

Leonard Hamilton Keeps On Chopping

By Roy Johnson

ESPN.com

March 23, 2011

Leonard Hamilton won't take a bow.

Not after last week's two NCAA tournament victories, Florida State's first two NCAA tourney wins since the Seminoles made it to the second round in 1998.

Not after winning more games (100) in the vaunted ACC in the past six years than all but Duke and North Carolina, two programs whose pedigrees are among the most storied in college basketball.

Not even after making basketball matter again (yes, again) at the school Bobby Bowden built.

And maybe never.

It's not time yet to take a bow.

That's what Hamilton says to his teams after big victories, potentially monumental victories, which he's had a few of recently. He said it in January after Florida State stunned then-No. 1 Duke 66-60 in front of a raucous home crowd in Tallahassee. And he repeated it twice when the 10-seeded Seminoles "upset" No. 7 Texas A&M and No. 2 Notre Dame in last week's Southeast Regional to reach the Sweet 16 for the first time in 18 years.

Guys like Hamilton don't take bows. They know better.

They're too busy climbing. Too busy surviving.

He's done a lot of both.

He's 63 years old and in his 23rd season (his ninth at Florida State) as a head basketball coach at three different institutions. He's won a bunch of games (376); lost a bunch, too (326). In my book, that's a Grinder.

He's been celebrated for reviving programs in dire need (at Oklahoma State, Miami and now FSU). He was named coach of the year in the Big East (at Miami, in 1995 and '99) and the ACC (1999), and he was UPI's national coach of the year in '95.

He's also been lambasted and vilified. And yes, like most coaches, he's been fired.

Just a couple of seasons ago, the drumbeat in Tallahassee was calling for Hamilton to be canned again after failing to reach the NCAA tournament in his first six seasons.

"Trouble is part of what you have to deal with in life," Hamilton said during a telephone conversation Tuesday afternoon. "To me, it's about taking over a program and staying focused when things aren't going well. You'll always run into stumbling blocks. I once received a text from a friend that said, 'Just keep chopping wood.' Keep working at it until you reach your fullest potential. We haven't come close to reaching ours."

Maybe so. But Hamilton still deserves to take a bow.

He's standing at the precipice of reaching the Elite Eight, preparing to face No. 11 Virginia Commonwealth on Friday in San Antonio with a young, relatively inexperienced team that prides itself on defense. The Seminoles led the nation in field goal percentage defense (36.2 percent) for the second consecutive season this year -- the first team

to accomplish that back-to-back since Georgetown in '90 and '91. As one Noles insider put it: "He gets guys to come play defense here who aren't defensive backs or linebackers."

To get to the Sweet 16, Florida State weathered the typical vicissitudes of a season, struggling at times largely due to youth and injuries. Junior forward Chris Singleton, who leads the team in scoring (13.0), rebounding (6.7) and steals (2.2), missed six games before the NCAAs with a foot injury. Several other key contributors each sat a handful of games as well, including 6-foot-11 center/forward Xavier Gibson (knee), reserve swingman Ian Miller (groin) and forward Terrance Shannon (knee).

Their absences help explain why the Seminoles played like world-beaters in defeating Duke, then seemed unworthy of even an NIT bid in thumpings by Clemson (62-44) and Maryland (78-62).

Some critics used those losses to once again stoke the still-simmering embers among those who were calling for Hamilton's hide.

Yet he kept right on choppin'.

"We grew and improved with each setback," he said. "Our wins have been good, but our losses exposed our inexperience. People had a hard time figuring out who we were. Now we have a lot of confidence."

You wouldn't know what to think if you watched Hamilton during games. No matter the moment, no matter the score, his expression remains stoic and stern. He's not the hand-clapping, arm-waving, coat-tossing guy you see in those quirky coach videos. If you didn't know him, you'd think he must be about as much fun as, well, a vacation in Tallahassee.

On the telephone, he laughs (almost) at that analogy.

"No one enjoys life more than I do," he said "But I can't allow myself to get too excited when things are going good, or too down when we have setbacks. When I'm in that zone on the basketball court, I have to be aware of what the other coach is doing with his lineups and matchups. And when you have a lot of inexperienced players, you have to be aware of everything going on -- teaching and communicating while still coaching. I tune everything else out -- the band, the crowd, everything -- and only concentrate on what's on the court. Sometimes my passion and what's going on in my head shows on my face. People misread me."

Hamilton also deserves a bow for having the audacity to try to rebuild Florida State back into a premier national program ("That's our goal," he says) in a middle-of-nowhere stretch of the South that breathes little else but football.

The team reached the Sweet 16 in '92 and the Elite Eight a year later. In '72, they even played for the national title, losing to -- who else? -- John Wooden and UCLA.

That was four years before a kid named Bowden came to town to take over the football program. Thirty-four years later, he "retired" with two national football championships, having dang-near won nine of every 10 games.

During the Bowden era, there was just one ball in Tallahassee, and it wasn't round. And it doesn't help the basketball recruiting that the state capital is at least four hours from a major airport. Very few McDonald's All-Americans have dreamed of being a Seminole over the years.

When Hamilton arrived in 2002, he moved into a house right next door to Bowden's -- coincidentally, he said. But if you have visions of the two men exchanging recruiting tales while trimming their adjoining hedges, forget it.

"Like a lot of coaches of big-time programs, he was extremely busy," Hamilton said. "I didn't have a lot of time for chit-chat, either."

Hamilton says Bowden came to "a few" basketball games and occasionally left him congratulatory notes and messages. Most importantly, Bowden often paused to meet recruits and shake a young hand.

"He was always gracious with his time," Hamilton said.

Good thing, because Bowden might have been the best recruiting tool Hamilton had, at least until now. On campus tours with recruits, the coach often doesn't even bother to show them the team's practice facilities, which are spartan relative to many top-tier programs.

But Grinders don't sell fancy training rooms. They sell life.

"We are who we are," Hamilton said. "I don't try to paint any picture that's not consistent with what I believe. I'm open and honest with youngsters and their families and hope they want to be part of a family atmosphere and that they have the talent, skills and confidence to build something as opposed to being part of something already well-established.

"I understand you have to win games. But we tell parents and youngsters we want to be part of helping them grow from teens to young adults, preparing for life after basketball. We hope that as a result of being in an environment where we hold them accountable -- on and off the court -- they'll succeed. We won't really be able to evaluate that for 10 or 12 years down the road when we see what kind of fathers, husbands and people they've become."

To reach the Elite Eight this weekend, Florida State will have to defeat a team with a coach whose own journey might have been smoothed somewhat by Hamilton's bumpy ride. VCU's Shaka Smart will be 34 years old in April. He's in just his second season as a head coach, both with the Rams. He's won a lot of games (53) in those two years, against only two losses.

By routing Southern California, Georgetown and Purdue en route to the Sweet 16, Smart's Rams have head-butted critics who said the team didn't deserve an NCAA bid. Now, Smart is the flavor of the month in college hoops -- not an unusual status for a young African-American coach these days, in large part because folks like Hamilton keep climbing and surviving.

"I never thought about it that way, until you brought it up," Hamilton said. "I'm so appreciative of the guys who paved the way for me: John Thompson, Nolan Richardson, George Raveling, John Chaney. And I'm mindful of the fact that a lot of guys did not enjoy the same measure of success as they did. I have tremendous respect for Coach Shaka and what he's accomplished. He'll go his own way. He has charisma. He connects with his players and he's enjoying the moment. I want nothing for the best for him -- except on Friday."