

Hamilton, Missouri's Martin Share Mutual Respect On And Off Court

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. – For all the kind words that Missouri coach Cuonzo Martin heaped on Florida State's Leonard Hamilton on Thursday afternoon, perhaps Martin's greatest show of respect was in the way that he referred to Hamilton while fielding questions during his press conference here at Bridgestone Arena.

"Seems like Coach's teams always have length, athleticism," Martin said at one point.

Then later, when discussing Florida State's defense, Martin said, "That's where Coach hangs his hat."

Finally, Martin recalled "wanting to meet Coach" and, when he finally did, being taken aback with Hamilton's calm demeanor and his leadership traits.

For the 46-year-old Martin, 23 years Hamilton's junior, there's no need to call Hamilton by any other name. "Coach" will suffice.

Each coach expects an atmosphere of respect and admiration when Hamilton's eighth-seeded Seminoles meet Martin's No. 9-seed Tigers in the first round of the NCAA tournament on Friday night.

"If there is such thing as a mentor in this profession, he would be one for me," Martin said.

"The most impressive thing about Cuonzo, I think he really cares about his profession," Hamilton added. "He's extremely concerned with his players and their well-being, and when you have a coach who is passionate about the respect and love that he has for his players – and on top of that, he's a good coach, a good mentor, a good father figure for his guys – you know that success is just right around the corner."

Martin believes he first met Hamilton in 2000, when Hamilton was about to embark on a stint with the NBA's Washington Wizards and Martin was first setting out as an assistant at his alma mater, Purdue, under coach Gene Keady.

In Hamilton, Martin saw someone who had blazed a trail that he hoped to walk: An African-American coach who played the game, started coaching at a young age and climbed through the ranks to take control of his own program.

Naturally, Martin sought to learn as much from Hamilton as he could.

"When you're an assistant coach, and even (still) as an African-American coach who has been through it a long time, you migrate to guys to get information," Martin said. "'How do you do this? How do you maintain? How do you have success?' It's all those things. ...

"His demeanor, his calmness as a man, as a leader really stood out to me."

Hamilton, for his part, recalls meeting Martin and seeing something in him that he wanted to help nurture.

"I've always tried to make myself be available for anything I can do to help younger coaches, because I had some great mentors myself," Hamilton said. "I feel honored that he would even reach out and want to talk to me, because I admire and respect what he's done, and what he's done in his coaching career. ...

"There have been times I've gotten phone calls early in the morning, late at night and we've had to have what we call the 'brother-in-law conversations,' what we call 'graveyard conversations' that we talk about it and leave it there."

Those conversations often have little to do with the Xs and Os on a basketball floor.

Martin said that he and Hamilton have discussed many of the challenges surrounding their profession – how to reach their players, how to help them in their personal lives, and how to avoid the missteps that can sometimes happen in the coaching world.

Hamilton poked a little fun at himself and said that, after more than 40 years in coaching, he knows where to find all the potential pitfalls.

“Sometimes it’s good to have somebody like myself, who has made a lot of mistakes,” Hamilton said. “You know, I’ve learned (a lot), not because I’ve been smarter than anyone else, but because I’ve made enough mistakes, and sometimes mistakes will teach you how not to make the same mistake again.

“I’m just available so (Martin) won’t bump his head against the wall, like the bumps I had. I keep him from bumping his head as much as I can.”

While they share a friendship on and off the floor, both Hamilton and Martin will be looking to succeed at the other’s expense on Friday night.

Hamilton said he expects a healthy challenge from Martin’s Tigers, who in his first year at the helm won 20 games – despite combining for only 27 victories in the three years prior to his arrival.

“They execute their offense very well,” he said. “Defensively, they’re very sound fundamentally. They’re extremely physical. They play awful hard and they’re very well coached.”

And Martin believes he’ll see all of Florida State’s typical hallmarks under “Coach” – length, athleticism and tenacious defense.

“Coach,” Martin said, “is built on that.”