

American Legion: Hamilton loves life between chalk lines

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American Legion coach Leo Hamilton has spent the majority of his life between the chalked lines of Tulsa's prep baseball fields.

Far from calling it a chore, though, Hamilton will tell you he wouldn't have it any other way.

For 37 years, Hamilton, who turned 70 this year, has made chain-link dugouts around the city his second home. Wins and losses both have piled up, but for Leo, winning hasn't mattered all that much. Rather, it's been about being close to what he loves.

Now his knowledge of the game, along with a talent for teaching it to countless generations of athletes, has the longtime coach nearing two incredible milestones.

At 6 p.m. Friday, he'll swap lineup cards with an opposing coach for the 1,300th time when he takes on Owasso at LaFortune Park, and a win will put his career total three short of 1,000.

But the extra attention accompanying those marks hasn't kept him from approaching this summer any differently than he has since he broke into coaching in 1965.

"I'll be honest with you, I haven't even thought about it," Hamilton said. "I just go out to coach, and if or when it gets here, it'll be great. I just enjoy being around the kids and coaching them."

Hamilton's career, in terms of success, is nothing short of amazing. His career .766 winning percentage (996-304) ranks as one of the best in Tulsa baseball history.

And it all started on a grade-school diamond over three decades ago.

Hamilton's stepson, Mike McCormick, was about to lose his first-grade coach. Managing a team of 25 was too much responsibility, and McCormick's team was in trouble.

Back then, Hamilton was just a spectator, taking in small-stakes games with his wife, Diana, on a grade-school diamond close to their south Tulsa home.

Coaching, it seems, turned out to be Leo Hamilton's calling.

McCormick, whose brother Richard also played under Hamilton, enjoyed incredible success for 10 years.

"While I was coaching my boys, I never lost over five games during a season," Hamilton said. "But if you don't have the players and you don't have the talent, you're not going to win."

It's his recruiting ability and meticulous attention to perfection that have made Hamilton's teams perennial winners ever since.

"He just has a passion for it," Richard said. "He's got a good knowledge of the game and he knows how to get talent. He knows how to get the best out of his players at the right times."

The talent has come largely from Tulsa's suburbs, where baseball seems to have taken on a different meaning for the players.

"I get players from the small schools, and very few people even want to go in there and look at these kids," Hamilton said. "They have a different attitude ---- they will do whatever you ask them to."

"The kids I have want to play, and that makes all the difference in the world."

His players, and his family, offer a different explanation, though.

"He cares about the game," Richard said. "People will remember him as a man who cared about his kids, had a knowledge of baseball and loved the game."

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