

How Florida State's Leonard Hamilton, The ACC's Overlooked Coaching Mainstay, Has Stayed Relevant

By Craig Meyer
Pittsburgh Post Gazette
February 18, 2020

It was several years ago, he guesses it was 10 or 15, that Leonard Hamilton was asked a well-intentioned but loaded question.

How long are you going to do this?

The Florida State men's basketball coach was taken aback, even insulted. Now 71 years old and in his 18th season with the Seminoles, Hamilton is occasionally faced with questions about what keeps him energized in a profession that drains and overwhelms men much younger than him. Such queries, rife with implications and rooted in stereotypes, are irrelevant in Hamilton's eyes.

"I don't relate to what they're asking me," he said. "How do I keep going? I've never stopped."

On Tuesday, Pitt will travel south to face Hamilton's Florida State team, which is ranked No. 8 in the Associated Press poll, marking the third time in the past four seasons it has cracked the top 10.

In a conference with three Hall of Fame coaches — Duke's Mike Krzyzewski, North Carolina's Roy Williams and Syracuse's Jim Boeheim — and a fourth seemingly destined to end up there (Virginia's Tony Bennett), Hamilton is often and perhaps unfairly overlooked. But like many of the ACC's luminaries, he has found a way to stay relevant and thrive in an ever-evolving sport.

"A lot of coaches, once they get a system they're comfortable with, they just believe that their players have to adapt to that," said Stan Jones, who has worked as an assistant coach under Hamilton every year but one since 1996. "He tends to adapt more to what it takes for his team to be successful and for the kids he gets to have the best chance to develop so that not only can they play well for us at Florida State, but they'll give themselves their best chance to succeed at the next level."

At 21-4 and one game out of first place in the ACC standings, the Seminoles are a virtual lock to make the NCAA tournament for the eighth time in the past 12 years at a program that had made it just 10 times in its first 61 years of existence. A team that lost six of its top eight scorers from the previous season could very well make it to the Sweet 16 for the third-consecutive year.

Hamilton is fifth in career victories at an ACC school, trailing only Krzyzewski, Dean Smith, Roy Williams and Gary Williams. Though a Final Four appearance has eluded him, he has made a career out of winning at places where few have — at Oklahoma State, which hadn't had back-to-back postseason appearances in more than 30 years; at Miami, which had reintroduced its program only five years before his arrival; and now at Florida State, a school where football is unquestionably king. Hamilton's career path reflects the personality of a man who has long believed he is best suited for more challenging jobs.

Obstacles, after all, are nothing new to him. Born in segregated North Carolina, Hamilton became the first black player ever at Tennessee-Martin. When he was hired as an assistant coach at Kentucky in 1974, he was the first black coach in the history of a storied program that had integrated only five years earlier. At Oklahoma State, he was the first ever black head coach in the Big Eight Conference.

In being a trailblazer, he didn't find pressure, but a sense of responsibility, leaning heavily on the lessons passed on to him by his father.

"I always felt from an early age that I had to work harder than everybody else," Hamilton said. "That was an important part of my DNA. Never having anybody to complain or make excuses to, like so many people have, only gave me one potential outcome — I either had to be successful or had to keep working until I became successful."

By excelling in those positions, he helped provide inspiration to other black coaches, including the man who will be on the opposite sideline Tuesday night.

"When I was younger, when I was a player and things like that, you looked around and you didn't see a lot of people that looked like me on the sidelines in positions of leadership," Pitt coach Jeff Capel said. "When I did, I immediately became a fan of them because my dad was in this profession and he was trying to climb that ladder."

Along the way, he has continuously adapted. After getting to Florida State, he abandoned the three-out two-in motion offense he used in the rugged Big East to something more fitting for the up-tempo ACC. When the Seminoles went on a foreign tour in Greece in 2013, he saw the way the game was changing overseas and implemented a scheme utilizing more spacing.

Hamilton insists very little about him has changed over the years, and in some ways, he's right. His fundamental principles and beliefs have remained unchanged, namely in how he interacts with and treats those with whom he works. Jones recalls how in Hamilton's lone season as an NBA coach, with the Washington Wizards in 2000-01, he surprised an assistant coach by calling his wife to ask how their children were adjusting to their new school. Last year, he stood strongly by the side of forward Phil Cofer, whose father died as the team played in the NCAA tournament.

"Coaches at our level, they say they do those things, but sometimes, their actions don't speak the same as their words," Jones said. "He's a guy that does more and says less."

Through it all, he has managed to stay young in an industry that has a nasty habit of rapidly aging many. In his early 70s, Hamilton — in what has become something of a running, awe-inspiring joke — could pass for 45, making him the closest thing college basketball has to Benjamin Button.

It's not due to a lack of effort. Hamilton said he still works the same number of long hours, makes the same number of phone calls and sleeps the same number of hours as he did decades ago. He doesn't hunt, fish or play golf. One of his only diversions, in fact, is listening to hours of gospel music late at night after he has finished watching film.

Hamilton has even, after initially agreeing to it reluctantly, embraced social media. His Twitter profile is an active source of humor, from posting a video of him and his players signing "Silent Night" in Santa hats in the team's locker room to joking about his resemblance to actor Robert Wisdom, who played police major Howard "Bunny" Colvin on the HBO series "The Wire."

For Hamilton, it's a way to provide a glimpse at the jovial personality many close to him know well, a sharp break from his stoic, almost distant demeanor in games.

"I've seen people in the airport and they'll say 'Gosh, do you ever smile?'" he said. "It has become so comical because nobody likes to have more fun than me."

It's a way to stay relevant and accessible 280 characters at a time. More than anything, though, it's a window into a man who is, nearly 50 years into his career, living his best life and producing his best teams.