

FSU Men's Basketball Coach Leonard Hamilton: We've Made Progress, But George Floyd, Protests Show We Must Keep Fighting

By Leonard Hamilton as told to Andrea Adelson

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[Editor's note: Florida State men's basketball coach Leonard Hamilton, 71, has spent the past 40-plus years along the sidelines after playing at the University of Tennessee at Martin. With the recent uptick of protests and tension since the death of George Floyd, he wanted to share his personal story.]

The police brutality that led to George Floyd's death is a sign of one of the biggest and toughest opponents we face in this country: social injustice. I cannot tell you how painful and difficult it was to watch a police officer push the life out of someone while that someone called for his mother, who died two years ago. The officer knew he was being recorded, and yet he kept pushing. For an individual to think it's OK to put your knee on someone's neck for that long when they're not moving speaks volumes about their mindset. That the other officers watched and participated is just as disturbing.

I grew up in Gastonia, North Carolina, during segregation. I lived through the sit-ins, used the colored bathroom, the colored water fountain. I wasn't able to eat in certain restaurants, and I had to sit up in the balcony at movie theaters.

When I played basketball, there were some hotels where we couldn't stay because I was a member of the team.

There were people then who made sacrifices -- people who were bitten by dogs, had water hoses used on them, and people who gave their lives -- for me to have this opportunity. I would be less than honest if I didn't identify the fact that we've made some progress. But we still have a long way to go. For the people who made those sacrifices, I would not allow myself to be discouraged when things were not going my way. I had to figure out a way to honor the people whose shoulders I stood on by finding a way to overcome whatever challenges I had with hard work and a positive attitude, regardless of how painful it was. I had to honor them by not getting emotional, and I've always felt like it's important to try to be a part of the solution, and not be a divisive force.

As I watch on TV, I see people from all races, young and old, energized at a level that is really, really different than what I've seen in the past. People want change. They want more than statements. They want our actions to make a statement.

We have institutes, coalitions, think tanks, initiatives led by the Black Caucus, along with foundations that are funded to address the ills in our society. They can produce the best studies and reports, but it means nothing if we do not act and put resources behind it. There's a passage in the Bible, in the Book of James, where it says, "Faith without works is dead." In other words, we can have faith, we can have ideas, but if we do not work to make the changes, we are nothing but "a sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal," to quote another scripture passage.

In all sincerity, we need to have a call to action of an official, authorized national task force where we bring all public entities together and make a commitment to move forward with the all-out intent of finding a solution to deal with all the ills of our society. All of us have to be a part of it, not just our elected officials. We have a lot of great minds in America, from all walks of life. We all need to chip in and be a part of this and hold ourselves accountable. In addition, exercising our right to vote has to be a priority.

This current situation is a manifestation of a lot of other things that are going on that need to be addressed. You've got education, health care, domestic violence, poverty, homelessness, civil rights ... we've got issues all over the place. We can all identify this particular situation as police brutality, and the relationship between people of color and our law enforcement needs a lot of attention. We need to be leaders in how we deal with our social issues, and we really need to have serious conversations.

Sports have a way of bringing everyone together. It's not perfect, but for that moment in the game, no one is concerned about the color of somebody's skin or where they're from, nor their background. We can start with just that concept in mind.

And in our sport, I ask my team to do three things: Defend, play hard and be unselfish. That is what we need to do for America. We've got to defend our democracy. We have a great life in America. We have to defend what we believe is right. We have to be unselfish. We have to understand there's enough for all of us, where everyone can earn an equal living, take care of their families, and have a right to an education so we can have the same opportunities.

I know there are so many people less fortunate than me and we need to be fighting for equity so everyone can enjoy a slice of the American pie. If we can put a man on the moon, I have to believe we can come up with a way to work together and respect one another.

Our team also has sessions where we learn about each other. When you make an effort to learn about your fellow man, you can better relate to him. We all are here together, and there can be strength in diversity when we know the challenges each one of us have. We need to teach our children conflict resolution and mutual respect at an earlier age as basic training.

Fundamentals are so key in basketball. By the time young men get to me, they know the basics. By the time children become adults, they should know the basics of how to identify and resolve differences. It's hard to change philosophies and stereotypes, but we have to start somewhere.

I'm not willing to give in. I'm concerned about where we're going to be unless we stop the bleeding and say enough is enough. I want to keep coaching until the buzzer sounds, and I think we can win this. Even though we have a long way to go, we can accomplish our goals if we all work together.