

Leonard Hamilton And Florida State: Two Of The Best-Kept Secrets In The Game

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Leonard Hamilton smiled, clasped his hands and laughed as he reflected on the conditions he grew up in. He was born in Gastonia, N.C., in 1948 during an era where segregation was firmly entrenched across the country. He remembered riding in the back of the bus, drinking from colored-only water fountains, having to use colored-only bathrooms and not being able to eat at certain restaurants. More than anything, however, he felt the most restricted because he was poor.

“Those were the signs of the times,” Hamilton said last month. “Those were the things we had to deal with. But that was the way it was in the whole South. The challenge for me was to try to figure out how I was going to escape the low-income situation that I grew up in.”

Hamilton was the oldest of six children. His mother was a domestic worker. His father was a truck driver. Neither graduated high school. They emphasized the importance of getting an education, but didn’t have the means to contribute financially. Hamilton wouldn’t only have to find a way to get an education — he’d also need to get it paid for.

There were only two clear options: land an athletic scholarship or enlist in the military and seek to benefit from the GI Bill. Hamilton received a football scholarship, but he never reported to practice due to an illness. With the mandatory draft in effect for the Vietnam War, he planned to join the U.S. Army, but Gaston Community College, which was less than five miles from Gastonia, started a basketball program in 1966. He joined the team.

That started what has become a 54-year relationship with college basketball. Now Hamilton is sitting in his office inside the Florida State Basketball Training Center. He is the Seminoles’ all-time winningest coach and the fifth winningest coach in ACC history. No. 4 FSU (26-5, 16-4) won its first ACC regular-season championship this season and will have a double-bye in this week’s ACC tournament.

“With our culture that we have with everything being instant and automatic and short-lived, everybody wants instant gratification,” Hamilton said last Saturday after the Seminoles captured their first ACC regular-season championship. “The emphasis is placed on the one-and-dones and two-and-outs, and everybody is concerned about their own individual statistics. These guys have bought into the unselfish spirit that has allowed them to be successful. I’m so proud of them.”

The ’Noles are coming off an Elite Eight appearance in 2018 and a Sweet 16 showing last season, but they have aspirations for more. Still, success can be fleeting in the crapshoot that is the NCAA Tournament.

“In order for us to have something to talk about, this is not the time to start feeling satisfied with the progress you’re making,” Hamilton said. “I’ve been around long enough to know that this isn’t time to start feeling good about nothing. We’re still in the fight.”

Hamilton, 71, speaks from experience. His reluctance to relax comes as a result of a lifetime of hard work, focus, determination and perseverance.

Hamilton starred as a guard at Gaston College from 1966 to ’68 and set the school single-game scoring record with a 54-point outburst. Schools in the area took note, but he elected to walk-on at Tennessee-Martin, becoming the first black athlete in program history.

"I didn't know that," Hamilton said. "I was only concerned about trying to get to school and get an education. It never dawned on me until I got to school there. In fact, I never even really thought about it, but it was obvious when I got there."

Ron Wilcox was entering his last season in 1969 when coach Floyd Burdette called him into his office. Burdette broke the news that the team was integrating and that Hamilton would be Wilcox's roommate.

The two lived in an otherwise all-white dormitory that had just opened. A partition separated the rooms in half, but roommates shared tight spaces and a bathroom only a year after the end of the Civil Rights movement.

"He was one of the finest young men I ever was around," Wilcox said in a phone interview last month. "He's just a super person. I can never remember either one of us being angry at the other. We always had a respect for each other and a kindness that we showed toward each other. It was just a remarkable opportunity and relationship for both of us."

Hamilton redshirted his first year but still practiced with the team. He was known as a well-spoken and intelligent individual. He also had a bit of flair. He paid particular attention to his dress, would often wear suits to class, performed "Oh Happy Day" as his signature song in the United Collegiate Choir and became a member of Kappa Alpha Psi, a historically black fraternity.

On the court, Hamilton stood out with his impressive athleticism. He could stand flat-footed and dunk, which for a 6-foot-1 guard in the late '60s was quite the feat. He garnered the respect of his teammates, was well-liked and didn't have any conflicts regarding his race.

"I didn't have a whole lot of interracial relationships (in Gastonia)," Hamilton said. "And I was green and inexperienced and all of the above, but I guess I had enough savvy and enough maturity to be the right person to integrate the situation. I didn't know that at the time. That's just the way it evolved."

In Hamilton's second year, Mel Page became the second black player to join the team. Hamilton was instrumental in his recruitment, introduced him to the coaches and players and provided guidance for everything from choosing classes to improving as a player.

"My freshman year, even though we weren't roommates, it seemed like he was my big brother and I just tagged along with him," Page said. "Just about everywhere he went, I would go there."

Besides his athletic ability, Hamilton ingratiated himself with others with his kindness. Page became Hamilton's roommate in 1970 and once borrowed his early '60s Chevrolet Impala to go to a party. He returned the car with a large hole in the front seat from a cigarette burn. Hamilton, who woke up at 5 a.m. regularly to read the newspaper, discovered the hole the next morning. Instead of snapping, he calmly took the front seat out of the car to air out the smell.

"He came in and asked me about it," Page said with a laugh. "I didn't know how to tell him. I thought he was going to really get pissed off about it. And he didn't."

While living with Hamilton, Wilcox caught pneumonia. Hamilton checked on him frequently, ensured he took his medicine regularly and brought him food from the cafeteria across campus. Wilcox also suffered an injury that year and Hamilton took the time to stay late after practice and help him rehab.

"He didn't have to do that," Wilcox said. "That's just the type of person he was. He was a coach then, and he didn't know it."

Hamilton graduated from UT Martin in 1971 with a degree in physical education, unsure of what would come next. With the mandatory draft still in effect, however, he had to join the military or enter the draft. He had started the

process of becoming a member of the U.S. Army Reserve when a graduate assistant coaching position came open at Austin Peay. He took the job, enrolled in advanced Army ROTC training and was able to defer his service as long as he remained a full-time student.

“I did not know I wanted to coach,” Hamilton said. “That was unique within itself because I started there in September and the full-time assistant coach became ill in January and had to resign. So once again, I’m in the right place at the right time. Now I’m a graduate assistant with full-time assistant coach responsibilities.”

Coach Lake Kelly was organized and thorough, and he took the effort to teach Hamilton. During a typical practice, Kelly would run a drill on one end of the court while Hamilton did the same on the other. He learned how to communicate with, teach and motivate others.

Although some of the players were older than Hamilton, he was mature beyond his years. He was already married to Claudette, and the couple had their first child. Along with that, he earned respect through his playing experience.

During the spring of his first season, Hamilton temporarily dropped out of graduate school to take on more responsibility. He was nine hours short of completing his master’s degree, but because he was still technically a student, he didn’t have to enlist in the Army.

After the season, Hamilton embarked on his first recruiting trip, to New York. He’d never been to the city and didn’t even have a credit card to rent a car. He went in blind, but met two players — Fly Williams and Danny Odums — who signed with the Governors. Williams led the Ohio Valley Conference in scoring as a freshman and Odums led the conference in assists. Austin Peay went 22-7 and made its first NCAA Tournament appearance, reaching the Sweet 16 before losing to Kentucky in overtime.

“That was my first trip ever recruiting and the two kids who I recruited helped us go to the NCAA Tournament,” Hamilton said with a chuckle. “I always tell people my steps have been ordered. I mean, I didn’t know what I was doing. Really. I was just learning the business. Overall, that experience was unbelievable having that responsibility when I was that young. I’m like, I’m 23 years old and I have the responsibility of a coach. Who gets that kind of experience?”

The following year he approached the university president to discuss the possibility of becoming the head coach. Considering Kelly had just taken the Governors to their second consecutive NCAA Tournament, the timing was strange. Hamilton left the conversation believing he wouldn’t have the chance to take over because he was black, became disenchanted and abruptly resigned.

Looking back, Hamilton wonders what he must have been thinking. “I was discouraged that I wouldn’t become a head coach at 26, which I can’t believe the confidence I must have had,” Hamilton said. “I talked to him on Wednesday, resigned on Thursday, moved out of my house on Friday and took a job with Dow Chemical in Charlotte, N.C., on Monday.”

On that same Monday, Hamilton received a call from Joe B. Hall, the coach at Kentucky. The two initially crossed paths during their 1973 tournament meeting. The brother of the Austin Peay sports information director held the same role with the Kentucky Colonels of the ABA and was friends with Hall. The Austin Peay SID had relayed to his brother how good of a coach Hamilton was and he passed that information onto Hall.

Hamilton purchased a plane ticket to Lexington, Ky., the day that Hall called him, visited campus the next day and returned that night so he could be back at his job Wednesday morning. Hall called him the following Monday and offered him a job. Hamilton left Charlotte on Tuesday.

“I tried to get out of coaching,” Hamilton said. “I was just discouraged. I just didn’t see no way. That was a time in my life where I responded because of the climate of what was going on, but it’s almost like I had this hedge of protection. God just said, ‘This ain’t what I got for you.’”

"I went from not having a job to having a job with the winningest program in the history of college basketball. Now how do you add that up? All the stars were lined up for me. I feel like I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing." Hamilton made history once again when he became Kentucky's first black assistant coach in 1974. Much like at UT Martin, he adjusted well.

"I didn't get caught up in how I was perceived and what people thought on the other end," he said. "That's up to them. All I did was try to fulfill the requirements of the job that I had. Whenever there was an obstacle or a challenge, I just tried to work through it, we'll work around it or leave it alone. If I was concerned about anything else, then I would be distracted."

Hall, who was beginning his third season, gave Hamilton a lot of responsibility. He learned and acclimated himself to the differences regarding the academic program, conditioning program, recruiting, media responsibilities and attention at an SEC program. Hamilton caught on quickly.

"Leonard is a hard worker," Hall said in a phone interview earlier this month. "He's very knowledgeable about how to handle the press. He's cool-headed. His knowledge of people in the game ensures he's gonna be at the top of anything he takes responsibility for. He is a tireless worker, and all of his efforts were toward improving himself and doing his job to the best of his ability."

"He's a person that never wastes a minute's time during a day. He doesn't take part in the thrills of coaching. In that, I mean socializing or fishing or golf or hunting or any of those activities that free your mind from the pressures of your job. He seems to thrive on the pressures of what's expected of him. More than anybody I've ever known."

Over the course of Hall and Hamilton's 11 seasons together, Kentucky made nine NCAA Tournament appearances, two Sweet 16s, two Elite Eights, one Final Four and won the 1978 national championship. Hall retired in 1985, having long believed Hamilton would soon get an opportunity to become a head coach.

"I figured that somebody would recognize his talent and steal him away from me," Hall said. "And I would dread that day."

Hamilton remained on the staff for another year under Eddie Sutton. The Wildcats went 32-4 and made it back to the Elite Eight, but Hamilton believed he was ready for more.

"I was being trained and prepared when I really didn't know that I was being trained and prepared," Hamilton said. "I just felt so ready. Now the challenge for me was that as we had more success there and I had established myself as part of the winning culture, opportunities were coming, but I was very careful as to the type of job I thought I really needed."

Hamilton was ambitious, but he didn't exactly know what he should be looking for. He preferred a job in a large city with a strong recruiting base, ardent supporters, sound finances and modern facilities.

Then again, who wouldn't?

"It became obvious to me that I needed a job that was not a good job," Hamilton said. "A job that no one else had been consistently winning at. A job that was in a remote area where they're not supposed to have good players. It didn't matter if it was a football school or whatever, but I needed to have something where I could show what I was capable of doing."

Legendary Georgetown coach John Thompson Jr., who mentored Hamilton, recommended him for the Oklahoma State opening, and in 1986, Hamilton became a head coach. He was 38. He took the Cowboys from an 8-20 record in his first season to a 17-14 mark in his last season before leaving for Miami in 1990.

The Hurricanes hadn't had a basketball program for 13 years, but they came back that year as an independent. They didn't even have an on-campus gym. Figuratively, Hamilton was tasked with bringing a program back from the dead. He thought it was exactly the job he needed.

Miami joined the Big East in Hamilton's second season. He remained there for 10 seasons and led the Hurricanes, who hadn't made the NCAA Tournament since 1960, to three straight appearances starting in 1998. The turnaround was impressive, but Hamilton believed he was ready for a bigger challenge: the NBA.

Hamilton left Miami for a four-year, \$8 million deal as the coach of the Washington Wizards. He lasted only one season, going 19-63 before resigning. He came to realize he was better suited for the college game, but elected to sit out for a season to weigh his options around the country.

He didn't have to wait long. Florida State parted ways with Steve Robinson in 2001 after four consecutive losing seasons, and Hamilton was targeted as his replacement. He was interested in the opportunity to return to Florida, and the recent construction of the basketball training center and the chance to compete in the ACC were appealing. He accepted the job ahead of the 2002 season.

Initially, results were slow to come as the Seminoles had a losing record in two of Hamilton's first three seasons. He homed in on building a great staff of assistant coaches, developing lasting relationships with his players and figuring out how to navigate the challenges that came with competing in the basketball-rich ACC at a football-first university.

The program finally experienced its breakthrough when it made its first NCAA Tournament appearance under Hamilton in 2009. It would be the start of four consecutive bids, which included a Sweet 16 appearance in 2011, but that was followed by a four-year tournament drought from 2013 to '16. It was time for a change.

"I think two things happened: We started getting more skilled players and we adjusted our system to the talent we were getting," Hamilton said. "That's why our offense has gotten so much better. Some of those years, we were good but not as skilled and I had to coach to the talent I had. Now I'm able to recruit to the style that I want to play."

The Seminoles finished with the 58th-ranked class in the country in 2014 according to the 247Sports Composite, but they jumped to No. 11 the following year thanks to the addition of five-star guard Dwayne Bacon, four-star guard Malik Beasley and four-star guard Terance Mann. Beasley became the first one-and-done in program history, but Bacon and Mann were joined in 2016 by five-star forward Jonathan Isaac and four-star guards Trent Forrest and CJ Walker.

And in 2017 the 'Noles went 26-9 and made it to the second round of the NCAA Tournament. That started the current stretch of four consecutive tournament appearances, and FSU produced the most wins in a four-year span in program history.

"This is our second run at this thing," Hamilton said. "Once we got it going, I think it was more challenging to sustain it, but now I think we're where we need to be. We're not where we'd *like* to be. We'd like to be at the top."

Hamilton views the success as holistic. He values graduating players, the relationships he has developed with them and seeing them go on to have successful post-basketball careers. He takes pride in the staff he has put together, which is anchored by long-time assistants Stan Jones and Charlton Young. He's infinitely appreciative of the vast uptick in fan support.

Naturally, he still wants more.

"I've tried to keep things in perspective," Hamilton said. "As of right now, we've just got to try to finish this whole thing so we cannot be the 'what if' team."

Florida State has won at least 20 games in eight of the last 10 seasons, made six NCAA Tournament appearances and has become an ACC mainstay, but it's been perpetually overlooked in preseason projections. The Seminoles began this season unranked.

Despite his standing among the most successful coaches in conference history, Hamilton only this week won his third ACC Coach of the Year award. He believes the apparent lack of recognition for both himself and his program stems from the fact he has taken over rebuilding programs and experienced lulls in success.

"I can't expect to get the recognition other people have gotten," Hamilton said. "And it doesn't bother me because it hasn't been my journey. I've taken over jobs that I've had to build and develop. With that comes a period of adjustment. I'm not concerned about me personally."

Hamilton is happy that as of 2018, 61 of 63 players who enrolled and played at least four seasons have graduated. He's proud of the 14 NBA Draft selections he has produced since arriving in Tallahassee and the others who've carved out international careers. He's pleased about the ability of his team to win at a high level year in and year out.

"That's how I'm judging my success," Hamilton said. "If the general public don't recognize it, that's on them. I didn't take the job because I want to satisfy the public. I took the job because I wanted to fulfill my requirements and my obligations to the school and to the players I've recruited. I feel good about that."

"At Kentucky, I went to three Final Fours, won a national title and won a NIT title, so I've been through all of that. That's what I want for us. I can't get too overly concerned about my personal recognition. If there's some coming, then so be it if it helps our program, but I don't need it."

On the same note, Hamilton knows he's one of the most successful coaches in college basketball history. He knows how far-fetched that all seemed when he was a kid growing up in Gastonia or when he temporarily abandoned his coaching career. Even in the midst of his quest for excellence, he appreciates what he has accomplished.

"It means that I've been blessed and that same hedge of protection that's been around me and the same guy who was ordering my steps from Highland High School to Gaston Community College to UT Martin to Austin Peay is still alive and doing well," Hamilton said. "I'm still protected. I'm fulfilling my calling. We all have to fulfill the purpose we have."

"And I know that my purpose is to be coaching here because there's a piece of understanding that comes over me that I feel good about what I do every day."

His faith keeps Hamilton from becoming stressed about awards or rankings or national recognition. In fact, he prefers being overlooked because it provides his players additional motivation. Regardless of preseason rankings, history remembers who comes out on top.

"You can't let all that other stuff distract you," Hamilton said. "That's immaterial to me. I've been fortunate to be there, so there's no question I realize it would be nice for us to get that status, but that makes the difference in how you proceed. My goal is to be consistent every day. That's what I can control."

"I can't control March. I can't control April. What I can control is my mental and emotional preparation. And our guys have to stay in the moment. We're going to keep on kicking and doing exactly what we've been doing." Florida State experienced a taste of what it feels like to reach the top after its 80-62 win over Boston College last Saturday. Confetti fell. Nets were cut down. An ACC championship banner was unfurled in the rafters of the Tucker Center.

The Seminoles have designated themselves as "new blood." The ACC regular-season championship added another notch to their belt in their quest to be considered among the best programs in the country. Hamilton was emotional

as his players and staffers enjoyed the moment. He knows they aren't finished yet, but he believes their latest accomplishment will only push them to continue to push forward.

"Now it motivates you to want to work even harder to enjoy it again and again and again," Hamilton said. "That's what is significant about this moment. It's just the beginning."