

***Coach Leonard Hamilton: 'The Worse the Program, the More I Became Interested'***

***By Billy Witz***

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*Hamilton, the Florida State men's basketball coach, was presented with the Joe Lapchick Character Award in New York last week.*

Leonard Hamilton was on the ninth floor of the stately New York Athletic Club with its million-dollar views over Central Park, accepting the Joe Lapchick Character Award at a luncheon on Friday. Outside, a chauffeur waited to whisk him across the Hudson River to a private plane that would deliver the Florida State men's basketball coach back to Tallahassee, Fla.

It was quite the departure from his first visit to New York.

That came 50 years ago, when Hamilton was a wet-behind-the-ears assistant coach at Austin Peay State University in Tennessee. Hamilton walked to the La Guardia Airport car rental counter only to discover that he could not pay cash for a car — and he did not have a credit card. So he jumped in a cab and asked the driver to take him to the cheapest hotel he could find near a gym in Brooklyn.

When Hamilton got to the gym, he heard other coaches talking about a hot prospect from the neighborhood. So he pulled aside Rodney Parker, a street basketball consigliere whom any recruiter in the city had better get to know, and asked if he could introduce him to this phenom. The next night, they went to the prospect's apartment a little before he was expected home at 7. His mother answered the door. They talked and talked, Hamilton turning on the charm.

After a while, Parker left, and they talked some more.

Sometime after midnight, when the mother excused herself to use the bathroom, Hamilton turned the clock back a couple of hours lest she ask him to leave. When she went to the bathroom again, he pulled the blinds down, lest she discover the sun would soon be peeking through. Finally, just around 7 a.m., in walked a sinewy 6-foot-5 teenager with a bushy Afro and a sly grin.

Immediately, Hamilton hit it off with James Williams, whom everyone knew as Fly.

"I was following him around playing All-Star games," Hamilton said. "Nobody knew me, and I never wore anything with Austin Peay on it, so Fly, being the jokester that he was, told everybody I was his cousin. I actually sat in on two recruiting meetings with other schools. He said, 'I can't talk with anybody without my cuz.'"

Austin Peay, which had finished last in the Ohio Valley Conference the previous season, nearly reached the Mideast regional final of the N.C.A.A. men's tournament in 1973, losing in overtime to Kentucky.

Hamilton, 74, was the first Black player at the University of Tennessee at Martin and the first Black coach in the Southeastern Conference when he was hired as an assistant at Kentucky in 1974. He is getting ready for his 21st season at Florida State, where he has coached six first-round draft picks since 2016 — including the reigning N.B.A. rookie of the year, Scottie Barnes — and where 73 of the 75 players who have completed their eligibility have graduated.

He spoke to The New York Times last week about growing up in the segregated South, taking on reclamation projects, why he doesn't think about the what-ifs of the pandemic and when he'll retire.

**You quit coaching when you were told Austin Peay would not hire a Black head coach, right?**

It wasn't quite like that. I went to talk to the university president when I thought Coach (Lake) Kelly might leave to see if there was a chance I could replace him. He said he was retiring in a couple years and nothing would make him happier than for me to be the coach at Austin Peay. Politically, he said he didn't know if he was strong enough to get it done. He was being honest with me, but that cut my guts out.

**So you quit?**

I got a job at Dow Chemicals. My first day on the job, I got a call from Joe Hall (the Kentucky coach), who had become aware of me because we almost beat them. Near the end of my interview, I said, "I'm going to tell you four things: I'll be loyal to you, nobody will outwork me, you'll have players, and I won't get you in trouble. But if you're not going to offer me the job, I'm going to go back to Charlotte and be the No. 1 chemicals salesman in the country."

**You spent 12 years as an assistant at Kentucky (winning the 1978 championship with the team), but your head coaching jobs have been at places that were not exactly blue bloods. Oklahoma State hadn't won an N.C.A.A. tournament game in more than two decades; Miami had recently resurrected its program 15 years after dropping it; and Florida State had always been a football school. Is that a coincidence?**

As an assistant coach, like most young coaches, I was dreaming. I wanted to be somewhere that had good facilities, was in the vicinity of good players and that had won. I wanted to find one of those good, cushy jobs where I could really go to work. But then it's almost like God slapped me on both sides of my face and said, "Those programs don't need you." It was almost like a vision — if you're going to make a name in this business, you're going to have to go somewhere that is extremely challenging. The worse the program, the more I became interested. That would be a way for me to earn my stripes.

**How much did your upbringing in Gastonia, N.C., prepare you for that, having to make do with less?**

There were eight of us living in a two-bedroom house. Our bathroom was on the back porch, there was no hot and cold running water. I took my bath in a tin tub. Everybody in our neighborhood lived that way. This was an era when we were still drinking out of a colored water fountain, using a colored bathroom, sitting in the back of the bus. We lived 30 or 40 yards from my church — Mount Zion Baptist, at the corner of Allison and Morris, where everybody is somebody and Christ is all. I could hear the piano from our back porch, and if the doors were open, we were there. It gave me a moral compass. All of those circumstances, even the negative part of segregation, prepared me mentally. It gave me a toughness, a desire, a will to fight and a determination to try to overcome challenges.

**Last year, Gaston College, the community college you attended in your hometown, resurrected its athletic program after 50 years, bringing back five sports, including men's basketball. You urged the college's board of trustees to do this. Why?**

Most Blacks in that time got their education through the G.I. Bill, so that's what I was going to do in 1966 — join the Army. My mother went to school up to the seventh grade, my father went to the ninth grade. The coach convinced me I could always join the Army but this would be a good experience. And he was right. Gaston College meant so much to me because I was a guy who needed some direction. I needed small classrooms. I needed the relationships. I needed that environment. Every Wednesday night, my coach would take me to Howard Johnson's. He was teaching me how to eat pasta. He wanted me to take the fork and the spoon and curl it up, which made no sense to me. It helped prepare me to go to Tennessee-Martin. I had three younger brothers and a sister who looked to me for leadership. Getting my degree set the table for them.

**In 2020, Florida State was 26-5, A.C.C. champions, ranked fourth and picked by some to get to the Final Four, where you have never been. Then the pandemic hit and the N.C.A.A. tournament was canceled. How often do you think about what might have been?**

I don't. When you think about the negative effect that continuing to play those games could have had on a lot of people, me standing up there saying "I'm No. 1" pales in comparison. I would have loved to have played for a championship, but the most important thing is it was the right decision to make.

**In the past two years, Roy Williams retired at North Carolina, Mike Krzyzewski retired at Duke and Jay Wright retired at Villanova. You turned 74 last month, you just had hip replacement surgery, and you coached with a ruptured Achilles' tendon in last year's N.C.A.A. tournament. How long do you want to coach?**

This is my ministry. This is my calling. This is what I'm built for — to help young people fulfill their dreams. I don't play golf. I don't hunt. I don't fish. I'm boring. I always tell my staff that if I don't come out of the locker room and go to the wrong bench, then I'm going to stay here.