

THE VALUE OF A COACH

We thought you dedicated gymnastics coaches would enjoy reading this article written by basketball great Bill Walton on the impact his college coach, John Wooden, had on his life. Walton expresses how the values of sport transcend sport and become part of the fabric of a person's individual character and personality.

John Wooden is the greatest basketball coach of all time, but what I learned from him had much more to do with living life than with playing ball. The skills he taught us on the court—teamwork, personal excellence, discipline, dedication, focus, organization, and leadership—are the same tools that you need in the real world. Coach showed us how these skills are transferable. He wasn't just teaching us about basketball, he was teaching us about life.

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John Wooden taught us how to focus on one primary objective: Be the best you can be in whatever endeavor you undertake. Don't worry about the score. Don't worry about the image. Don't worry about the opponent. It sounds easy, but it's actually very difficult. Coach Wooden showed us how to accomplish it. Coach gained respect with a very simple method: by his personal example. He worked harder, longer, smarter, and was more dedicated, loyal, concerned, caring, detailed, meticulous, and enthusiastic than anyone I have ever worked with.

John Wooden never had to tell you that he was the one in charge or get up and give rah-rah

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speeches to get your attention. He led by being himself.

You saw how true he was to doing things right, by thinking right. Coach Wooden was more interested in the process than in the result. This was very important to him. He really wanted things done correctly and it started with the way he did things. You wanted to follow him and his example.

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For us, it all started with our practices at UCLA, which were nonstop action and absolutely electric, super-charged, on edge, crisp and incredibly demanding, with Coach Wooden pacing up and down the sidelines like a caged tiger, barking out instructions, positive reinforcement, and appropriate maxims: "Be quick, but don't hurry." "Failing to prepare is preparing to fail." "Never mistake activity for achievement." "Discipline yourself and others won't need to."

At the same time he constantly moved us into and out of minutely detailed drills, scrimmages, and patterns while exhorting us to "Move...quickly...hurry up!" It was wonderfully exhilarating and absolutely intense.

In fact, games actually seemed like they happened in a slower gear because of the pace at which we practiced. We'd run a play perfectly in scrimmage and Coach would say, "OK, fine. Now re-set. Do it again, faster." We'd do it again. Faster. And again. Faster. And again.

I'd often think during UCLA games, "Why is this taking so long?" because we had done everything that happened during a game thousands of times at a faster pace in practice.

Coach Wooden wasn't one to casually throw around compliments. He expected you to be really good. Being really good wasn't something special. He assumed you'd be on top of things because that's the way he was. He didn't think you needed to be complimented for doing what was normal.

However, as players we knew we were rising to a greater level when we'd see that smile on his face. When four guys touched that ball in two seconds and the fifth guy hit a lay-up, man, what a feeling! When things really clicked, the joy of playing was reflected by the joy on his face. He created an environment where you expected to be your best and outscore the opponent; where capturing a championship and going undefeated was part of the normal course of events. Coach made the extraordinary seem normal.

I can't describe how exciting it was to be a part of that-the joy he created in preparing us for competition. Of course, the real competition he was preparing us for was life (even though I didn't realize that until much later). His lessons were invaluable to me when I started raising a family and pursuing other professional activities beyond basketball.

After my father, Coach Wooden has had the most profound influence on me of anyone in my entire life. I was touched by Coach Wooden's greatness-he set a standard I have been trying to live up to ever since. He is as positive as you get. He taught us the values and characteristics that could make us not only good players, but also good people. He taught us how to be true to ourselves while also striving to be our best.

Now I'm forty-four years old and I'm telling

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my four teenage sons what Coach Wooden used to tell his players. I'm even writing his maxims on their lunch bags and then listening to them complain about it, just like I used to complain.

worked with.

They'll see. My kids will learn. Soon enough they'll come to understand and appreciate the great wisdom of a very wise man: Coach John Wooden. I have nothing but the greatest love and respect for Coach. Thanks for your sacrifice, gifts, and patience.

Bill Walton
College Basketball Hall of Fame
NBA Hall of Fame

This article originally appeared as an introduction to the book: "Wooden: A Lifetime of Observations and Reflections On and Off the Court," published by Contemporary Books. The book is the basis for a special on public television to be broadcast during March Madness 2001.