

Florida State's Hamilton: Nobody Expected Us To Be Where We Are. Nobody.

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LOS ANGELES, Calif. – A day before Florida State played Gonzaga in a Sweet 16 matchup, Leonard Hamilton, the Seminoles' 69-year-old head coach sat in a vacant room repeating a familiar refrain: No Respect.

"Nobody expected us to be where we are. Nobody," Hamilton said.

It's true. Not just about the Florida State team but also about Hamilton. He was a poor kid from Gastonia, North Carolina, from where no wonderful things were expected. This is the chip he has carried for the past six decades, from Gaston Community College in North Carolina, to the University of Tennessee-Martin, through four assistant coaching stops, four head coaching gigs.

Hamilton has made a career out of defying odds, working with young, mostly black players and showing them that if a poor kid from Gastonia could succeed, they could make it too, provided they stayed hungry and kept the faith.

"I have been clawing and scratching, scratching and clawing, and that's OK," he said. "That's who I am. That's how I was raised. That's what I'm about."

Florida State scratched and clawed its way past favored Gonzaga but lost to Michigan, 58-54.

"Not one person on TV thinks we've got a shot," he said. "I love it."

Before Saturday's loss, Hamilton is the last man standing. That is, the last African-American head basketball coach standing in the tournament dominated by young black talent.

Hamilton, who has been a head coach for over 30 years at three universities, has never been one to publicly rattle sabers about the number of black people in coaching and administrative positions, but he thinks about it, even during a tournament run.

He was a teenager in 1966 when Texas Western, with an all-black starting lineup, upset Kentucky to win the NCAA basketball title. While there has been an explosion of black talent on the court, the road for blacks in every other facet of the industry has been littered with obstacles.

"It has been extremely confusing at times, discouraging at times, to come up with the right answer," Hamilton told me this week. "It's a mystery to me why progress has been so slow. It's a mystery why the doors have not been opened wider."

This month marks the 52nd anniversary of that Texas Western victory, which unfolded on March 19. The game became a reference point for athletic integration.

"That was a monumental event in our lives," said David Williams, II.

Williams was a sophomore at Northern Michigan University then. Today, as the athletic director at Vanderbilt, he is one of a handful of black athletic directors at Power Five conference member schools.

He has seen a change so drastic that if a team of all white players won the national championship in 2018, it would be considered as novel as five black starters winning in 1966. The presence of black players has exploded, but the number of black coaches and administrators has not come close.

This has created an odd optic.

“it’s very disheartening, over time, to sit there and constantly watch the game,” said Williams.

“He watched Kansas State upset Kentucky on Thursday.

“You’re watching Kansas State and you’re watching Kentucky and its 10 black kids going back and forth, back and forth, but every time they spotlight the head coach of those teams it’s a white guy.”

He said he was not suggesting that there should not be white head coach or that white coaches should not coach black kids.

“But you do start to say, ““What’s wrong with this picture?””

More than the issue of player compensation, the uneven distribution of labor is troubling.

Why has the recruitment of black college football and basketball players escalated to warp speed while the hiring of black coaches and the promotion of black administrators progressed like a crawl?

Williams said it’s an issue of “intentionality.”

“You have to be intentional about what you are doing. If you’re trying to win the championship, you’re very intentional about who you recruit,” he said.

Black athletes are needed to be successful; the perception is that black coaches and administrators may not be as necessary.

Stan Wilcox, the Florida State athletics director, was 7 years old when Texas Western upset Kentucky. He has seen a gradual moving away from the deeply entrenched ol’ boys network in intercollegiate sports. But until change comes at the presidential level, the will be no major sea change.

“At the end of the day, we all report to the president. When you see more diversity occurring there, you’ll see more diversity with minorities and women happening faster throughout the rest of the industry.

There has been progress. When Florida State played Michigan on Saturday, both schools had African American athletic directors. Warde Manuel, the Michigan AD, is black.

Kevin White, the Duke Athletic Director, was 15 years old in March 1966. He has seen the dichotomy as well as the rabid recruitment of black football and basketball players and the often tepid hiring of women, blacks and other people of color in athletic administration, including coaching.

He agreed with Wilcox.

“The hiring entities tend to reinforce their personae image by securing people who not only look like they do but also think the way they do,” White said.

“The hiring mechanism was dominated by older white males and they tend to hire people who look like they did, have the same political views that they have, social views and everything else.”

The second problem happens at what White calls the bottom of the food chain, entry-level positions in the industry where middle managers have stocked the pipeline with mostly young white males.

“We’ve done a very poor job at the entry-level and lowest end of the food chain,” White said.

“We tend to hire a whole bunch of people who express interest who happen to be white males. Once we put all those kids in the queue, it’s hard then to bring kinds in from the outside and have them cut the line.”

It’s difficult to pull athletes of the sports conveyor belt and put them into the administration pipeline. White said he is in the process of aggressively recruiting a former Duke football player into administration. The hard part has been persuading the player to get off the pro football treadmill.

“We’ve done a very poor job on that. I’ll indict the whole enterprise on that front.” said White.

White hired black head coaches at Maine, and at Notre Dame he hired football coach Tyrone Willingham.

There have been suggestions that each conference should institute a college version of the NFL’s Rooney Rule and require member schools to interview a diverse pool of talent before making hires.

In recent weeks, Georgia and Mississippi hired basketball coaches. Williams wonders whether either school interviewed minority candidates.

“If the institution has the intentionality to make change, they’ll agree to a Rooney Rule,” Williams said.

He said that the issue of disparity between black players, coaches and administrators has not seriously been addressed at conference meetings either.

“These are not the issues that get talked about at the conference level.” Williams said. “We’ll have committees that deal with student conduct and those type of things, but where is the task force and the committee that is going to sit down and say, ‘We have 14 head coaches, we got all of these black kids playing, shouldn’t we be doing something as a conference to talk about the diversity of the head coaches pool?’” We don’t do that.”

For now, and for the next two weeks, the focus on college basketball will be on the road to the Final Four and the athletes who make the journey.

Leonard Hamilton’s focus on the journey. Winning, he believes, will cure a multitude of social ills within the basketball industry.

He began his head coaching career at Oklahoma State in 1986. He walked through the door that John Thompson, Nolan Richardson, John Chaney and George Raveling had opened during their legendary careers.

They forcefully raised issues about coaching opportunities in an industry that ran on black talent but kept black coaches at bay.

They were also successful on the court.

Thompson’s Georgetown team reached the Final Four three times and won the title in 1984.

Richardson led Arkansas to the national title in 1994. Chaney won an NCAA title at Cheyney State in 1978 and became a legendary coach at Temple. Raveling was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 2015.

A new group of black head coaches has not consistently filled the void – on or off the court.

“They opened up doors for guys to be at Tennessee, Alabama, Indiana, Ohio State, Kentucky, Cincinnati, Minnesota,” Hamilton said. “but the level of success that those guys enjoyed did not follow them.”

For Hamilton, winning speaks volumes. “I feel that I have to do what I do in the lane that I’m in with the opportunity that has been given to me,” he said.

"I want to let my actions speak for me."