

FSU Coach Hamilton Looking Forward To Assembly Return

By Kevin Brockway
Bloomington Herald
December 3, 2019

BLOOMINGTON — As a young assistant coach starting his career at Austin Peay, Florida State coach Leonard Hamilton kept two books on the top of his dresser.

One was a Bible. The other was a thin red book authored by then-Indiana coach Bob Knight, which spelled out Knight's defensive principles.

"I remember reading that book over and over and over again, when I didn't know Coach Knight, I just knew of his reputation, and I respected his defensive philosophy," Hamilton said. "I read that thing like it was the Bible. I had two books I read, the Bible and Coach Knight's little red book on defense."

Hamilton will return to Simon Skjodt Assembly Hall with a ranked team when No. 17 Florida State faces Indiana on Tuesday (9 p.m., ESPN2) in the ACC-Big Ten Challenge. Hamilton had a front row seat to many of the border wars between Indiana and Kentucky during his stint as an assistant coach at UK from 1974-86.

At 71, Hamilton doesn't remember the last time he stepped foot in Assembly Hall, but he remembers the first. In that game, Indiana beat Kentucky 98-74 on Dec. 7, 1974.

"I remember that game vividly because they had their way with us," Hamilton said. "It was eye opening for me." Kentucky got its revenge later that season, upsetting Indiana 92-90 in the Elite Eight when injured big man Scott May tried to play through a broken arm. The following season, Indiana finished a perfect 32-0 in 1975-76 and secured the first of Knight's three national titles.

Hamilton remembered having to take several scouting trips to Assembly Hall because he was assigned as the Kentucky pregame scout for Indiana for several seasons.

"Back then, you scouted live," Hamilton said. "Indiana is probably one of the all-time arenas, all-time crowds in college basketball. They're extremely passionate, emotional and invested in their team, extremely knowledgeable and it's kind of a way of life for the Indiana basketball fan."

Hamilton considered the education he received, first from Austin Peay coach Lake Kelly and then from Joe B. Hall at Kentucky, as the springboard that helped him achieve success as a head coach. Hamilton has won 561 career games in 32 seasons at Oklahoma State, Miami and Florida State. He's taken Miami to one Sweet 16 and Florida State to two Sweet 16s and one Elite Eight.

"I just had a chance to be exposed to, in my opinion, some of the greatest learning experiences that a young coach can ever ask for and competed against that level of competition and more important than anything else, watched them building programs," Hamilton said.

Defense has always been the calling card for Hamilton's teams, physical man-to-man defense. Hamilton recruits to that style by finding athletic players with speed, size and length. This season, FSU is holding teams to 59.9 points per game and 35.8-percent shooting from the floor. The Seminoles (7-1) have won seven straight and are coming off a 63-60 win over Purdue on Saturday to win the Emerald Coast Classic in Niceville, Fla.

"We have six first-year players, and we only have two guys returning with experience," Hamilton said. "Our kids play hard. They defend. They play unselfish. We have potential, but I think we're a work in progress."

"I think we've had games where we've played well in all phases, but we haven't probably been as consistent as I know we need to be as we think about moving toward the ACC season."

Certainly, playing in a road atmosphere like Indiana in front of 17,000 fans will present another challenge for Hamilton's FSU squad. Hamilton is not one to bask in FSU's recent accomplishments. The five national championship banners he will see Tuesday at Assembly Hall will remind him there's more work to be done.

"We're a long way from where we would like to be," Hamilton said. "Indiana is the 10th winningest program in the history of college basketball, where Purdue is not that far behind. So just having the opportunity to compete with those level of programs along our training, it just gives us the right perspective."