

## **An NCAA Sweet 16 Coach Remembers His Time In Philly**

By Mike Jensen

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Can you name the coach of an NCAA Sweet 16 team who spent two summers living in South Philly, at 24th and Christian?

Nope, not him ... or him. Go way back, over five decades.

"When I graduated from community college in Gastonia, that summer, I wanted to get a summer job," Florida State coach Leonard Hamilton said over the phone recently, not talking about his Seminoles, just his memorable time in Philadelphia, which you won't find on his official bio. "I came up to stay with my sister."

In from North Carolina, Hamilton found two jobs, working 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Christian Street Y, "with Tee Shields," which sticks out 50 years later, since Tee Shields remains one of the legendary hoop coaches in this city, a Sonny Hill League honcho forever. Stumbling across such a man maybe was a gift to an out-of-towner, especially a tall one with some basketball skills.

Hamilton stood out beyond his ability.

"I had that Southern accent," he said. "Guys would call me 'Country.' "

At night, Hamilton had another job that first summer, working at Breyers, 10 p.m. to 7 a.m., "keeping the machines running and keeping them sanitized."

For years afterward, if Hamilton saw Breyers in a store, he grabbed it. "I became a fan of Breyers ice cream because they were so meticulous in keeping everything clean and sanitized and germfree."

His sister had come up from Gastonia to live with an aunt and stayed.

"The next summer I came back, I worked for Big Apple Construction," Hamilton said. "That was the toughest job I ever had in my life. Roofing. We tore and replaced a roof at the Navy Yard. I remember working in the hot sun all day."

The first day he came home from work, his sister ran out to see him.

"Leonard, is that you?"

Tar all over him, but it was still him.

"They were grown men that worked it," Hamilton said of that job. "That was no place for the feint of heart. A lot of those guys had served a little time. You had to have a little toughness."

Getting out of his comfort zone, Hamilton suggested, was important for him. He moved on to Tennessee-Martin to play basketball.

"I was the first Black basketball player at UT-Martin," Hamilton said. "Everywhere, I was always integrating something. I was the first Black [assistant] coach at Kentucky, the first Black coach in [what is now] the Big 12," at Oklahoma State, before moving on to Miami, then a brief stint coaching the Washington Wizards, then taking over the Seminoles in 2002.

Sunday's game with Michigan represents Florida State's third straight trip to the Sweet 16, with an Elite Eight appearance in 2018.

His basketball education, Hamilton said, included long ago trips to the Sonny Hill and Baker Leagues, to watch games at Temple's McGonigle Hall, "mostly the older star players."

He still has relatives here, but probably mostly gets here for recruiting purposes. That happens, though. Look for two Philadelphia-area players to be on the roster next year, big man Naheem McLeod from Plymouth Whitemarsh High, who spent this season at Chipola College; and Jalen Warley, from the Westtown School.

Those guys probably don't know their coach might count as an honorary Philadelphian.

"I actually played in the Philadelphia-New York All-Star Game one summer," Hamilton said, remembering that Nate "Tiny" Archibald played for the New York team. "I had never seen anybody so damn quick and fast. I had to guard him."

Memories from long ago, but Hamilton conjured them right back up. He was in no hurry to get off the phone.

"I buy all my neckties in Philly," Hamilton said. Distant on Sansom Street is his go-to. "They send me swatches. I pick out the ties. If you ever see me on TV and I've got a suit on, more than likely, the tie is from Philly."