

Leonard Hamilton: The Game Changer

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GASTONIA, N.C. — As the ball plunged through the net and Florida State's players sprinted in the direction of shooting guard Michael Snaer, Cameron Indoor Stadium was awash with emotion.

The 9,000 Duke fans in attendance were crushed. Blue Devils point guard Austin Rivers collapsed near the spot where the winning shot landed. Florida State's players and staffers jumped up and down in a wave of elation that carried them from one side of the court to the other.

And there was no telling how many cheers erupted back here in Gastonia, a three-hour ride south on Interstate-85.

This is a town that knows its basketball. Some folks pull for Duke or North Carolina; others live for N.C. State or Wake Forest. But they find common ground when it comes to supporting their home-grown products — from James Worthy, who was practically raised at the Boys Club; to Eric "Sleepy" Floyd, Darrell "Sky" Armstrong and Leonard "Hamp" Hamilton, who honed their skills at the Erwin youth center on Pryor Street.

On this day, of course, it was Hamilton who had the locals' attention.

Powered by brilliant team defense and the grace of Snaer's game-winning 3-pointer, Hamilton's Florida State Seminoles had shocked fourth-ranked Duke that afternoon. They had ended the Blue Devils' streak of 45 consecutive home victories and won in a building that had only seen FSU secure one win in school history.

It clearly was cause for celebration.

But Hamilton never offered so much as a smile. Standing stoic in the midst of chaos, he nodded at his celebrating players, turned 90 degrees to his left and marched forward to shake hands with the defeated Blue Devils.

It was the shot of a season.

It was the snapshot of a lifetime.

Escaping 'the gas house'

A large, pale water tower stands tall above Ozark Avenue, just northeast of downtown Gastonia. In green writing on its side, it reads, "Great place. Great people. Great promise."

It is the typical, generic type of public relations message scripted on billboards and banners in cities and towns across America.

But "promise" is not exactly the image that sticks with people who were raised here 40 or 50 years ago; at least not the ones who grew up in the poor, black neighborhoods.

"Gastonia was just a tough area, especially when you talk about socioeconomics," said Larry Reid, a lifelong friend of Hamilton's who now serves as an assistant principal at Warrington Middle School in Pensacola. "When we came through, Gastonia was in the textile center of the world, and most of our relatives worked in the cotton mills. Many of the people around us didn't have the basic necessities. They might have a radio or a black-and-white TV that you could use a clothes hanger to bring in one or two stations. But not much more than that. Even a bicycle was hard to come by."

In many of the homes, there was no indoor plumbing. Leonard Hamilton and his siblings had to boil water on a stove and pour it into a tin tub if they wanted a warm bath.

To put food on the table, families often had to be resourceful.

"Everybody had a hustle," said Willie Hamilton, one of Leonard's three younger brothers.

For some, it was hunting rabbits and selling them on the street for food. For others, it was selling moonshine.

Back then, Gastonia had a brutal reputation. It was known to many as "The Gas House," in reference to the exceedingly high crime rate and the number of residents who ended up on Death Row. So the Hamilton kids, and many of their friends, turned to athletics as a safe, productive outlet.

Leonard, the oldest of the bunch, was a phenom. By the time he reached middle school, he and Reid were strong enough to play with the grown men on the basketball courts next to the youth center at Erwin Park. Reid was known for his outside shot, while "Hamp" was more of a slasher.

"Leonard was a tremendous athlete with a lot of elevation," Reid said. "He could really jump. And he had great speed and quickness. I was a better jump-shooter, but I definitely was not the athlete that he was. He also was a very good ball handler."

The rugged appearance of the Erwin Park court — one long slab of concrete, split down the middle by a tennis net and surrounded by a 12-foot, chain-link fence — was symbolic of the style of play.

With half-court games of 4-on-4 taking place on either side of the court, and dozens of other young men waiting their turn, the contests felt like high-stakes affairs. The first team to reach 15 was allowed to stay and play again, while the losers had to either hope to be picked up by someone else or wait up to two hours for another chance.

"That was a tough brand of basketball," Reid said. "You could really get hurt out there. You didn't take the ball to the basket without getting hit. They would try to take your head off if you went to the basket. And there wasn't a lot of whining or crying about fouls. What was considered a foul was getting knocked down or getting a black eye. But it made us tough."

By the time Hamilton, Reid and their friends reached high school, they were not only competing with the older players, they were crushing them.

"Hamp could jump like (former N.C. State star) David Thompson," childhood friend Bobby Murray said. "Remember how David Thompson had that vertical jump? Leonard had the same thing. He could stand under the basket and just jump and dunk it backwards. He was something to see."

"We seldom lost," Reid said. "We just dominated. And we also would go to other towns and play. When the boys rolled in from 'The Gas House,' we usually dominated them, too."

They were so good that they sometimes created problems for themselves. Like the time they went to a YMCA in a neighboring county and won games by such a large margin that they were asked to not come back. And the day when a neighborhood bully felt as if Hamilton had embarrassed him with his play.

"We were whipping some older guys; they were like three or four years out of high school," Reid recalled. "And one of the biggest bullies in town — he was like 6-4 or 6-5 — he took a swing at Leonard, and Leonard swung one time. Leonard hit this guy and knocked him out. We had never seen anything like that. Usually, when guys would fight, you would end up pulling them apart. But this guy got knocked on his back."

"He knocked the guy out. I mean out," agreed Floyd Love, another member of Hamilton's circle. "The guy's friends carried him out, and he ended up coming back in with three or four guys and a knife, and they tried to cut Leonard. That was about as bad as it ever got."

Changing the culture

"Big John" Hamilton didn't make it out of the ninth grade. His wife, Bennie Ruth, dropped out in the seventh to go work as a sharecropper. But their oldest son, Leonard, knew from an early age that wasn't an option.

Even though they lived in the heart of Dixie, where in the mid-1960s schools still were segregated and blacks weren't allowed to eat in many restaurants, Leonard's parents saw a brighter future for their children.

"My father made it clear we were going to get our education," said Hamilton, who had four younger siblings. "He told us we weren't going to get anywhere in life without an education. That was paramount in every discussion that we had."

They had to not only get an education, but also work harder and be better prepared than their classmates.

"He never allowed us to make any excuses," Hamilton said. "We couldn't come to him and complain about not being treated fairly, or someone having an advantage. He would not allow that to be part of the conversation. So there was nothing else to think about, other than, 'You need to get the job done' and that there were absolutely no excuses for failure."

"Leonard always had a goal in life — to move from where he was into a better situation," said David Moore Sr., one of Hamilton's teachers at the old all-black Highland High School. "His personality was to focus on what he wanted to do. He wasn't the kind just to hang out."

There was no time for that. Between juggling his sports and academics, and helping to care for his siblings while his parents worked, Hamilton refused to waste a waking moment.

On many occasions, when a crowded house of eight people made studying too difficult, he would grab his textbooks, head outside and create a makeshift library out of a broken-down car.

"I was the kind that needed peace and quiet to study, and I just couldn't concentrate inside," Hamilton said. "So I would grab that big flashlight and head out to the car."

As the star point guard on Highland's basketball team and the quarterback of its football team, Hamilton figured his best chance to attend college would be earning an athletic scholarship. And since very few big-time colleges in the South were offering basketball scholarships to blacks, Hamilton originally accepted an offer to play football at Livingstone College in Salisbury, N.C.

Then when that didn't work out — he missed the start of preseason practice with a skin virus — Hamilton decided his best choice would be to join the military.

It wasn't until the local two-year school, Gaston College, hired a sharp young coach from Florida named Peter Brooks did his life begin heading toward its final destination. Brooks arrived in 1966 to start a basketball program from scratch, and he immediately heard chatter about Hamilton, the hot-shot guard from Highland.

Hamilton wasn't interested at first. Part of his attraction to the military was the opportunity to leave Gastonia and seek out new opportunities; so staying at home for two more years wasn't exactly appealing. But after listening to Brooks' sales pitch, Hamilton reconsidered.

It turned out to be a blessing for everyone involved. Hamilton would go on to become a star at Gaston College for two years and then play his final two seasons at Tennessee-Martin, where he again was the first black to break the color barrier.

But the prize all along — the one that would not only please his parents but also inspire his siblings — was the bachelor's degree he received following his senior year at UT-Martin, and then later his master's degree from Austin Peay.

"I wanted my mother and father to be proud of me, but the most important thing was I realized I had to try to change the culture of my brothers' and sister's goals," Hamilton said. "Because we didn't have a lot of those types of role models in our community."

In much the same fashion that his father urged him, Hamilton pushed his siblings. His greatest fear was they would be swept up by the harsh realities of "The Gas House." So he would help them with homework, watch them closely on the streets, and make sure they didn't get mixed in with kids who weren't on the same track.

"He always called it, 'The bad crowd,'" Hamilton's mother, Bennie Ruth, said. "He used to tell his brothers and sister, 'If you stay away from the bad crowd, you'll be all right.' And I would say, 'Now, how can you tell who is the bad crowd?'"

"He said, 'You can tell. You can tell the good from the bad.' And Leonard has always been good in my eyesight. Leonard never gave me a minute of trouble."

Though she now is 97 years of age and well-cared for in a Gastonia nursing home, Bennie Ruth Hamilton's smile still lights up when the subject turns to Leonard. She doesn't follow his games as closely as she used to, but she remembers clearly how proud she and "Big John" were when Leonard earned his degree — and how he went to great lengths to make sure his siblings followed the same path.

While he was serving as a graduate assistant coach at Austin Peay in Clarksburg, Tenn., Hamilton even went so far as to ask his parents if he could take little brother Willie, who was entering his senior year of high school, to live with him.

"He was kind of a father figure because he was about six years older," Willie said. "So I went out there and graduated from Clarksburg High. He helped me out quite a bit. At home, if I had an algebra problem or a geometry problem, there was no one that could help me. But Leonard had already graduated with his bachelor's and was working on his master's, so I listened to everything he had to say."

Within a few years, Willie would become the second of the Hamilton siblings to earn his degree. He went on to a successful basketball career at Western Carolina, graduated with his bachelor's and went on to a white-collar career. Then Hamilton adopted another younger brother, Barry, and sister, Pamela, and provided the same opportunities for them.

The further he soared, the further they soared.

"He wanted us to be able to take advantage of the things he was experiencing," said Willie, who recently retired after 35 years with the same company. "It was no disrespect to my parents. He wasn't trying to run the house. It was just a knowledge thing."

And as "Big John," who passed away in 1999, figured, that "knowledge thing" was contagious.

Both of Willie's sons have now graduated from college, including one with honors from the University of Miami. Leonard and wife Claudette's two children have earned college degrees as well. In fact, there are college graduates sprinkled throughout the family.

"Leonard pretty much started it," Willie said. "He was the first one in the family to earn a degree. When we were coming up, your choices were to either get drafted or go work in the cotton mills. He didn't want that. He wanted something better."

'The big picture'

It took about two days of preseason practice before Peter Brooks realized Leonard Hamilton would be one of his key players. And it was soon after that he knew he had a potential star.

"He reminded me of Oscar Robertson," Brooks said, referring to the former college All-American and NBA All-Star. "He had the same kind of shot. Leonard was that kind of player."

Hamilton wasn't just quick; he was intelligent. He wasn't simply skilled; he was tough. In Brooks' mind, Hamilton had "the perfect body" for athletics. And on top of all that, he was an excellent teammate who refused to be out-worked.

"He dominated," Brooks said. "I don't care if we were playing North Carolina, Wake Forest or whoever."

Though Gaston College was a two-year school, Brooks was able to schedule the freshman teams from many of the top programs in the South; they played Duke, North Carolina, Clemson, Wake Forest, Louisville and others.

And Hamilton, indeed, was often the best player on the court. In one game, against Montreat-Anderson, he and backcourt mate Jim Turpin each scored more than 50 points in a 150-87 victory. Turpin finished with 53; Hamilton had 54

"Even though he was a guard, almost all of his baskets were layups or dunks," said old friend Larry Reid, who watched that game from the stands. "A lot of times they would just grab a rebound, get the ball to Leonard and he would zip up and down the court and dunk."

Everything about Hamilton impressed his new teammates. While some of them came from humble backgrounds, they had no idea what poverty was until they visited his house.

Just the fact that he made it to class each day was an accomplishment. Living four miles away from school, with no means of transportation, the team's best player would either bum a ride from a friend or coach or, most often, walk up to the highway and hitch.

"And he'd always be one of the first ones at practice," Brooks said. "He'd be dressed; he'd be out there shooting. It was obvious that, 'Hey, this guy wants to play.' He stood out from the beginning."

As one of the first black college athletes in the South, however, Hamilton stood out for other reasons.

When the team would go off to play road games, there were restaurants that wouldn't feed him, movie theaters that wouldn't allow him to sit with his white teammates (which would cause the whole squad to leave), and there were even some physical altercations.

"There were some rough places," said Robert Marziano, one of Hamilton's white teammates. "They cut off the water at our hotels. People would say things ... shameful things. One night, Coach made Leonard go back into the dressing room before the game was over because he was worried about him. But Leonard didn't want to go. He wanted to stay with his team."

Hamilton finally went to the back to let things cool down, but even that didn't help. While he was in the locker room, some students came out of the stands and attacked his teammates and even injured Coach Brooks.

But that was the exception. In most instances, when the assaults were just verbal, the young man who once shocked his friends by knocking out a bully with one punch usually played the role of peacemaker. "There were times that Leonard had to cool me down," Brooks said. "Some of the garbage we got ... Leonard would say, 'Hey, we've got more important things than to honor what they're saying or doing.' We just put that out of our minds. He was an inspiration; he really was."

Looking back on it now, Hamilton gives much of the credit to his parents and to the other families in the neighborhood. Even when times were tough economically, and their children didn't have access to the same opportunities as many white kids, the adults Hamilton knew never preached hatred.

"I always felt like you had to stay focused on the big picture," Hamilton said. "People were not that way because they chose to be that way. They were that way because of the climate and the times. It's what they had been taught. So to try to change some of those stereotypical attitudes, you had to try to be above it. I wasn't intimidated by any of it. I wasn't afraid of any of it."

"But I felt we were there to play basketball, get our education and move on."

His many blessings

One day before his Florida State men's basketball team would take on a Virginia squad that was ranked in the top 20 of both major polls, Leonard Hamilton sat in his corner office on the third floor of FSU's Basketball Training Center and laughed as he listened to the question.

It was one he had heard so many times before.

Why does a man who has been named national coach of the year two times, who as a young assistant coach helped Kentucky win a national championship and has a well-deserved reputation for being one of the top recruiters and defensive coaches in the game, always seem to find himself at programs like this?

When he left Kentucky in 1986, it was to take over a struggling Oklahoma State. After turning that program around in four years, he was lured to an even worse situation at Miami. And after taking the Hurricanes from worst to first in the Big East during his tenure there, followed by a brief stop in the NBA, he made his way to Tallahassee in 2002.

FSU had reached the NCAA Tournament just once in the previous eight seasons, and Hamilton knew it would be a struggle. But that, he said, was precisely why it was appealing.

"I had other head coaching opportunities when I was looking to leave Kentucky," said Hamilton, who is an extremely young and active 63. "But I really just felt that my skills, which I had developed over the years, were better suited where we have a chance to go in and help rebuild a program that hadn't had a lot of success in recent years. There's just a different mindset and focus you have to have when you're building, as opposed to maintaining."

In some ways, Leonard "Hamp" Hamilton was made for jobs like this.

Jobs where you have to be resourceful. "He was driven," remembered Marziano, his teammate at Gaston College. "He was inspirational. Nothing, no matter what got in his way, was going to stop him. He was going to go around it, over it or through it. He played that way, too."

Jobs where you have to recruit elite players without the amenities of the programs you are competing against. "When he was at Austin Peay, he went into New York and beat out (Jerry) Tarkanian for Fly Williams," recalled his brother Willie. "He convinced Fly Williams, who would be the top scorer in the country, to come to this little town in Clarksburg, Tennessee. Good grief."

Jobs where you, as his father told him all those years ago, would have to not only be as good as the other guys, but be better than them and work harder.

Early Saturday afternoon, Leonard Hamilton's Seminoles defeated Virginia, 58-55, to improve to 7-1 in the Atlantic Coast Conference — a mark never before achieved in school history. The Seminoles also have set a new school record by winning seven consecutive ACC games.

They have beaten preseason No. 1 North Carolina by 33 points, knocked off the conference's perennial powerhouse, Duke, for the second consecutive season, and enter the second half of the season with the inside track on a first-ever regular-season ACC championship.

This just one year after going to their first NCAA Tournament Sweet 16 appearance in nearly two decades.

It has been an amazing turnaround, indeed.

Not only for the program, but for the boy who came from next to nothing, broke numerous racial barriers, achieved incredible success, uplifted his family and inspired so many others along the way.

"You don't realize the meaningful lessons that you learn when you're going through the struggle," Hamilton said. "At the time you're going through those challenges, you really don't know that they're any different than what other people are going through. So I feel like I have been blessed on both ends. I was blessed to have the lessons that those obstacles taught me, and I was blessed to have the opportunities where I could apply what I learned."

It is that type of perspective – the maturity his parents saw during his childhood, the confidence his friends witnessed in the neighborhood, the focus Mr. Moore saw in the classroom and the wisdom Coach Brooks saw at Gaston College — that have made it possible.

"If he put his mind to it, Leonard could pretty well do whatever he wanted," Brooks said. "To me, it was just an honor and a privilege for me to have him in my life."