being there as a youngster. And through high school and college, I don't think I ever missed a Sunday going to church. That's just part of who we are as a family, and I enjoy it. I embrace it.

At Miami for about nine years, I would fast for nine months, a Daniels fast, and I would get up in the morning and read and study and it's just kind of part of what has kept me grounded, and that allowed me sometimes to -- I'll say the words, do unto others like you don't want them to do unto you.

But no, seriously, that's just part of my family and upbringing and it has worked well for me. I never try to push that on my players, though. If they want to go to church with me, I take them.

I just try to provide that moral compass that allows them in those moments where they've got to make decisions that they're moving in the right direction.

Q. We've seen two other head coaches step down in the ACC, Jim Larranaga and Tony Bennett. Have you reached out to them for after your decision, as well?

LEONARD HAMILTON: I've talked to both of them. Jim laid it out for everybody. He said what he thought everybody else wanted to say, so I don't have to say anything because he was pretty clear as to how he felt.

Tony, I had a short visit with him, and we've talked on the phone. But the challenges that we have are what they are, and I don't think it's going to change anytime soon. So we have to figure out a way how to work within the rules that we have. Just got to figure it out.

Everybody is going to probably do it differently, and it will be -- I'm just not going to be a person that wants to complain about everything. I might sound like I'm making an excuse. You've just got to figure out how to work within the rules that we have, and it's not easy. You'll find some schools that will make some mistakes and they'll have -- they might have a bad year.

But they'll learn from that experience, and you'll see guys back recovering from that because they understand now how we have to deal in the climate that we're faced with.

Q. Coach, what gives you the most faith for this program moving forward under one of your former players in Coach Loucks?



LEONARD HAMILTON: Well, one thing about Luke, he thinks things through. The all-time leading assist record in a championship game is by Luke Loucks. I think he had 13 assists in the championship game that we won -- where was it? Was it Atlanta? Atlanta, which says a lot about his mindset. He maybe did all the little things.

We had some very interesting conversations along the way. Sometimes he would have his frustrations.

But I think that he's dealt enough on all levels that he has matured to the point where he understands what it's like at the NBA level and the challenges, and I think he's also experienced a lot at Florida State in how we maintain our program and the things that he went through from a development standpoint.

I think he's very prepared to come in and navigate through it. He's extremely confident and probably a little stubborn like me. He'll be his own man. He's not going to ask me for any out of bounds plays. He's going to develop them himself. He has the ability to communicate with youngsters.

I think he'll do a great job at Florida State.

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