

TALLAHASSEE

THE GENUINE ARTICLE

BUILDING A WINNER AND
DEVELOPING CHARACTER,
FSU'S **LEONARD HAMILTON** IS
RIGHT WHERE HE SHOULD BE

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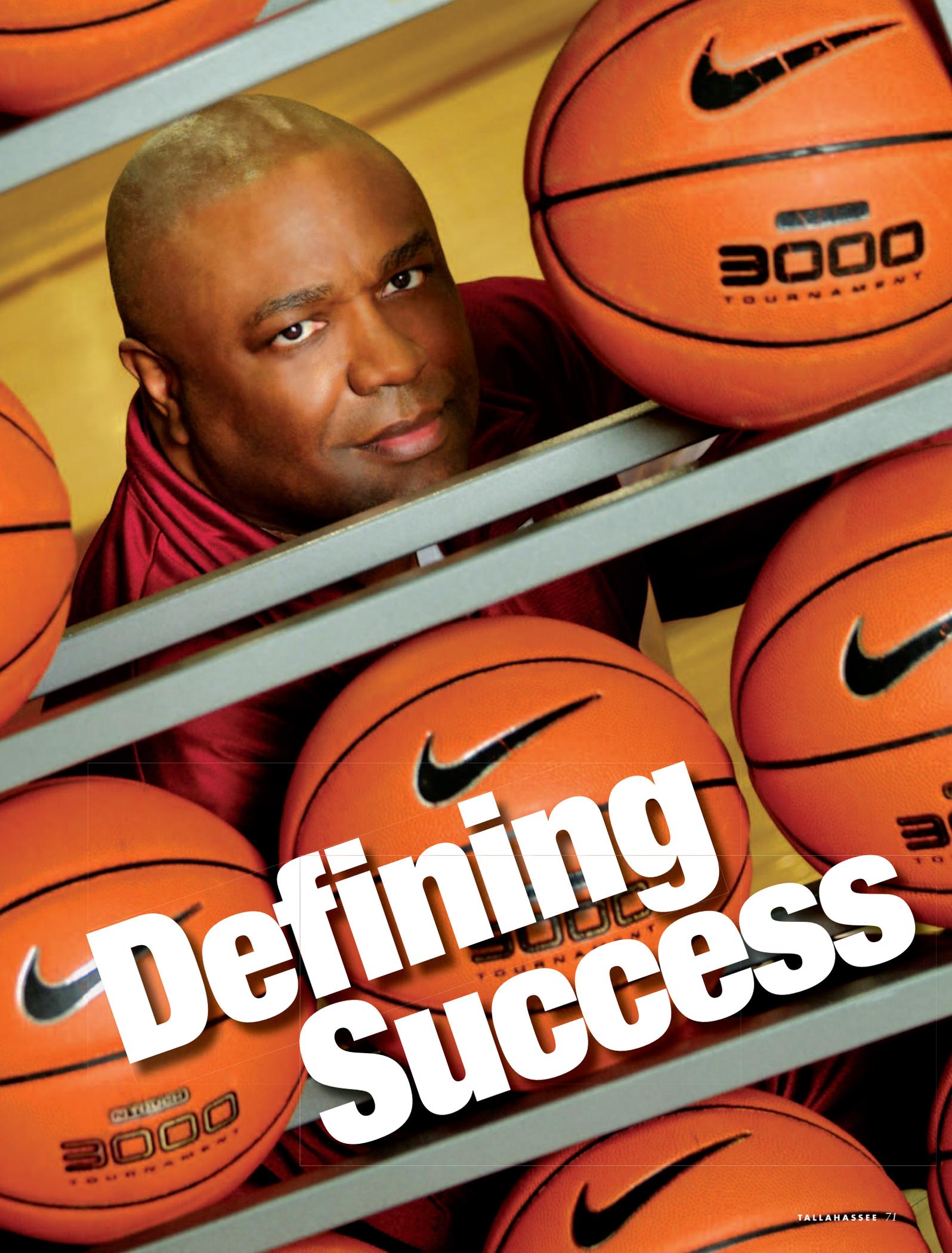
**IN LEONARD HAMILTON'S
WORLD, WINNING ISN'T
EVERYTHING — IT'S
NOT EVEN THE MOST
IMPORTANT THING**

For now, the recruiting is done, the practices have begun, and head coach Leonard Hamilton is about to embark on his fourth season leading Florida State's basketball team. After a disappointing 12-19 season last year – including several heartbreaking, last-second losses – Hamilton is at the helm of a starting team he recruited, surrounded by a handpicked staff and wholeheartedly backed by FSU's athletic establishment. Can the vaunted turnaround coach work his magic for the Seminoles, as he did for Oklahoma State and the University of Miami? Will the Seminoles be able to run with the big-dog teams of the Atlantic Coast Conference? Will this be the year Hamilton and the team finally turn the corner, put it all together, pull off the close ones, win on the road and play in the postseason?

STORY Rosanne Dunkelberger

PHOTOS David Eggleston





Defining Success

“... the most important thing is the development of young people. You can win basketball games and fail in your responsibilities to the individuals you are charged with leading and guiding.” – FSU men’s basketball coach Leonard Hamilton

Hamilton chooses not to speculate, and encourages those around him to put away the crystal balls. They have more important things to do. “I’ve always adhered to the philosophy that if you worry about things you can’t control, you do less about the things you can,” Hamilton said. “And the things you can control are your focus and your preparation, your attitude, your work ethic, and the progress you make every day.

“If you allow any other frame of mind to exist, then you get caught up in something unhealthy.”

Although he’s been at the helm for a few years now, at a university where marquee sports coaches are practically public property, Hamilton remains something of an enigma. He doesn’t appear at many social events, doesn’t play in golf tournaments, and doesn’t talk much about his personal life.

He’s not aloof, Hamilton insisted in a recent interview, just busy with the task at hand. And while the time he spent talking wasn’t full of shocking revelations, Hamilton did offer a glimpse into what makes him tick and how he goes about the business of turning basketball programs into winners.

The Oklahoma State basketball program was stagnant when Hamilton arrived in 1986. Within four years, he coached the Cowboys to back-to-back postseason appearances. His decade coaching the University of Miami through the 1990s was even more dramatic, taking a team with no fan base, no conference and no on-campus arena and turning it into a Big East powerhouse, with three consecutive NCAA Tournament appearances. Prominently displayed in an office filled with the watches, rings and other awards he’s picked up over a 34-year career are two Big East Coach of the Year trophies.

It was that reputation that put Hamilton on FSU Athletic Director Dave Hart’s short list when it was time to seek a coach to lead the Seminole basketball team into the 21st century – and the deal to bring Hamilton to Tallahassee was struck within 10 days after Hart contacted him in March 2002.

“He was clearly our target as (the) search process unfolded,” Hart recalled. “I spent a lot of face time with him, and I was absolutely convinced at the end of a couple days he would be an exceptional fit.”

While Hamilton doesn’t like to make preseason predictions, Hart is a little more willing to invoke the W-word because, at the end of the season, winning does matter.

“All coaches know that ultimately success between the lines is an expectation,” he said. “We are very, very close – very close – to turning the corner and having a program that has a consistent level of success in our league and nationally.”

But with the resources in place – including a \$23-million renovation to make the Civic Center more “basketball friendly” and a palatial \$10-million basketball training center next door – Hart said he’s willing to be patient and is

convinced of Hamilton’s ultimate success.

“I think because of who he is and how he handles himself . . . he deserves time, and he’ll get time to turn the program into a consistent winner,” Hart said. “I don’t believe it’s a matter of ‘if,’ I believe it is strictly a matter of ‘when.’”

Contrary to that old Lombardi chestnut and perhaps sacrilegious to the Seminole faithful, in Hamilton’s world, winning isn’t the only thing – it’s not even the most important thing.

“As determined as we are to win and to have a successful basketball program . . . the most important thing is the development of young people,” he said. “You can win basketball games and fail in your responsibilities to the individuals you are charged with leading and guiding. You might receive a certain status, but deep down inside I’m not real sure it could all be worthwhile to you if you can’t look back and say that you have been a part of helping young people grow.”

Hamilton has a program – and he expects his players to get with it. It actually is a pretty good fit for any endeavor one might undertake in life. And it goes something like this:

“If we’re a little bit better today than we were yesterday, then we’re moving in the right direction,” he explained. “And if we keep taking that step each and every day, then at some point in time, we’re going to arrive at that point we are all trying to achieve.

“If we focus on the end result, and not on what we have to do to be successful, then we lose our way,” Hamilton continued. “I’m not really sure I have a whole lot of control over tomorrow, but in order for me to feel good about tomorrow, it’s important that I have a very successful today. We challenge our staff and our players to adhere to that and to not allow themselves to get caught up in putting things ahead of themselves.”

Hamilton’s commitment to improvement and development doesn’t stop with the players, said Seminole Associate Head Coach Stan Jones, who has coached under Hamilton for 10 of the last 11 years, starting in Miami, and following him to the Washington Wizards and FSU.

“He is a person who is the genuine article. As good a basketball coach as he is, he’s a better molder of people,” Jones said. “He’s not out to use you, he’s out to enhance you. He cares about you being successful and he cares about your family being happy.”

Jones tells of going to lunch with two veteran NBA assistant coaches who were amazed by Hamilton’s solicitousness. “They looked at me and asked; ‘Is he for real?’ And I said, ‘Welcome to my world.’”

And Jones isn’t worried about toiling in shadow of the head coach. In fact, he’s following the lead of Hamilton, who



During Leonard Hamilton's tenure at Miami, 28 of the 31 players who finished their college basketball careers there earned a degree. At FSU, his players are a perfect 14-of-14.

Leonard Hamilton built an early reputation as a recruiter and found success in turning around floundering programs.



“He cares about you being successful and he cares about your family being happy.” – FSU Associate Head Coach Stan Jones, who has coached under Hamilton for 10 of the past 11 years

spent 12 seasons as an assistant at Kentucky under Joe B. Hall before being tapped for a head coaching position. While he started out doing office duties and practice preparation with players, Jones said over the years, Hamilton has added to his responsibilities with administration and recruiting. “He’s preparing (me) to become a head coach,” he said.

But Jones is in no hurry to move on. “I’ve got a fantastic position at Florida State,” he said. “We’re a team ... It’s a terrific working environment.”

Hamilton is a man of faith, regularly attending his home church here in Tallahassee, Bethel Missionary Baptist Church. He doesn’t take full credit for the success he’s enjoyed so far in his 56 years.

“I could not have done it by myself,” he said. “It always seemed as though my steps have been ordered. I have been in the position to make the right decision, but it seems as though even when I tried to make poor decisions . . . there has been somebody with a hand guiding me.”

Born poor in Gastonia, N.C., Hamilton’s corporeal guiding hand came in the form of his father, who “impacted a lot of wisdom,” he said. “The main thing he said was never to allow anyone to outwork you. You always could control the effort that you put forth, regardless of what the task might be. He harped on that – never allow yourself to give less than a 100-percent effort every day.”

His father also counseled his children – Hamilton was the oldest of four – to be respectful and accountable. His father once told a reporter of the time Hamilton got a hard-earned lesson in the latter. The children once neglected to cut the grass, as they had been told to do. “He came home at about 2 o’clock in the morning and made us get up and cut the grass in the dark with the sling blade and the push mower,” Hamilton recalled.

But spiritual “guidance” seemed to track Hamilton throughout his life, too. For starters, he was supposed to attend college on a football scholarship, but became ill and couldn’t attend training camp. With the opportunity lost, he was ready enlist in the Army (this was during the Vietnam War), but Gaston Community College, a local school, was starting up a basketball program and invited him to join.

He was offered a scholarship to nearby University of North Carolina-Charlotte, but “I thought it was important for me to get out of the area for me to grow as a person.” So he turned it down to walk on at the University of Tennes-

see-Martin. A scholarship materialized there within weeks and Hamilton would have a stellar college basketball career, culminating in his selection as Most Valuable Player and Best Defensive Player in his senior year. He was a charter member of the school’s Hall of Fame.

After graduation, Hamilton considered joining the military reserves, but was offered the opportunity to serve as a graduate assistant at Austin Peay State University, studying for a master’s degree, teaching PE classes and helping the assistant coach. When that coach became ill, Hamilton took over his responsibilities. “That’s the ultimate on-the-job training,” he said. “There I was, barely out of college, a year or two older than the players I was recruiting, charged with the responsibilities of coaching them.”

On his first recruiting trip (“I was so young and inexperienced I didn’t even know you had to have a credit card”), Hamilton managed to sign two recruits who would break records during their tenure at Austin Peay. “I had never recruited anybody in my life. I can’t say it was all me, I just have to say I was blessed and, once again, I have this hand guiding me through.”

Basketball’s loss was to be Dow Chemical’s gain when Hamilton impulsively quit in a huff a few years later. But he was only out of roundball “a week and a day” when he was hired as an assistant coach at the University of Kentucky, the first black coach in the program’s history. He won acclaim as a recruiter and was promoted to associate coach six years later. During his 12 years there, the team would win eight Southeastern Conference championships, go to three Final Fours and win the 1978 NCAA championship.

Then it was off to reverse the fortunes of Oklahoma State, Miami (with an ill-fated, year-long detour to coach the NBA’s Washington Wizards) and, finally, FSU.

“I feel I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing,” he said. “I’m supposed to be coaching and working with young people.”

Hamilton is not a particularly tall or big man and, while his voice is deep, it isn’t particularly loud. And yet his presence fills his corner office, decorated in a Seminole-luxe style and equipped with a raised desk, two cell phones (one for work, one for personal calls), a land line and two televisions connected to an extensive audiovisual system, set up for viewing DVDs of games and tapes from college hopefuls.

Hamilton’s manner is no-nonsense, and one gets the distinct sense that it would not be a good idea to make him angry.

Any story about Hamilton would not be complete without a mention of his extreme commitment to work. Anecdotes abound about his 5:30 a.m.-to-1 a.m. workdays, his phone calls to assistant coaches in the wee hours, his habit of watching the game on DVD while flying home from an away game – and then heading back to the office to watch it again after the plane lands at 2 a.m.

Assistant coaches are always advised to beat the boss into

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Seminoles Picking Up the Pace for the New Season

BY IRA SCHOFFEL

When the Florida State men's basketball team traveled to Trinidad in early September, sight-seeing was pretty low on its itinerary.

With three of their top five scorers gone from last season, the Seminoles used the extra 10 days of practice and four exhibition games as a chance to get off to a running start to their 2005-06 campaign. And make no mistake – the emphasis was on running.

After struggling to find their identity offensively last season, the Seminoles insist it won't be a problem in the fourth year of Leonard Hamilton's tenure.

"We're trying to push the tempo," said sophomore guard Jason Rich, who started 11 games last season. "We've got too many athletes to be walking the ball down the court."

Plodding their way to a 12-19 record (4-12 in the Atlantic Coast Conference) last season, Florida State ranked next to last among ACC teams in scoring offense. The Seminoles, who scored 68.6 points a game, were one of only two teams to score less than 70 on average.

Part of the problem was that leading scorer Von Wafer, who was expected to fill in where former All-ACC performer Tim Pickett left off, never fully grasped Hamilton's offensive and defensive systems. The coaching staff apparently was so frustrated with the sophomore shooting guard's development that he was dropped from the starting lineup late in the season and eventually declared for early entry to the NBA draft.

Wafer's second-round selection by the Los Angeles Lakers prematurely ended the rocky career of Hamilton's

first high-profile recruit, but the Seminoles hope it will lead to better chemistry and execution.

If everything goes according to plan, the Seminoles will be more balanced offensively this season, with any number of players capable of being the leading scorer on any given night. That approach was evident during the recent exhibition tour, as four different Seminoles – forwards Alexander Johnson and Al Thornton and guards Isaiah Swann and Jerel Allen – were credited as leading scorers during the four games.

"We think this team has the potential to be more athletic and a little more aggressive," Hamilton said. "Getting them down the floor more consistently. Playing at a little faster pace ... We're trying to implement more of a running game, trying to attack more out of transition."

Wafer isn't the only departure, however. FSU also must find replacements for top front-court players Adam Waleskowski and Anthony Richardson, who combined to average nearly 15 points and eight rebounds during their senior seasons.

The good news for the Seminoles is that junior forward Alexander Johnson appears to be in the best shape of his career. After a promising freshman season, during which he averaged 9.5 points and 4.2 rebounds, the 6-foot-10 forward struggled with his conditioning last year after sustaining a preseason injury.

But the Albany, Ga., native slimmed down in the off-season, and the Seminole believe he could be poised for



If everything goes according to coach Leonard Hamilton's plan, the Seminoles will be more balanced offensively this season than last year's 12-19 squad.

a breakout year.

Johnson will have support inside as well. Thornton, a 6-7 junior, came into his own last season and is one of the most athletic players in the ACC. He scored in double-figures during each of the Seminole's exhibition games.

FSU also will look to 6-10 forward Diego Romero, who struggled last season with a knee injury but hopes to come back strong from off-season surgery. And FSU would love to see early contributions from highly touted freshman Uche Echefu.

Despite being recruited by virtually every high-profile coach in the country, Echefu signed with the Seminole over the likes of Kentucky and national champion North Carolina. And he seemed to make a big splash during the exhibition tour, recording "double-



doubles” (10 or more points scoring and rebounding) in the final two games.

Rich said he has been impressed by all of the Seminoles’ newcomers – Echefu, Casaan Breeden and junior college transfer Jerel Allen. Allen, a sharp-shooting guard, scored 14 points in the Seminoles’ final exhibition.

“I’m real excited about them,” Rich said. “I know they are ready to play. I’m excited to have them in here. I think they are going to do a great job this year. Those young guys are polished. They just need to get the understanding of how to play college basketball. Once they do that, they will be fine.”

Unfortunately for Florida State, the Seminoles won’t benefit from the addition of one new player. Auburn transfer Toney Douglas, who was the Southeastern Conference’s Freshman of the Year last season, will have to sit out this year as per NCAA transfer rules.

When he becomes eligible next year, Douglas will instantly give the Seminoles a proven scoring guard. But FSU should benefit from plenty of backcourt options in the meantime.

Point guard Todd Galloway is returning for his senior season, as is shooting guard Andrew Wilson. And sophomores Rich, Swann and Ralph Mims earned valuable playing time in the backcourt last season.

With all of that experience returning – not to mention the lessons learned during the four-game exhibition tour – Hamilton is hopeful that his talented newcomers will be ready to contribute when the season begins Nov. 19 against visiting Jacksonville University.

“It might give the younger guys a chance to pick things up at a faster pace,” he said.

And a faster pace is exactly what the Seminoles crave. ■

the office and stay until after he leaves. With Hamilton, “that’s almost an impossibility,” said Jones.

“I go out very seldom,” Hamilton said. “When you’re building programs there’s always something to do, so you really can’t get it all done, regardless of how many hours you put in.”

He’s cognizant of the fact that while he was working all those years, he wasn’t paying attention to his own family – his wife, Claudette, and their two children, who are now 35 and 21.

He spoke about it during a 1997 interview that appeared in *The Miami Herald*: “I come home for family time sometimes, and I’m all alone because they’ve gotten on with their life,” Hamilton said. “I’ve been raising other folks’ kids, and my wife has been raising mine.

“But these freshmen and sophomores, people buy in to this illusion that they’re mature because they look so big and strong, but they’re at a critical, fragile part of their development, so we have to spend as much time coaching their minds as we do their bodies.”

In a coaching career filled with honors and success, the graduation rate of his players is perhaps Hamilton’s most impressive statistic. During his tenure at Miami, 28 of the 31 players who finished their college basketball careers there earned a degree. At Florida State, he’s got a perfect 14-of-14 record.

Claudette Hamilton said that early in their marriage, she went through a hard time accepting the situation, but has come to accept and support her husband’s overwhelming commitment. “We kind of get into the lives of all the kids,” she said. “You have to understand and recognize that it is something God has called him to do.” It also helps that Claudette was raised with a Tennessean’s appreciation for the sport.

She does maintain a higher profile in the community, recently agreeing to serve as a teaching leader for a new evening women’s class for Bible Study Fellowship International.

“The most important part of our responsibility we’re charged with, you don’t realize until 10 or 15 years after they’ve left you,” Leonard Hamilton said. “Then you look back and see what kinds of husbands and fathers and citizens and people they’ve become – and that’s when you realize that you won the game or not.”

Their son, Lenny, is a musician in Nashville, Tenn., and their daughter, Allison,

is a senior majoring in business management and fashion merchandising at FSU. According to Claudette Hamilton, their daughter decided to head north from their Miami home for college, and was “a little surprised” to discover her parents would be following behind her.

Like any typical teenager, for Allison Hamilton, the idea of having her parents follow her to college was difficult to envision.

“After I was accepted to FSU and made plans to go, my parents decided to come to Tallahassee shortly after. At first, I was just going to stay in Miami and go to the University of Miami instead,” she said. “But I talked to my brother, who went to UM when my dad coached there. He told me it was never a big deal for him. And it was the best decision all in all, because I really enjoy going to FSU. I love being a student here, and my parents really give me the space and independence I need.”

Allison Hamilton lives on her own now, but Claudette said she has no empty-nest blues because their daughter often visits their Northeast Tallahassee home with a houseful of sorority friends in tow.

Allison Hamilton describes her father as driven, dedicated and hard working.

“Growing up, he wasn’t too strict at all. I guess his job didn’t influence his home life,” she recalled. “I don’t know how he was with his players, but at home, it was fine.”

Without a doubt, Allison is a motivated and strong-minded person. Those characteristics make her a Hamilton, but she has no plans to take up basketball anytime soon.

“I never had the desire to learn how to play,” she said without any hesitation.

Tallahassee, in my opinion, is the ideal city . . . for what we do, it’s perfect,” said Leonard Hamilton, ticking off the highlights – diversity, quality academic institutions, name recognition, a great conference, a fan base, a good location not too far from potential recruits.

“As a coach and a family, we enjoy it,” he said.

“I’m going to keep praying that that same guiding hand that has always led me will be watching over me. It’s been a tremendous run from a guy from Gastonia who grew up with no hot or cold running water. I’m a long ways away from taking baths in tin tubs.

“I want this to be my last stop. I want to complete this one and make it special, and I think we have the potential to do that.” ■

Amy Tratenberg contributed to this article.