

FSU's Hamilton Belongs In Hall Of Fame

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GREENSBORO, N.C. -- North Carolina's victory over No. 11 Florida State last month was notable on two fronts. The performance was the Tar Heels' most impressive of an erratic season and marked the 900th win in Roy Williams' coaching career.

But rather than extol his team or crack wise about his longevity, Williams opened his postgame news conference with a heartfelt endorsement of Seminoles coach Leonard Hamilton for the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame.

The gesture spoke volumes about Williams' grace and the coaching fraternity's esteem and affection for Hamilton. That admiration extends far beyond Hamilton's peers. His professional accomplishments and personal journey are that compelling.

"My path has been different," Hamilton said, "so for me to even be in the [Hall of Fame] conversation is far greater than anything I expected."

This week, for the 19th consecutive season, Hamilton's path brings him to the ACC tournament, an event FSU won in 2012 and was favored to win last year before the global pandemic intervened. Such endurance alone is remarkable, especially in the sport's premier conference, an unsurpassed collection of ruthless programs that have exhausted many a coach's patience and resolve.

The only men to coach in the ACC longer than Hamilton are Duke's Mike Krzyzewski (41 seasons and counting), North Carolina's Dean Smith (36) and Maryland's Gary Williams (22), Hall of Famers all.

Hamilton debuted on the Hall ballot this year but was not among the 14 finalists announced Tuesday. His day should come.

"Leonard Hamilton deserves to be in the Hall of Fame," said Williams, a 2007 inductee. "He's a good friend; he's been a friend for a long time. When I was starting out [as an assistant to Dean Smith] at North Carolina, he was at Kentucky [under Joe B. Hall]. What he's done and his record ..."

Hamilton, 72, grew up poor in Gastonia, N.C., and played two seasons at Gaston Community College before transferring to Tennessee-Martin, where he was the program's first Black player. He transitioned to coaching immediately after graduation, first at Austin Peay as an assistant.

As Hamilton relayed to ESPN's Andrea Adelson two years ago, he began to regret his decision when in 1974 Austin Peay's president told him the university was not ready for an African-American head basketball coach. Hamilton resigned and eventually landed at Kentucky, where in 12 years, the last six as associate head coach, he helped the Wildcats reach three Final Fours and win the 1978 national championship.

Kentucky's success and status led Hamilton to believe that he, too, could lead a ready-made blue blood. A man of deep faith blessed with a wonderful singing voice, Hamilton soon learned God had charted a different course.

"It's almost like the Lord reached down from heaven and slapped me on both sides of my face and said, 'Those well-established, traditional, successful programs with great facilities don't need you. You need to go be a part of building something that's been challenging for other people to build,'" Hamilton said.

A two-time national champion during the 1940s, Oklahoma State had reached one NCAA tournament in the previous 25 years when Hamilton arrived as head coach in 1986. He didn't end that drought, but two NIT appearances in four years earned him another daunting rebuilding task.

Hamilton inherited a Miami program in 1990 with one NCAA appearance in its history, 1960. Even more challenging, the independent Hurricanes were poised to join the Big East.

Their first three Big East seasons were predictably grim, an 8-46 conference aggregate that included an 0-18 finish in 1993-94. During the next six years, Miami went 65-41 in the league, won a regular-season title, earned three consecutive NCAA bids and reached the 2000 Sweet 16.

After an ill-advised, one-year foray into the NBA with the Washington Wizards in 2001, Hamilton returned to the college ranks at Florida State.

"For him to be 72 and still doing it on this level, and how committed he is, just shows who he is as a person and how much he cares about this program and us as human beings," said M.J. Walker, the Seminoles' all-ACC guard. "Age isn't a factor with Coach Ham."

Indeed, we should all look as good at 52 as Hamilton does two decades older. Renowned for size, defense and depth, his program is aging just as well, and he recently signed a contract extension through 2025.

This will be FSU's fourth straight NCAA bid and eighth in the last 12 tournaments. Seeded second this week behind Virginia, the Seminoles have won nine games combined in their last five NCAA appearances.

Hamilton lacks the Final Four affirmation of most college coaches enshrined in the Hall, but so, too, do recent inductees John Chaney and Lefty Driesell. Moreover, his .569 career winning percentage (575-436) and ACC record (165-146) are beyond distinguished given where he's worked.

"He didn't have basketball schools," Roy Williams said, "... but he made every one of them better." He made Walker a better man, jolting the young man from an academic malaise two years ago with a stern-yet-loving confrontation.

"That changed my whole life and mindset," Walker said. "... He wants the best for us in life, so we can be successful young men. That's the thing I respect about Coach Ham."

Hamilton shrugs off praise with a humility rooted in his youth, crediting players, their parents and assistant coaches. "I'm not worried about it," he said of the Hall of Fame. "I enjoy what I do, working with youngsters, trying to create the atmosphere that helps them prepare themselves for life after basketball."