

Florida State's Men's Basketball Coach Leonard Hamilton: 'I Was Built For This.'

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Leonard Hamilton doesn't consider himself a trailblazer.

This shouldn't come off as a surprise to those who know the Florida State men's basketball coach well.

Throughout his extensive career, the 71-year-old Hamilton has played a critical role in breaking the color barrier both as a player and a coach.

He prefers to look at what he's accomplished in a different way, though.

"I've always been reluctant to put labels. Some kinds of labels mean certain things to different people," Hamilton told the *Democrat*.

"I just think I was very fortunate to come along at a time when opportunities were not as available for African-American guys, but I always seemed to have been able to slide into situations that were available.

"I've always felt a hedge of protection around me. I've always felt that my steps have always been ordered...I was built for this."

Hamilton enters No. 6 FSU's (24-4, 14-3 in ACC) road game at Clemson (14-13, 8-9 in ACC) Saturday at 2 p.m. with 558 career wins. He's actually won 580 games but lost 22 wins from FSU's 2006-07 season as part of an academic scandal.

Of those 558 wins, 358 have come at FSU during his 18 seasons.

Should Hamilton reach the 600-win mark over the coming seasons, he'll join rare company as just 37 Division-I coaches have won 600-plus games in college basketball history. A far smaller subset of that 37-person group are minority coaches.

Hamilton may downplay it, but his career has put him among the winningest black coaches in college basketball history.

Considering Hamilton's background, this would be an accomplishment that is almost impossible to believe.

MEAGER BEGINNINGS

Hamilton grew up in segregated Gastonia, North Carolina, the oldest child of two parents who both dropped out of high school by 10th grade.

While this was his parents' lot, they made sure to demand better of their children.

"Because of the lack of opportunity for them because they didn't have the education, they were always emphasizing that I needed to get my education," Hamilton said.

"They had absolutely no money to participate so I had to figure out a way how to get it done myself."

Hamilton explored the possibility of an athletic scholarship but ended up set on joining the Army after graduating from Highland High School. An encounter with a persistent basketball coach in his hometown changed this, sending Hamilton down the path he's paved.

"Right before I enlisted in the Army, they decided to start a basketball program at the community college right outside of Gastonia in Dallas, North Carolina, about five, six miles from my home," Hamilton said.

"A guy named Pete Brooks, they'd given him the responsibility of starting a basketball program so he was trying to get as many of the local guys in the area that he thought was pretty good players to come to school and obviously, I was one of them.

"I really had made my mind up I was joining the Army. I really had. He kept running around the town looking for me and I actually was avoiding him because I was going to the Army, I didn't need to talk about going to Gaston Community College. But then when he finally caught up with me, he kind of convinced me this was the way to go. So, we started that basketball program, the first basketball program at Gaston Community College."

Hamilton was one of a few black players selected to help break the color barrier as a member of the Gaston basketball team in 1966.

With this responsibility came unfortunate adversity.

"There were a lot of issues during that time. It was a lot more challenging than what people probably would think.

Specifically, I don't think it's healthy for us to get into all the stuff," Hamilton said.

"For me, that was part of just the sign of the times. Colored bathrooms, colored water fountains, certain restaurants you couldn't eat at."

Despite this, Hamilton did well enough in his two years at Gaston -- setting a program-record with 54 points in a single game -- that he was granted the opportunity to break the color barrier among athletes at another school, University of Tennessee Martin.

MR. UTM

Hamilton's second time playing a role in breaking the color barrier among athletes was a far more enjoyable one. It may have helped that there was already a growing population of African American students enrolled at UTM before he arrived in 1969. It also may have helped that a big deal wasn't made of it, so much so that Hamilton didn't even know.

"For me to have an opportunity to go to UT Martin, at the time I went there I didn't even know I was going to be the first black player," Hamilton said.

"I didn't have any idea. I just wanted to go to school, get my education so I didn't know that was the case."

Hamilton played at UTM for just two seasons, but he set a school record that has since been broken with 206 career assists over his time as a Skyhawk. As a senior, he averaged 11.7 points per game and was named a first-team all-conference player.

Perhaps in a showing of how the times were already changing, Hamilton was voted Mr. UTM during his time on campus.

"There was a campus-wide election. The interesting thing is I didn't run for it," Hamilton said

"It was one of those things that people campaigned for. I didn't even know somebody wrote me in as a candidate. I was a write-in candidate.

"Needless to say, I enjoyed (my time at UTM), it was good for me and I like to think I was good for the program."

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Looking back now, Hamilton sees now how these experiences some five decades ago did a great deal in shaping him into the man and coach he became.

"All the experiences that I've had, the good, the bad, have helped me grow, be aware of things and be more qualified to be successful," Hamilton said.

"I've gained a lot of wisdom through the process, the journey. I think it prepared me to be more understanding, more patient, more tolerable of people. I've had a great experience in coaching, dealing with different kids from different homes, different ways of life. It's been a very unique ride for me."

Those around him on a daily basis will tell you he was, in many ways, the perfect person to blaze the path he did.

"He's kind of that guy right now that people kind of look up to, that last bastion of those people that had to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, become a self-made man in this business," FSU assistant coach Stan Jones told the *Democrat*.

"I don't think we have enough of that in our society today in all walks of life. I don't think we have enough people teaching people how to build a life right. Everybody expects they're entitled to it. A lot of people need to study coach Hamilton an awful lot more than they're doing."

Another FSU assistant, Charlton "C.Y." Young, credits Hamilton with a trait he has a great appreciation for as he looks to build it in himself.

"I've always been in a situation where I was fighting for respect as a player, fighting for respect as a coach. When you come out of that environment where you gotta fight for everything, you take a lot of things personal and you don't have control of your emotional intelligence at all times," Young told the *Democrat*.

"J. Leonard Hamilton is a man that is always in control of his emotional intelligence. That's amazing. I still have a long way to go, I'm not there yet. He is so special and so good that he doesn't take anything personal."

FROM MENTEE TO MENTOR

Hamilton creates a number of his predecessors among black coaches for paving the path to him being where he is today.

Hamilton got his start in coaching as an assistant coach at Austin Peay from 1971 through 1974 and then at Kentucky -- as the school's first African-American coach -- from 1974 through 1986.

While growing through the ranks, he idolized the likes of John Thompson -- the first black coach to win a major collegiate national championship at Georgetown in 1984 -- and George Raveling, who won 335 games between 1972 and 1994 at Washington State, Iowa and USC.

"They influenced me from afar and then later on, as I got to know them, they were my mentors," Hamilton said.

"Guys who helped me whenever I got stuck in situations, they kind of nurtured me along and gave me the benefit of their wisdom they'd gained from experience."

As Hamilton has become one of the veteran African-American college basketball coaches, he's become one of the premier coaches the next generation of minority coaches admires.

"I've told a lot of young minority coaches, 'You need to make sure you get to know coach Hamilton because he understands this business better than anybody I've ever seen or heard from all perspectives,'" Jones said.

"I certainly think his demeanor and competitive spirit, but also his humility (have allowed him to be successful.) And then you throw in the high level of intelligence he has, I think all those things wrapped into one has allowed him to be the success he's been at every level that he's been at."

LOOKING AHEAD

Asked about his window for a possible retirement on a recent ACC coaches teleconference, Hamilton laughed, saying that he plans on sticking around for a while.

However, whenever he does decide to hang it up, he'll be leaving a much different college basketball than the one he got involved with back in the 1960s.

At the beginning of the 2019-20 season, 14 of the 75 (18.7%) of the head coaches in the six power conferences were black.

This number is an example of where Hamilton believes there's still room for more progress. He hopes his example - and the success he's found -- paves the way for a greater diversity.

"There's no doubt that things have progressed tremendously and we've still got a long ways to go," Hamilton said.

" I was just very fortunate to have myself ordered where I got into situations that that were healthy for me to progress and be prepared to do what I do. I think all the experiences that I've had, good, bad and different, have prepared me to be understanding and patient with people, but also be thorough and also be aware that you can't take things for granted.

"I've had a lot of experiences that sometimes I think I was prepared to deal with where I think God put me in the right spot to deal with some issues, to open up doors for more people."