

## **Kentucky, Joe B. Hall And 'Divine Intervention' Saved Leonard Hamilton's Coaching Career**

By Lucas Aulbach

Louisville Courier Journal

February 23, 2020

Leonard Hamilton's ties to the Bluegrass State run deep.

It's not just Joe B. Hall, although the former Kentucky coach is the biggest reason why it all happened. When you spend as long as he did in one place, he said, part of you never leaves.

"I was there for 12 years," Hamilton said last week, ahead of Monday's game between his Florida State team and Louisville. "I still have friends and relatives. My brother just moved from Lexington down here with me, but I have nephews and family members that still live in Lexington. Some of my longtime friends are there, and I stay in contact with quite a few of them on a regular basis — not only in Lexington, but friends all over the state of Kentucky."

Hamilton, now 71, caught up with Hall last time he was in town in January, spending an evening with him and FSU's assistant coaches at a hotel lobby where the team was staying.

They had plenty to talk about — Hamilton spent 12 years as an assistant coach on Hall's staff at UK, from 1974 to 1986, and hasn't had enough opportunities to catch up with him since he left Kentucky. He'd come on the Joe B. and Denny Show when Hall and former Louisville coach Denny Crum hosted a radio show before it ended in 2014, but life as a college basketball coach is busy. There just hasn't been much time.

Still, Hamilton will tell you he wouldn't be where he is today — in his 19th season as head coach at FSU, and leading an Atlantic Coast Conference contender — if "divine intervention" and a call from Hall just days after he'd taken a job as a salesman at Dow Chemical hadn't brought him to the commonwealth 46 years ago.

It was a Monday, his first day at Dow, when his wife let him know Hall had called while he was at work. Hamilton called back that night, and Hall told him he'd been recommended for an assistant coach opening on his staff at UK (Hall had just been hired after Adolph Rupp was forced into retirement).

Hall was out of town but would be in Lexington on Tuesday afternoon and suggested Hamilton come by for an interview Wednesday — Hamilton booked a flight to Lexington out of Charlotte, North Carolina, on Monday, met with Hall that Tuesday evening and was back at work at Dow Wednesday.

When Hall offered the job the next Monday, Hamilton said, he didn't wait. It was lunchtime, but UK's newest assistant coach had somewhere to be.

"I wrote a note — 'to whom it may concern, I resign my position effective immediately. Thank you very much for the opportunity.' I got in my car and moved out of my hotel," he said. "My wife said to me 'I am not driving.' She said 'if you want me to go, I'm riding.' I left one of my cars there in Gastonia (North Carolina) at my family's house and I drove to Lexington."

It was a quick exit, but working at Dow wasn't Hamilton's dream job. Taking a job as an assistant at UK, though, was a step in the right direction. He wanted to be a head coach of a college basketball team — he just didn't think it would be possible.

Hamilton had spent three years as an assistant at Austin Peay in Clarksville, Tennessee, but he said when he asked administration officials if he'd be considered for the head coach opening years later when coach Lake Kelly retired, he was told no.

"The reason I resigned at Austin Peay is I became discouraged that I would not have an opportunity to become the head coach because I was an African American," Hamilton explained. "I just got discouraged and decided that if I

wasn't going to have an opportunity to be a head coach, I needed to go where I could earn my own stripes. I thought that selling chemicals was the way for me to go — and needless to say, God had another plan for me."

"That was a real concern in that era," Stan Jones, FSU's associate head coach who has worked with Hamilton for nearly 25 years, said. "... Coach Hall called him before he got embedded into that job at Dow Chemical, and he immediately traveled up there to meet with Coach Hall and take that job."

Jones didn't work with Hamilton during his 12 years in Lexington. He joined Hamilton's staff during his time as head coach of Miami, following his years at UK, and has been with him nearly nonstop since then — Jones spent one year on Rick Stansbury's staff at Mississippi State, when Hamilton was out of basketball in 2001, but rejoined him when FSU hired him in 2002.

He was with Hamilton when he met with Hall last month. Those years meant a lot to Hamilton, Jones said, and he's spoken about them often as the two have been on the same staff in years since at Miami and Florida State, with a season in between coaching the NBA's Washington Wizards. (Hamilton also served as head coach at Oklahoma State from 1986-90.)

"So many of those players still come through and see him," Jones said. "He talks to them, he talks about them, they call him and ask him for advice on business decisions, on family issues — Melvin Turpin's son Kiel Turpin played for us for four years back in the early part of the last decade. He's just such a great people person. He never let's anybody go that's been part of his life."

Those years in Kentucky shaped Hamilton as a coach. Hall taught him how to handle the limelight, from TV and radio interviews to "preparing for some of the most high-profile games you can think of," and Hamilton watched how he'd connect with recruits and with his players off the court.

"That whole intensity of being in the fishbowl existence and making sure that you're aware of the challenges of being in that position — all those things helped prepare me for whenever the opportunity became available for me to become a head coach and have my own program," Hamilton said.

He learned about the biggest rivalry in the Bluegrass State, too.

Hamilton was on staff with Hall when the Wildcats met Louisville with a berth in the Final Four on the line in 1983. Hamilton and UK lost "the Dream Game," as it's become known, but would go 3-1 in four other games against the Cardinals before he left for Oklahoma State in 1986.

Hamilton knew there was a rivalry between the two schools — his head coach and two players at Austin Peay were from Lexington. But his focus was on the scoreboard, not the name on the other jersey.

"Now, those people who had grown up in Kentucky, they took those games to a whole 'nother emotional level," Hamilton said. "They took it to heights on steroids. It was unbelievable how much emotions went into that game. But for me personally, I had to maintain what I thought was the right focus to not get enamored with the emotional part and just try to be prepared."

"During those days, Louisville had a really, really good team. Coach Crum was doing an outstanding job, and they were unbelievably successful. It was a big game for people in the state, and it took on an almost outstanding intense rivalry that I'm sure people enjoy to this day."

Of course, there's a different rivalry that has Hamilton's focus this week. Florida State hosts Louisville at 7 p.m. Monday night in a clash between two top ACC contenders that will have a big impact on how seeding shakes out in next month's conference tournament.

The Seminoles beat Louisville handily six weeks ago, but the Cardinals showed what they're capable of when they ripped off 10 wins in their next 10 games. Monday's showdown is a heavyweight fight between two teams that could meet again deep in the ACC Tournament.

Win, lose or draw, though, Hamilton said he won't get too high or too low. He's taken the court against Louisville plenty of times over the years — one night won't make or break him.

"I'm not stressed because I realize that my calling is not necessarily to win basketball games as it is to develop young people to their fullest potential," Hamilton said.

"The wins and losses pretty much take care of themselves."