

2012-13 Florida State Men's Basketball Preview

"It's not where you start, it's where you finish," says two-time ACC Coach of the Year Leonard Hamilton.

In the case of the defending ACC Champion Florida State men's basketball team, Hamilton quickly points to the evidence that supports his claim. During their current run of a school record four consecutive NCAA Tournament appearances, the Seminoles have far exceeded their preseason expectations.

*The Seminoles were picked to finish 10th in the league standings in 2008-09; they finished in fourth place with a 10-6 record in ACC play;

*The Seminoles were picked to finish seventh in the league standings in 2009-10; they finished in third place with a 10-6 record in ACC play;

*The Seminoles were picked to finish fifth in the league standings in 2010-11; they finished in third place with an 11-5 record in ACC play;

*The Seminoles were picked to finish in third place in the standings in 2011-12; they won the ACC Championship for the first time in school history.

Florida State's run to its first ACC Championship in school history in 2012 marked the fifth consecutive season the Seminoles had finished better in the ACC standings than they had been predicted to in the league race. The Seminoles' current streak of four consecutive top four ACC finishes comes on the heels of being picked to finish above fifth only once, in the bottom half of the standings twice and as low as 10th heading into the 2008-09 season. After being selected to finish in 10th place in the ACC race in prior to the 2008-09 season, the Seminoles finished in fourth place and played in the championship game of the ACC Tournament for the first time in school history.

"When we look at our track record in the past six of seven years, we've been pretty good," said Hamilton. "We think, just like we did last season, that we have a chance to be pretty good again. But, we lost six seniors; teams that normally lose six seniors don't get the same level of recognition the next year."

Despite losing six players from last year's team that won a school record 15 ACC games, Florida State returns four of its top five scorers and three of its top four rebounders from a team that finished with 25 wins and a school record tying 12-4 record in regular season ACC play. The Seminoles defeated an ACC best six ranked teams, were 4-1 against Duke and North Carolina and beat the ACC's four Tobacco Road teams (Duke, North Carolina, NC State and Wake Forest) in the same season for the first time in school history.

"I believe that we have a group of guys returning that I think is going to give us some tremendous leadership and stability to keep us moving forward," said Hamilton. "I also think we have an underrated group of youngsters coming in that might be able to contribute right away. We're very excited about this group as a whole, and because we have added some really good players to an already talented group, we feel confident that we will continue to grow as a team."

Florida State's growth and its ability to continue to move into the upper echelon of the college basketball world, rests squarely on the shoulders of its solid group of returning players who have helped lift the Seminoles to new heights during their careers. Guard Michael Snaer, the Most Valuable Player of the 2012 ACC Tournament, is the Seminoles' only returning starter and should contend to national and league honors. He is not alone as a pair of athletic forwards – junior Okaro White (69 games played with 25 career starts) and redshirt junior Terrance Shannon (52 career games played with five career starts) – are two players who bring considerable playing time to the Seminoles' starting line-up. Add junior guard Ian Miller (47 career games played) and sophomore guard Terry Whisnant (25 career games played) into the mix and Hamilton's reasons for optimism become much clearer.

"In the last number of years, we've been able to overcome some of the challenges we've had," said Hamilton. "We have tried to make adjustments with this team. We have tried to become as versatile as possible."

With Snaer, Florida State has one of the most versatile players in the nation in its starting line-up for the fourth consecutive season. One of two returning Seminoles who averaged in double figure scoring last season, Snaer has shown the ability not only score throughout his career but to play lockdown defense on the best players in all of college basketball. He is considered to be one of the top perimeter defenders in the nation and will continue to excel in that role as a senior.

"Michael has worked as hard as any player I have ever coached on his development throughout his career," said Hamilton. "He is a relentless worker who doesn't view second best as an option. His motor is always running as he works to get better both offensively and defensively. Michael's continued development as a leader will also play a very important role in the development of the chemistry of our team."

Snaer's commitment to excellence has not gone unnoticed by others in college basketball.

“Michael Snaer is a damn good player. He's an outstanding athlete, he's smart, and I think he's the best competitor in our league,” said Duke's Mike Krzyzewski.

“Florida State's key is Michael Snaer, a great competitor who should be first team All-ACC,” said ESPN's Jay Bilas.

Snaer has increased his offensive production throughout his career and averaged a career-high a team leading 14.0 points per game as a junior. He is the fourth leading returning scorer in the ACC and averaged 18.0 points, 3.3 assists and 1.3 steals in the 2012 ACC Tournament in leading the Seminoles to their first ACC Championship in school history. Defensively, Snaer averages nearly one steal per game for his career and totaled career highs for both steals (39) and blocked shots (13) in earning All-ACC Second Team honors last season.

Snaer will be joined in the starting line-up by junior Okaro White who has shown flashes of brilliance during the first two seasons of his career. White's incredible ability to utilize his athletic talents in concert with his outstanding offensive skills and his dedication to playing lock down defense has moved him to the head of the class of outstanding players in the ACC. He played starters minutes on last season's ACC Championship team (22.6 minutes per game) and has started 25 games in the first two years of his career. White enters his junior season having already played many important minutes for the Seminoles. He has played in 69 career games, 32 ACC games, five NCAA Tournament and four ACC Tournament games.

“We feel that Okaro White is getting ready to have a breakout season,” said Hamilton. “Despite playing major minutes in so many crucial situations during his career and starting nearly half of the games in which he has played since he has been here, Okaro is going to step into a new role this season. It a new role with increased leadership responsibilities that he is going to have accept along with his increased role on the court. We are extremely confident in Okaro's ability and we are looking forward to helping him continue his maturation as a basketball player. Even he has no idea how high his ceiling is.”

White is one of only three returning Seminoles who averaged more than 20 minutes of playing time last season and is Florida State's fourth leading returning scorer as he averaged 7.7 points per game as a sophomore. He averaged or scored in double figures against five ACC teams totaled the first two double doubles of his career last season. White's first career ACC double double of 12 points and 10 rebounds came in Florida State's historic 90-57 win over No. 3 North Carolina in 2012.

A third player who has experience as a starter during his career as a Seminoles is Terrance Shannon who was forced to take a medical redshirt season after playing in only seven games in 2012. Maybe the Seminoles' toughest player, Shannon was averaging a career-high 17.4 minutes played, a career-high 8.3 points scored, and a career high 4.4 rebounds when he was injured against UConn during the third game of the Battle 4 Atlantis in November.

Shannon's resume included 52 career games played and five career starts including one in a victory over No. 1 Duke on Jan. 12, 2011. Prior to his injury last season he has scored in double figures in three of his seven games and earned the first double double of his career in the 2011-12 season opener against Jacksonville.

“Having Terrance back in the line-up is something that we are really excited about,” said Hamilton. “He was only beginning to get cranked up when he was hurt so he's going to be a welcome addition to the line-up. Terrance is such a tremendous competitor with an infectious personality – one that raises the bar for everyone else on our team. His attitude will take us to another level in practice and during games.”

Shannon's experience includes 22 ACC games and four NCAA Tournament games as he played a pivotal role in helping the Seminoles' advance to the Sweet 16 of the NCAA Tournament in 2011.

Miller, also a junior, is certainly on his way to becoming the next household name in the ACC after averaging 10.3 points per game as a sophomore. He began to develop his reputation as one of the top offensive threats in the league last season and accelerated his growing legend as he hit one of the most memorable shots in the league in 2012 – a buzzer beating 3-point shot that helped the Seminoles recover from an 11 point second half deficit to win at Virginia on March 1, 2012.

Already known for his ability to create instant offense and with future promise as a prolific scorer, Miller will look to take on the added responsibilities as one of Florida State's point guards as a junior and a senior.

“Ian is an extremely athletic youngster who has a high basketball IQ,” said Hamilton. “He sees the court very well and is not afraid to shoot. We feel that we can utilize his talents as both the shooting and point guard positions because he does so many things well. He plays especially well with the basketball in his hands so we think he can help us at the point this season.”

Miller consistently displayed his shooter's touch as one of the Seminoles' top shooters and has been compared by many to former Seminole All-American Toney Douglas because of his explosive scoring ability. He also displayed his abilities as a

top-notch defensive player who ranked second on the team with a career-high 1.3 steals per game in 2012. His efforts on the defensive end of the court have allowed Florida State to continue its tradition as one of the nation's top defensive teams.

Whisnant, who averaged 7.7 minutes played per game as a freshman, needs only experience (which will come his way as a sophomore) to become the next Seminole star. His ability to shoot well consistently from long range makes him the prime candidate to become the next great 3-point shooter in the ACC beginning with his sophomore season and for the remainder of his incredibly promising career.

“Terry didn’t have the opportunity to play much last year but we really love his potential,” said Hamilton. “He has worked really hard and made some tremendous progress; we like the end potential for the remainder of his career. We are going to have him play some point and some two – we can bounce him back between both positions which gives us even more versatility.”

Whisnant played in 11 of the Seminoles’ 16 ACC games, their ACC Championship clinching win over North Carolina and the Seminoles’ NCAA Tournament victory over St. Bonaventure as his minutes per game average and his playing time increased along with his confidence during the second half of his freshman season.

Junior Kiel Turpin, of the Seminoles’ three seven-footers, will make his Seminole debut in 2013 after sitting out his first season in Tallahassee. He practiced and learned the Seminoles’ offensive and defensive systems during his year away from competition. Turpin’s best work came in the weight room as he added 30 pounds to his already solid frame.

“We redshirted Kiel and he has gone from 210 to 240 pounds, so we accomplished our goals in trying to get him bigger and stronger,” said Hamilton. “We feel that his increased muscle and weight will give him more of an opportunity to be successful.”

While Florida State’s experienced group of returning players are expected to set the tone for the Seminoles’ traditionally solid work ethic and have already become a part of the culture of winning through hard work, it will also be their task to bring a large group of talented newcomers into the mix that has helped them become a program of significance in college basketball.

Hamilton’s excitement when it comes to his largest freshman class ever can be alleviated with the knowledge that two members (Robert Gilchrist and Joell Hopkins) are junior college transfers, three more (Devon Bookert, Montay Brandon and Aaron Thomas) are all fifth year high school players and the final two (Boris Bojanovsky and Michael Ojo) are far more advanced than most others in Hamilton’s successful history of working with big men.

Bookert comes to Florida State as the first player in school history from the state of Alaska and gives the Seminoles a star at the point guard position for the next four years. The Gatorade Player of the Year in Alaska who averaged 25.0 points and 8.0 assists as a senior who spent a year at the Impact Basketball Academy, Bookert will challenge for the Seminoles’ starting point guard role from the first day of practice. He possess a staggeringly quick first step and has an incredible ability to get to the basket and will give Florida State a newer look from the position than they have had in past years.

“Devon is a guy who people don’t know much about,” said Hamilton. “He is probably more of a pure point guard coming in which I think is a good piece to have. He impressed us by working on his skills after high school before coming to us so we feel that we are getting a more mature person and a more mature player entering our program than you might get at such an important position.”

Brandon, one of four players from the state of North Carolina on the Seminoles’ roster, comes to Florida State as a polished combination guard with the skills of a point guard, the shooting abilities of a two guard and the size of a wing forward. A natural fit for the Seminoles’ style of versatile players who can score from and defend any position on the court, Brandon experienced a large growth spurt in high school in which he learned the skills of playing as a bigger guard while continuing to embrace the skills he had perfected as a point guard. Because of his versatility he could see playing time at three of the five positions on the court at any time during a given game.

“Montay was 6-3 or 6-4 and all of a sudden he was 6-7,” said Hamilton. “He comes to us with the same perimeter skills he had when he was a guard and now has added more skills as a wing. His versatility gives us a player that can play more than one position and play them well.”

Brandon averaged 19.0 points, 5.0 rebounds and 4.0 points as a senior at Wesleyan Christian where he played for former All-ACC guard Keith Gatlin who played collegiately in the ACC at Maryland. He has a very long build that, in addition to his offensive skills, have the ability to cover a great deal of space on the defensive end of the court.

Thomas, who led Brewster Academy to the No. 1 national prep ranking in 2012, is considered to be a pure scorer who has excellent length that will allow him to become a strong player in Florida State's traditional mold of outstanding defenders. He, too, will give Florida State a renewed strength on the offensive end of the court with his ability to slash to the basket and strength as an outside shooter.

"Aaron can flat out score the basketball," said Hamilton. "He is an extremely hard worker who brings a very competitive spirit to the basketball court. His work ethic is what is going to allow him to stand ahead of other players in this league as his career progresses. We also like his size along with all of our newcomers and feel that his versatility gives us even more options at any given time on the court."

Thomas averaged 17.5 points, 5.5 rebounds and 6.0 assists per game in his only season at Brewster. He led the Bobcats to a 32-1 record and the national championship -- the national championship was decided on the court at the National Prep Tournament.

Another player with an experienced background is junior forward Robert Gilchrist who transferred to Florida State from Polk State College in Winter Haven Fla. In addition to playing two years at Polk and earning his associate's degree in 2012, he also played one year of prep basketball at Worcester Academy in Massachusetts. Gilchrist is 22 years old -- one of the Seminoles older players.

"Robert went to prep school then went to junior college so he has a little more experience than the normal college player coming in," said Hamilton. "Hopefully, that will help us and allow the guys who may not be further along than the average high school player to learn from the maturity he brings to the team. We also like him because he's a good player at the four and a pretty good jump shooter which will allow us to stretch some defenses."

In 23 games as a sophomore at Polk, Gilchrist averaged 11.8 points, 7.9 rebounds and 2.2 blocked shots and led the Eagles in field goal shooting percentage (.500 percent). He led the Eagles and ranked third in the state of Florida among junior college players in rebounding.

Hopkins is another player who will add depth to the Seminoles at the wing position. A transfer from Tallahassee Community College, he averaged 7.0 points and 4.0 rebounds in leading the Eagles to a 15-13 record. He has the ability to play on the perimeter and in the low post which gives Florida State even more versatility at those positions.

Florida State's two biggest recruits -- 7-3 Boris Bojanovsky and 7-1 Michael Ojo -- will give the Seminoles three players at 7-0 or taller and allow them to keep their title as the tallest team in all of college basketball.

At 7-3, Bojanovsky is believed to be the tallest player ever to play at Florida State. He played at Oakley College which provided him with outstanding teaching at an academy known for helping players earn scholarships to play basketball in the United States. He is a highly skilled center who will flourish under the guide of Hamilton and his staff.

"Boris is a typical European player who adds even more versatility to our team," said Hamilton. "Even though he is a big guy, he can move a defender out to the perimeter and shoot the ball as well as many Europeans do and play inside to take advantage of his height. Obviously, how much Boris can contribute will rely on how quickly he develops. We want to have the luxury of putting 30-40 pounds on him like we did Turpin this past year."

Bojanovsky averaged a double double of 22.0 points, 13.3 rebounds and 4.2 blocked shots while shooting .594 percent from the field as a member of the U-18 Slovakian Team at the U-18 European Championships...

At 7-1, Ojo will look to build to a combination of size and speed never before seen in a Florida State basketball uniform. As he continues to mature physically and learns the game from Hamilton and his staff, it is believed that he will develop into an outstanding player with skills refined enough to enjoy successful careers both at Florida State and at the next level.

"Michael is probably the least experienced guy we have because he's played the least amount of basketball," said Hamilton. He probably has the furthest to go from an experience standpoint. In his country of Nigeria, they don't play a whole lot of basketball. But he does have the physical stature that we feel brings something different to his game."

Ojo averaged 15.0 points, 14.0 rebounds and 5.0 blocked shot per game as a senior at Tennessee Temple High School in Chattanooga, Tenn. He was named to the All-American team by the National Association of Christian Athletes in 2012.

Joey Moreau and Raphael Portuondo round out the Seminoles' 15-player roster.

Joey and Ralfi have now been around for a while; they've watched and listened and they're giving us good leadership," said Hamilton. "We expect both of them to give us good leadership as we try to now indoctrinate a number of incoming new players."

Moreau and Portuondo are both seniors who have played on three NCAA Tournament teams and were both members of the Seminoles' 2102 ACC Championship team.

"We are going to need our experienced guys to set the table, set the tone for our work ethic, our practices and for them to help us continue to move the program in the right direction," said Hamilton. "We feel that we have also brought in some young guys who are really going to help us. We are going to need those young guys to be a little more ready than some of the teams in the past. Sometimes we've been able to bring them along slower, but I'm not really sure the way we try to develop our team that we are going to have that luxury this year to bring them along slowly."

With so much versatility and different weapons at each position, Hamilton will continue to rely on a scoring by committee mentality rather than one specific player scoring the majority of the Seminoles' points. The Seminoles should find it easier to score in 2013 which will take the pressure off of its defense to be perfect on each play. Hamilton, though, will continue to preach defense and Florida State will continue to make its living as one of the top defensive teams in all of college basketball.