

'Nole' Small Impact: FSU's Hamilton Recalls Impression Made By Fleming's Kelly

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The Daily Independent

January 19, 2019

Already a decorated college basketball coach, the late Lake Kelly re-invented himself at the end of a long career as the high school coach and a school administrator in his home community of Fleming County.

That's why the Panthers are honoring him Saturday with the inaugural Coach Lake Kelly Classic.

Kelly's influence spread well beyond Flemingsburg, though. It can usually be seen on national television once or twice a week this time of year, in the form of the coach of the 11th-ranked team in the country.

In 1971, Kelly took over as head coach at Austin Peay State University and hired the first African-American coach the Governors had ever had.

Forty-eight years later, Leonard Hamilton is a three-time national coach of the year, has the eighth-most wins in Atlantic Coast Conference history and is Florida State's all-time winningest coach.

That career started in Clarksville, Tennessee, when Kelly brought Hamilton on as a graduate assistant. Hamilton's duties increased exponentially midseason, when a Governors assistant fell ill.

Never mind that Hamilton was younger than some of Austin Peay's players, he said.

"As young as I was, to be put in that situation where I had to grow up and learn the business, I could not have been in better situation with a better person and coach," Hamilton said of Kelly in a Wednesday phone interview.

"I could not have been more blessed in my first year out than to learn from and work with and emulate Lake Kelly." Even though Hamilton was the first black coach at Austin Peay, not all that long after Ashland's Marshall Banks became the first black Ohio Valley Conference basketball player at Morehead State in 1958, Kelly didn't hire him to make a statement about race, Hamilton said.

The two instead grew what Hamilton called "an unbelievable special relationship."

"There's no question that he was colorblind," Hamilton said of Kelly. "It was like my steps were ordered to be with somebody in the early part of my career that could help give me some direction.

"He gave me the opportunity to grow, learn, make mistakes. He gave me guidance and let me be who I am, which gave me a tremendous amount of confidence. When a person gives you that level of confidence, it makes you work harder to succeed to prove that you're worthy of the confidence that he's given you, especially during that day and time when there weren't very many black guys at the level that he was giving me."

Hamilton said the most lasting part of his coaching philosophy he learned from Kelly was how to communicate with his players.

Hamilton still talks today about Kelly's wife, Marti, passing out peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to the Governors for a nightly snack, or the effort Kelly put into taking care of Howard Jackson, one of his players who fell 83 feet through a skylight at a summer job and survived, but shattered both of his legs.

Jackson, who had casts on both legs from his ankles to his hips, moved into the Kelly home, Hamilton recalled. Kelly fed Jackson, bathed him, escorted him to the bathroom, and drove him to campus, with a plywood plank affixed to

the bottom of the “6-7 or 6-8” Jackson’s wheelchair so his legs would stick out straight. That also involved Kelly carrying Jackson up the steps of academic buildings to get him to class.

Kelly’s young, impressionable assistant soaked it all in.

“We’re talking about him as a coach,” Hamilton said, “but you would never see anybody go to that extent for a player. He did it himself. That says a lot about what kind of guy he was.”

Hamilton worked with Kelly up close and personal. Much of what Chris Stapleton knows about Kelly is second-hand, but it didn’t take him long to see Kelly’s fingerprints at Fleming County.

The Panthers’ second-year coach drives every day on Coach Lake Kelly Memorial Highway on his way to school and sometimes glances at team pictures of the Panthers’ 1998 and 1999 region champions, coached by Kelly, on the wall of the end zone of Panthers Den. And Marti Kelly was one of the first people Stapleton met when he took over in Flemingsburg, he said.

Stapleton did get to watch Kelly work. A Mason County native, Stapleton was a wide-eyed 10 or 11-year-old Royals fan when the Panthers ran through the 39th District and the 10th Region en route to the 1998 state tournament semifinals and a return trip to Rupp Arena the next season.

“I really feel like he helped rejuvenate Fleming County basketball and brought them back to relevance,” Stapleton said of those Panthers’ coach.

Kelly’s son, Brian, is also a former Fleming County bench boss. He took over the Panthers in 2009, shortly after his father died, and led them until 2012. Brian Kelly coached Lawrence County from 1994-96, noted there for being the swing vote to institute seeding in the 64th District.

Brian Kelly is now the athletic director at Poplar Grove Middle School in Franklin, Tennessee, where he also coaches boy’s basketball and tennis. He plans to make the trip up for Saturday.

“It’s very special. A lot of ties, a lot of memories,” he said. “Still feel like that area’s home, and for them to do this in Dad’s name is quite an honor. We’re excited about it.”