

SOONER SPOTLIGHT • RAY HAMILTON

Ray Hamilton tried hard to be noticed when he played defensive tackle for the Oklahoma Sooners and the New England Patriots. For four collegiate seasons (1969-72) and nine in professional ranks (1973-81), opposing linemen, quarterbacks and ball-carriers not only noticed Hamilton — they tried to stay out of his way.

Times have changed. Hamilton retired after the 1981 season, and now devotes much of his time to the printing company he owns. Yet he has not left the sporting world completely. His retirement has given him the opportunity to enjoy another of his athletic loves — tennis.

Hamilton is not simply your average weekend hacker, however. He is a certified tennis official. Unlike his days as a football player, his quest as an official is to remain anonymous.

"I've pretty much gone unnoticed so far," Hamilton says, "at least by the players. My career has been uneventful, and that's the way it should be for an official."

Hamilton became involved with tennis during his days as a Patriot. About 10 years ago, some friends took him to watch the Boston Lobsters' World Tennis Team matches. Hamilton began to play the sport and eventually was asked if he would like to take a shot at officiating.

Since his certification by the New England Tennis Umpires Association and the United States Tennis Association (which he renews by attending classes and taking an examination each year), Hamilton has officiated such events as the U.S. Pro Championships at Longwood Cricket Club in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, the Hall of Fame pro event at Newport, Rhode Island, and several Virginia Slims Tour stops in Boston.

Although Hamilton tries to avoid becoming the center of attention during a match, certain qualities he had as a football player have helped him on the tennis court. Whether you are trying to stop a draw play or making calls on the service line, you have to be alert and aware of the situation.

"You're better off if you follow the sport," Hamilton says. "That way you're able to know a player and anticipate what shots he may make in a certain situation.

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Ray Hamilton

"It's also important to follow the match you're officiating. You always have to keep track of the score and what the situation is. You try to be particularly alert on an important point. Like a player, an official doesn't want to make an error on a crucial point."

Hamilton simply does whatever is asked of him. He can work the baseline, service line or sidelines. He even has been in the umpire's chair for a few amateur matches. "It really doesn't make much difference where they put me," Hamilton says. "It's al-

ways basically the same call — in or out."

Certain court surfaces and situations are more difficult than others, however. "There's sometimes difficulty in men's tennis," Hamilton explains, "especially when it's played on a hard surface. Men's tennis has the big service; the ball is only on the court for a split second.

"It's not as bad on clay or on grass. There the ball makes a mark when it hits the ground, so you can wait until the ball comes up to see where the mark is on a close call."

But there are bound to be some errors. "I just do the best I can," Hamilton says. "If a player feels I've made an incorrect call, the umpire will change it. Otherwise, my call stands. I don't speak to players about calls. That's not my job while I'm on the court."

So far, Hamilton hasn't heard much from the players. In nearly 10 years as an official, he has had no problems with the sport's often volatile stars.

"There are one or two players that I'm sure some officials would rather stay away from," he admits, "but I really haven't had any big run-ins on the court that I can remember."

Hamilton insists that being an ex-NFL star has nothing to do with the fact that his officiating career has been relatively problem-free. "I'm a good official," he says. "I make good calls. That solves a lot of problems right there."

The former Sooner star has no real aspirations as a tennis official. He is not looking to work the U.S. Open or to be in the umpire's chair for the finals at Wimbledon.

"You've got to have a real desire to be the umpire; I'm satisfied calling the lines. As for working the big tournaments," Hamilton says, "well, if I went to the U.S. Open, I'd rather go there to watch. Some guys who officiate do it all the time and travel a lot, but that doesn't interest me. It's more or less a hobby that I enjoy very much, and that's the way it is for most officials. Nobody is doing it to make a living."

Hamilton has the same two goals as an official each time he steps on the court: "Make all the right calls and stay alert." New England Patriots