

Leonard Hamilton's Quest For The Respect He Deserves In The College Basketball World

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Twenty-one years ago, a Miami columnist detailed 20 questions with Miami head basketball coach Leonard Hamilton.

The first question of that 1999 interview immediately jumped out. Would Hamilton shave three years off his life in order to win a national championship?

At the time, Hamilton was in his ninth year of what would be 10 years spent atop the Hurricanes' program. He had led Miami's transition from independence into the Big East. Hamilton built the program from a 1-17 Big East record in its first year in the conference to what would be a second-place finish in the conference (15-3 record) and a spot as high as No. 9 in the Associated Press poll during the 1998-99 season.

The question wasn't especially farfetched as the Hurricanes would enter that year's NCAA Tournament as a No. 2 seed, although they made a second-round exit after being upset by No. 10 seed Purdue.

The answer Hamilton gave after a 30-second pause says a lot about the type of person he is.

"It's sad when that's a hard question," Hamilton said.

"I know I should say that I want to keep the three years of my life, but to win would mean so much to so many other people in our program that I'd have to say shave the three years off my life. It would be worth the sacrifice."

In the two decades plus since this interview, Hamilton left the Miami job for a brief stint coaching Michael Jordan and the Washington Wizards before landing at Florida State. He enters the 2020-21 basketball season leading an FSU basketball program coming off one of the best seasons in program history.

On a more personal note, he passed longtime Georgia Tech coach Bobby Cremins for fifth-most wins in ACC men's basketball history this past February. He enters this season with 582 career wins as a head coach, although the NCAA recognizes just 560 as FSU had all 22 wins from its 2006-07 season vacated due to an academic fraud scandal.

Regardless of which win total you subscribe to, he's expected to join an elite group of college basketball coaches that have amassed 600 career Division-I wins within the next few years. There are only 39 members of that club currently, although a few more coaches will beat Hamilton to the historic landmark.

"The bottom line is I don't think he's ever gotten the national publicity he deserves," ESPN college basketball analyst Dick Vitale said of Hamilton.

"When you think about the ACC, that's not cupcake city, man. You think about that league and what he's achieved, I believe he ranks in the top five all-time in wins in the conference. There are some great coaches in that league. That is an incredible achievement. Leonard just goes about his business, he works his butt off, he's a recruiting genius and he's also a very solid tactician. I don't think people give him credit for the job he does."

And if you talk to anyone who knows Hamilton well, they'll tell you he's done it the right way.

"This guy has always been a winner. He's always been successful and he's always won because of his heart," FSU assistant coach Charlton "C.Y." Young told the *Democrat*.

"First thing you learned in the Bible is the more you give, the more you receive. He has given so much to people and it comes back threefold."

'Wake Up, Knucklehead'

Hamilton twice helped break the color barrier during his collegiate basketball career, arriving as one of the first Black student-athletes both at Gaston Community College and the University of Tennessee at Martin.

He parlayed his playing career into a role on the Austin Peay coaching staff, first as a graduate assistant from 1971 through 1973 and then as an assistant coach for the 1973-74 season, helping the Governors to the program's first two NCAA Tournament appearances in program history.

This success made Austin Peay head coach Lake Kelly a coaching commodity who began to attract attention from a number of larger programs. Despite having just one season as a full-time coach at that point, Hamilton channeled courage and walked into the office of the Austin Peay president, asking if he would be considered for the head coach position should Kelly go elsewhere.

The president, citing his pending retirement within the next few years, told Hamilton that he couldn't bring himself to make him the first Black coach in the history of the Ohio Valley Conference, although he personally wanted to give him the job.

After this discouraging development, Hamilton briefly left coaching before he was convinced to return when legendary Kentucky coach Joe B. Hall offered him a spot on his staff, making him the first Black coach in the program's extensive history.

Although he still had aspirations of eventually becoming the head coach of a traditional basketball power early in his time in Kentucky, he looks back now with that fateful meeting with the Austin Peay President as divine intervention which led him down the path he's paved.

"It's almost like God reached down in heaven and slapped me on both sides of the face (and said), 'Wake up, knucklehead. Those programs that are already in great shape with great facilities and great tradition don't need you,'" Hamilton told the *Democrat*.

"It was almost like I came to the realization that with the type of personality I have, I would be better served by taking jobs that were not in metropolitan areas, jobs that had consistently been challenging for other people to be consistent at winning.

"Those jobs would offer me the motivation and the challenge that I needed to go in and prove that I was capable of doing something that had not been done. Those types of opportunities really became what motivated me and I was excited and I started looking for jobs that needed to be rebuilt."

A Career Spent At "Football Schools"

Hamilton spent 12 years as an assistant at Kentucky, the final six of those as the associate head coach. He helped lead the Wildcats to the program's fifth NCAA Tournament Championship in 1978, Kentucky's first national title in 20 years at the time.

When the time came for Hamilton to take his first head coaching position, however, it wasn't with nearly as prolific a basketball program. He took over the reins at Oklahoma State ahead of the 1986-87 season, inheriting a program that had made the NCAA Tournament just once in the previous 21 seasons.

In the 21 years before he arrived in Stillwater, the Cowboys had finished above .500 in Big 8 play just twice.

Hamilton never took OSU to the NCAA Tournament -- the Cowboys made the NIT in each of his final two seasons -- but his tenure laid the groundwork for the success that followed years after his departure. OSU made the NCAA Tournament each of the next five years and 13 of the ensuing 15 years after his departure.

He moved on from OSU to accept the head coach position at Miami. He arrived ahead of the program's sixth year back in existence after Miami was without a basketball team from 1971 until 1985.

Once again, he found himself coaching a basketball team at a football school. The Hurricanes' football program won its third national championship the year before Hamilton arrived and won another in Hamilton's second season at UM in 1991.

There's something about this exact situation that aligns well with Hamilton's unique self-motivation.

"He had to investigate and evaluate programs where if he didn't let anybody outwork him, which is one of his big mantras, he could go in there and people would know that if he could turn it around then it was because of his effort and his talent and his focus that other people couldn't get it done," Stan Jones, a longtime assistant coach on Hamilton's staff, told the *Democrat*.

"That would be the way he would have to build his head coaching career. I think he's always looked at it that way, as I've got to take a program that needs a lot of restoration and if I do the restoration then nobody could say that it was given to me, nobody can say I didn't earn it. I think he's proven that at every stop along his journey."

It took him time to build the program up, but the gradual growth paid off when the Hurricanes made the NCAA Tournament in his eighth season in 1997-98. That snapped a skid of nearly 40 years since Miami's last NCAA Tournament appearance in 1960.

After a one-year stint coaching Michael Jordan and the Washington Wizards in the NBA, Hamilton landed back in the college game, this time at Florida State.

Taking over at FSU ahead of the 2002-03 season, Hamilton again took over a basketball program at a football powerhouse. He got to FSU just after the football program's record streak of 14 consecutive top-five finishes was snapped in 2001.

Similar to his previous stops, he again inherited a program in desperate need of strong leadership. The Seminoles, after a strong start upon their arrival in the basketball-heavy ACC, had fallen on hard times. In the nine years before his arrival, FSU had failed to win more than six ACC games in any season and finished above .500 just twice.

It again took him time to build the program his way, but he found quicker success this time. After a pair of losing seasons in his first three years at FSU, Hamilton has since led the Seminoles to winning seasons in each of the last 15 years.

He took FSU to its first Elite Eight since 1992 in 2018 and achieved perhaps the least likely accomplishment this past season, bringing home the program's first ACC regular-season championship.

"Leonard really has built programs, not just taken over programs at so-called football schools. As a result of that, especially if you're building, you don't have tradition there for basketball," Duke head coach Mike Krzyzewski told the *Democrat*.

"It's not that easy. It's not easy anywhere, but it's especially hard in those situations. Because he's a tireless worker, good guy, great coach, he's been able to do that at all these locations. His most recent success story is Florida State and it's a huge one."

Were it not for the cancellation of the NCAA Tournament this past March due to the coronavirus pandemic, Hamilton could have very well made his first Final Four as a head coach. Even better, his Seminoles were one of the trendiest picks to win the entire tournament.

The ascension of the FSU basketball program to another tier has been well-timed as the FSU football program has fallen on hard times unlike any over the last 40 years.

"He's never had an easy job. Let's face it, he's had jobs where football has been dominant. Miami, Florida State, especially the times he arrived," Vitale said.

"When he arrived, they were (football) giants. Right now, the people at Florida State are talking about, I guarantee it, when does basketball start? You've never heard that cry before."

Rightful Perspective

Nolan Richardson knows what it takes to succeed as a basketball coach at a football school.

He inherited a similar situation as Hamilton at FSU and Miami when he took over the Arkansas basketball program in 1985. Nearly a decade later, he became just the second Black head coach to win an NCAA basketball championship when he led the Razorbacks to the 1993-94 title, joining Georgetown's John Thompson Jr., who became the first in 1984.

Only two more Black coaches have joined this short list since Richardson, Kentucky coach Tubby Smith in 1998 and Connecticut's Kevin Ollie in 2014. Although these four all have titles while Hamilton has never made a Final Four, he's got more career wins than all of them except for Smith.

Even though Hamilton is far older than one would believe from looking at him -- he turned 72 in August -- he remains one of the likeliest coaches to join this elite club of Black coaches who have reached the pinnacle of college basketball.

"I don't really think he gets the kind of respect that he would get if he was a white coach with those kind of victories," Richardson told the *Democrat*.

"I think that's the thing that I've always said. You have to prove yourself more than once, twice, three or four or five times and it's a constant. For him to be able to win 600 games, that's quite an accomplishment. I understand what it means simply because I was in the same arena that he's in and sometimes you don't play on a level playing field that the others are playing on."

Now entering his 33rd season as a college basketball head coach, Hamilton has been one of the bridges from the last generation of Black coaches to the next generation. A mild-mannered person, especially in public settings, it's taken Hamilton time to get used to being a mentor to that next generation like Thompson and Richardson were to him.

"I try to encourage him more that he needs to be more of a voice out there in this winter of his career because he has so much to give and he has so much knowledge and he has so much savvy on how to navigate an athletic department, dealing with the media, dealing with recruiting, dealing with all the things that go on with being a successful head coach for anybody," Jones said.

"Whether you're a minority or not, he's a guy that really understands this business and he's incredibly smart and thinks through everything at a level that a lot of people that just play off of their emotions don't realize that's the key to success is how deep you're able to think. He is that guy."

Young is one coach who has taken advantage of that mentorship. He's now in his eighth season as an assistant coach under Hamilton at FSU. Although he didn't have much of a relationship with Hamilton before joining his staff, Young now views getting him the respect he feels he's deserved in the college basketball world as one of his biggest goals.

"Everybody is always asking, 'Why's he still doing it at his age?' Because he wants to walk out letting people know (he) was the best," Young said.

"One day, they're all going to say it. If you don't want to say it, we're going to make you say it. My goal for J. Leonard Hamilton is to get him in the Hall of Fame, to win a national title...I want his name to be synonymous with winning. Winning on the court, off the court, in life."

While Hamilton may not be a household name to the average college basketball fan, he's well-respected by the major figures in the coaching world.

"He does not get the attention and the recognition that he so richly deserves. Especially in this last decade at Florida State where Florida State is one of the top programs in the United States," Krzyzewski said.

"Our conference has some of the top programs in the United States and Florida State is one of them and it's a result of Leonard and his staff doing incredible work there."

Added North Carolina head coach Roy Williams, "Leonard really cares about his players. He's not only concerned with what they do on the court. He does a great job making sure his players do well off the court, in the classroom, and he helps them get ready for life after basketball. I admire him tremendously. He is one of the people that I would be very pleased if he coached my son."

Hamilton may never reach the top of the college basketball world. He hasn't discussed how many years of coaching he may have left, but it's a number that is dwindling whatever it is.

This may prevent Hamilton from getting the respect many in the college basketball world feel he deserves while he's still coaching. But George Raveling, another mentor to Hamilton who won 337 games as the head coach at Washington State, Iowa and Southern California between 1972 and 1994, is confident that Hamilton will get his due in time.

"Many years ago in a speech, Malcolm X said that history is best situated to reward a man's deeds. My interpretation of that is that ultimately history will put things into their rightful perspective," Raveling told the *Democrat*.

"If the story's not told today, it will be told tomorrow. History will put him in his rightful context at some point be it today, tomorrow or in the distant future. His contributions to life and the profession and the race and his family, those chapters are still being written right now.

"We're probably 20 chapters into a 30-chapter book right now. But at some point, history will take over and it will put him in his rightful perspective. Even if we as human beings can't do it or accept it or want to do it, history will do it for us."