

The Game Is Far From Over For 70-Year-Old Leonard Hamilton

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. -- He still feels the words all these decades later, so intensely, that he closes his eyes, puts his hand to his heart and pauses.

"Every time I say this, I get emotional about it," Leonard Hamilton says quietly.

It is 1974, and Austin Peay has just put together back-to-back NCAA tournament berths. Head coach Lake Kelly starts to attract attention from other schools across the country. Hamilton, then a 26-year-old assistant on staff and the lead recruiter, decides to see university president Joe Morgan with a pressing question.

Hamilton asks Morgan whether he would be the next head coach at Austin Peay if Kelly leaves. To this day, Hamilton does not know what gave him the audacity to go see Morgan and ask. But that audacity is the reason he is sitting in his Florida State office, retelling the story.

"He looked at me," Hamilton recalls. "He says, 'Leonard, nothing would make me happier than for you to be the head coach at Austin Peay. But I'm retiring in two years, and for you to be the first black head coach in the Ohio Valley Conference -- I don't think I can make that happen.'"

His eyes begin to well up.

"Whew," Hamilton says, letting out a deep, heavy sigh. "Where did I get that from? To think that I'm going to be a head coach at Austin Peay when there were no black head coaches hardly anywhere. But I hadn't even thought about being black. I felt I could get the job done.

"Every time I think about it, it does something to me. That cut my guts out."

It cut so badly, Hamilton quit coaching. But for a providential phone call from Joe B. Hall at Kentucky, Hamilton could very well be a salesman today in North Carolina. Instead, he built programs into winners at nontraditional basketball outposts, accepting this was the best avenue for him to take to maximize his impact.

He did it first at Oklahoma State and Miami. For the past 17 seasons, he has done it at Florida State, where he is the school's all-time winningest coach. Going into the No. 13 Seminoles' game against No. 1 Duke on Saturday, Florida State ranks No. 4 in the ACC in wins since the start of the 2005-06 season. Hamilton himself straddles a world uniquely his own: old enough to remember a time when black head coaches were extremely rare, but modern enough to lead an ACC program to the Elite Eight while sending a succession of players to the NBA.

After that Elite Eight run in last year's tournament quieted a growing number of critics in Tallahassee, he's arguably more relevant today than at any other point in his tenure -- with yet another team poised to make a deep tournament run.

"You're not playing against a team, you're playing against a program, and a program has certain values," says Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski. "His teams play together. They're very athletic, and they play outstanding defense, so I would anticipate we would see the same thing we've seen for a number of years from Leonard, because he's an outstanding coach."

His record says as much. To understand how Hamilton has done it, you first have to understand how his varied experiences shaped him not as a coach, but as a person.

Hamilton grew up in segregated North Carolina, poor, in a family of eight living in a four-room house with no running water, indoor plumbing or air-conditioning. "I didn't live on a street," he says. "I lived on a path between two streets." His father was a truck driver who moonlighted as a bootlegger to make ends meet. His mother was a domestic worker.

They grew up so close to their church, the Hamilton's could hear the piano playing inside their home. Hamilton sang in the choir, and his connection to the church and God remains a central part of his life. He owns a gospel music label and believes a "hand of protection" from above has guided him.

He got in trouble growing up, but always found a way out -- especially through sports. In 1969, he became the first black men's basketball player at UT-Martin. When he arrived in Martin, Tennessee, he found the bus had dropped him nearly two miles from campus. Armed with a heavy trunk and a large duffel bag, Hamilton would alternate dragging his trunk and bag along the street until he got to the dormitories.

When he met his teammates, he realized some of them had never played with a black player. His coach had never coached a black player. This was nothing new to Hamilton, who used his likability, gregarious personality and exceptional communication skills to endear himself to those around him. His high self-confidence helped, too. He also was a terrific player, known for his tenacious defense. That would soon become a hallmark of his own basketball teams.

"There were seven of us that came in as junior college transfers, and the best way to describe how Leonard handled it is in his second year he was named Mr. UTM, which was unheard of in the late 1960s for an African-American to be accepted like he was," says former UTM teammate Rick Leeper. "His personality gets him past that. Even the ones that had not played with any black athletes had no problem with him at all. Of course, that's the great thing about athletics. We're color blind."

Hamilton's first plan out of college was to join the Marines. But that changed when he landed a job as a graduate assistant at Austin Peay. That changed again when Kelly lost an assistant and decided to give Hamilton much more responsibility to help fill the void. At the time, Hamilton was married with a young child and had adopted one of his younger brothers to provide a better opportunity than what they had back home.

Hamilton gladly accepted the challenge, realizing this was his chance to prove exactly what he could do. He meticulously organized his schedule, put in long hours and developed a trademark work ethic his players still marvel at today. Soon he found himself on his first trip to New York City, staying up all night talking to the mother of a top recruit after turning the clock in her apartment back several hours to keep the conversation going.

That recruit, Fly Williams, ended up becoming the greatest player in Austin Peay history. But Hamilton had his work cut out for him beyond the recruiting trail. Only a few years older than his players, Hamilton had to approach his job differently than a more veteran assistant. On top of that, it was the first time many of the players on the team had played for a black coach.

"A lot of us black players, we didn't quite get it early," says Howard Jackson, who played for Hamilton at Austin Peay. "But the example he was setting is what we needed, and we became better people because of the exposure we had with him. He always held us accountable, and he held us accountable as much academically as he did in basketball. In coaching, it's very difficult for some to be honest with the players they're dealing with. He was always honest with me. He told me what I needed to hear, not what I wanted to hear."

Kelly also served as a guiding force for Hamilton, especially in the way he cared for and treated his players. Jackson was involved in a devastating accident in the summer of 1972 -- his career ended when he fell more than 80 feet through a skylight while working a summer job at a steam plant -- in which he broke both his legs. But Kelly cared for Jackson like a son, allowing him to stay in his home, driving him to class, pushing his wheelchair, taking him to doctor appointments. Hamilton watched with awe and vowed whenever he became a head coach, he would treat his players with the care Kelly always showed.

But when would that opportunity come?

In that office with Morgan in 1974, Hamilton felt defeated in a way he never expected. Race had played a role in his entire life, but he always found a way to break through barriers. Hearing those words from Morgan made him think maybe he couldn't break through them all.

He resigned the next day and moved to Charlotte, North Carolina, to work as a salesman for Dow Chemical. But back in Clarksville, Tennessee, Kelly had called then-Kentucky coach Joe B. Hall. "He told me Hamilton was too good of a coaching prospect to leave something that he had such a good future in," Hall said in a phone interview. So Hall called Hamilton for an interview.

Hamilton told him, point blank, "I'll be loyal to you. Nobody will outwork me, and I won't get you in trouble. But if you're not going to offer me this job, I'm going to go on back to Charlotte, and I want to be the No. 1 chemical salesman in the country."

Hall offered the job. Hamilton took it and left behind a note on his desk after a week at Dow Chemical that read, "I resign my position effective immediately. Thank you very much for the opportunity. Leonard Hamilton."

Whatever hurt he felt, he channeled into purpose. He was the first black assistant at storied Kentucky, a program that had only integrated five years earlier. Coaching here could get him a springboard to a head job, and in some ways affirmed the work he did at Austin Peay. But it would not be easy, at least at first. Both whites and blacks questioned why he was there -- whites because they were still uncomfortable with a black coach on the bench; blacks because he chose to work at a place that had never much cared for folks their color.

Hamilton did the only thing he knew: He worked, and he worked some more, recruiting high-profile players and excelling as a floor coach. The results would speak for him. Hamilton knew how to talk to people, but he also knew how to get people to trust him. Exacting and tough, but genuine and caring, Hamilton built a reputation as an indispensable part of Hall's staff. "When I hired him, I got a lot more than I expected," Hall says. "His work ethic is unequalled in the coaching profession. He never wastes a minute. He was that goal-oriented and that clear in his mind, how it would take 100 percent effort to achieve his goals. He never let an opportunity slip."

Hamilton spent 12 seasons at Kentucky, but head-coaching jobs at major programs remained elusive. In time, Hamilton realized he did not need those jobs to validate his work. Perhaps getting passed over for the Kentucky job in 1985 in favor of Eddie Sutton crystallized that for him.

Hamilton spent his career as the guy who just needed a chance. He had to find a program just like that.

"As a young assistant, I wanted me a great job, I wanted to be in a job where all the players are, but after a period of time, God reached down from heaven to say, you don't need one of those good jobs," Hamilton says. "In order for you to be significant in this basketball world, you need to take jobs that nobody else has been successful at. They're not hiring that many black people in the first place. Why does a good job in a good situation with great potential need you? So I started looking for jobs that had not been successful, jobs that had potential."

So he went to Oklahoma State in 1986 and took a program with a 37-year NCAA tournament drought back to the tournament. Then he went to Miami, which did not even field a team in the 1970s and most of the 1980s. He won there.

Then he went to the Washington Wizards, signing a five-year, \$10 million contract -- more than he'd ever been paid on the collegiate level. He went 19-63 and got fired after one season. Hamilton is reticent to discuss much about that year, saying only, "I'm appreciative of the opportunity. Things have worked out for the Wizards and things have worked out for me."

When he decided to get back into college coaching, Hamilton thought Florida State provided the perfect fit. And for 17 years, he has won there too, and shows no signs of letting up at age 70.

"He's had to pave his own way," says longtime assistant Stan Jones, who has worked alongside Hamilton for 22 years. "That allows you to be the ultimate competitor, but it teaches you how to be a genuine professional because you have to connect a lot of dots other people aren't connecting for you. When you apply those lessons and you keep those connections over the course of your career, it allows you to continue to take situations from Oklahoma State to Miami to Florida State, and put your stamp on it, where other people can say he just followed this guy, or he got this because of this coaching tree he was under.

"He had to go out and compete for players. He had to compete for respect. He had to compete to show people he's the best at the job he's given. To some people, that motivates. To some people, it intimidates. For him, it's an absolute motivation."

Hamilton has done it with his relentless recruiting, following up every single phone call and tip he gets on possible prospects. He has done it with buy-in from players, who understand fully the No. 1 expectation is to play solid, tough, relentless defense.

That is especially true playing in conferences like the Big East and ACC, with traditional programs that have more advantages than his own. Hamilton has to recruit a specific player to fit his specific scheme, and though he has changed up his offense some over the years to allow for more flexibility and versatility, the commitment to defense is the standard that never changes.

"You can be a kid that can score 30 points, but if you're not going to play defense, you're not playing for him. It's that simple," says Alex Fraser, who starred for Hamilton at Miami. "Coach Ham and his staff believe defense is the benchmark where their teams are going to be."

Because Hamilton and his staff have great rapport with their players, they have maximized their potential. Hamilton is not a screamer, and he does not get in his players' faces, though he does have a glare that many who do not know Hamilton mischaracterize as anger or harshness. The glare is simply his way of showing his players he is locked in, and he expects them to be locked in the same way.

"Regardless how far they go in March Madness, one characteristic of his teams are the kids respect him and they play hard," says Sam Bowie, whom Hamilton recruited to Kentucky in the early 1980s. "That doesn't mean their shots are going to go in and they're going to win the ACC or they're even going to qualify for the tournament. But when you watch Leonard Hamilton's teams play, they play with discipline, they play hard and they respect their coach."

Hamilton likes to tell his players, "The true test is how a man fights through adversity," having lived that all his life. And there was no truer test of that than last season, when Florida State coaches truly believed they had a Final Four-caliber team but struggled thanks to various injuries that disrupted their chemistry and production.

The Seminoles went into Selection Sunday on the bubble, and there was some grumbling in town about Hamilton's long-term future -- especially after a disappointing second-round NCAA tournament exit as a No. 3 seed in 2017. Florida State made it in as a No. 9 seed and pulled one upset after another, making it to the Elite Eight against Michigan before losing 58-54. "We never stopped believing in ourselves," says guard Trent Forrest. "Once we got there, it was the most focused I've ever seen us. We all had a fear of going home, and we didn't want to get knocked out in the first round. We knew we had a good team that deserved to be in the Final Four or the Elite Eight."

In the immediate aftermath of the game, Hamilton took heavy criticism for his "the game was over" comments, dismissive of a question about failing to foul in the final minutes from CBS sideline reporter Dana Jacobson. He has not spoken much about it publicly beyond a statement in which he offered his apologies and wished he had done better. Jacobson said on Twitter that Hamilton was "nothing but professional with me," noting he answered the question rather than walking away.

Hamilton allowed his emotions in the moment to swallow him. It was the closest a Hamilton-coached team had ever gotten to the Final Four.

Expectations skyrocketed headed into the season with a veteran group returning. But Phil Cofer got hurt in the preseason and is just working his way back into form, and Terance Mann has a heel injury that hampered him in a loss to Virginia last week. Facing Duke is always tough, but the level of difficulty is even higher for any team not at full strength.

Hamilton will manage his players the way he always does. No matter what happens, he will be the same person in the locker room he always is, dispensing words of wisdom or perhaps some measure of inspiration. The goal will remain the same.

"Showing people our run last year wasn't just a fluke, that we're back and hungry again," Mann says. That comes from the top, starting with a man all too eager to keep pressing forward, to keep proving, over and over again, he can win.

"We don't stand on a ladder saying, 'We're No. 3!'" Hamilton says. "If you don't have the determination to want to be No. 1 ..."

He pauses.

"That's the fun part. It's what keeps you motivated."