

“Little things make big things happen!”

The basketball world lost one of its most revered coaches on June 4, 2010. The education world lost a passionate and dedicated teacher as well. The teaching philosophy that John Wooden used as an approach to the game of basketball can be an inspiration to all teachers regardless of discipline. I hope the following will serve as inspiration as we prepare for the new school term.

John Robert Wooden (1910-2010) renowned UCLA Basketball coach would rather be remembered first and foremost as a teacher. Born in Hall, Indiana, the third of six children. His parents were farmers that stressed hard work, honesty and the value of education. He graduated from Purdue University with a degree in English. While at Purdue he was a three time All-American and led Purdue to its only national basketball championship. His first teaching job was at Dayton High School in Kentucky where he taught English and coached baseball and basketball. He also taught at Central High School in South Bend Indiana and Indiana State University prior to being invited to UCLA.

UCLA won an unprecedented 10 NCAA titles under his leadership and still holds the NCAA record for winning 88 consecutive games from 1971 through 1974. But he never emphasized winning and he was rarely concerned with the score board. To John Wooden winning was a by-product of effort not an end product. Wooden enjoyed practicing and preparing for the game more than the game. His two favorite quotes were “To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive,” (Robert Louis Stevenson) and “The journey is better than the inn,” (Cervantes). He always emphasized process over product. Wooden removed winning as the focal point and this reduced the pressure and fear his players felt entering a game. He asked his players to focus on their effort and a commitment to playing their best, “effort is internal and completely in your control” (Hill, 2001). “Don’t permit fear of failure to prevent effort. We are all imperfect and will fail on occasion, but fear of failure is the greatest failure” (Hill, 2001).

John Wooden’s practices were always meticulously organized and planned. He insisted that he and his coaching staff meet prior to every practice and plan every minute. Failing to prepare is preparing to fail (Hill, 2001). “By having practices carefully orchestrated, we were able to get more done in a shorter period of time” (Wooden, 1966). Lesson plans were a set of 3 x 5 cards that he pulled from his pocket that had been prepared well in advance by him and his staff. He demanded punctuality in players and staff. The organized portion of his practice always

started on time and ended on time. Every practice ended on a high note or positive note. By adhering to designated ending times he felt he would get maximum effort out of his players because they knew when sessions would end. Balls and equipment were strategically placed prior to every practice so that no time was wasted transitioning between drills. Coach Wooden placed great value on every single minute of practice; each was a never to be regained opportunity to teach the team and reach his goals. A quality rehearsal has the same aspects; meticulous planning and preparation, begin and end on time, have a plan and stick to it, students must feel that they are benefitting and learning from the session, end with a run through or performing a favorite portion or piece.

Each practice stressed fundamentals and conditioning. He taught by offering information in small bite-size pieces rather than large chunks that couldn't be assimilated easily. Every aspect of basketball was broken down to its basic components and taught with detailed instruction. He would begin each season with new recruits by sitting them down in the locker room and showing them how to put on their socks and the proper way to lace their shoes. His first lessons were about fingernails, hair length, socks, etc. He assumed nothing and instructed every aspect of the game from the ground up. "Little things make big things happen" (Wooden, Jamison, 2009). Hours were spent developing and instructing proper technique and conditioning. When the best players in the country entered the UCLA program, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bill Walton, Henry Bibby, Sidney Wickes, he always started at the beginning with fundamental instruction regardless of their past or where they came from. It was never the "Wooden way or the highway" but always teaching based on experience and research.

Wooden's instruction was based on his Four Laws of Learning: Explanation, Demonstration, Imitation and Repetition (Wooden, Jamison, 2009). The following teaching principles were the basis for each practice session: each practice was thoroughly planned (objectives); a fundamental must be explained and demonstrated (input/modeling); the correct demonstration must be imitated by the players; their demonstration must be critiqued and corrected (checking for understanding); and then the players must repeat the execution of the proper model until the correct habit has been formed (guided practice/independent practice), (Wooden, 1966). Each segment of a drill was broken down to the basic elements and repeated with slow precision. Rehearsals should also concentrate on isolating small portions and rehearsing these segments out of tempo for consistent execution. Wooden was adamant about practicing the correct desired behavior.

Each team he coached was different therefore his preparation and instructional methods were constantly changing. “Adjust to your members; don’t expect them to adjust to you” (Hill, 2001). “Each group will learn and respond differently. No two people are the same. Each individual under your leadership is unique. There is no formula that applies to all when it comes to teaching and leading” (Wooden, Jamison, 2009). As a teacher be flexible and plan your teaching to the needs and level of your students.

The discipline that he demanded from his players he insisted from his staff and himself. His favorite expression was: ***“No written word, no spoken plea, can teach our youth what they should be. Nor all the books on all the shelves: it’s what teachers are themselves.”*** (Hill, 2001)

Coach Wooden’s X’s and O’s: (Wooden, Jamison, 2009)

- The greatest teaching tool is your own example. Your deeds count more than your words.
- Be patient. People progress at different speeds.
- A good teacher wears many hats. Make sure they all fit your head.
- A good demonstration is more effective than a great description.
- A great leader is a teacher who is a lifelong student.

Andrew Hill has written a great book paying tribute to the teachings of John Wooden entitled *“Be quick, but don’t hurry,” Finding Success in the teachings of a lifetime* (Simon & Schuster, 2001). Hill was a member of three NCAA Championship teams at UCLA. Hill went on to become the president of CBS productions. His book is a wonderful account of a very successful individual who did not see eye to eye with Wooden as a player but years later realized how Wooden’s teachings had affected his life and the principles that Wooden taught had molded his life in a very positive manner.

The phrase “be quick, but don’t hurry” is one that Wooden’s players heard often. It has many attributes to basketball and life. He wanted his players to play aggressively but never out of control. Andrew Hill learned that this phrase also applies to our expectations of what we hope to accomplish. Impatience and unrealistic goals will sabotage a talented group of individuals in any situation (Hill, 2001). Working with long term goals in mind and developing the players (musicians) through a systematic approach to daily fundamental training will serve our students better in the long run. Quick fixes (rote teaching) and unrealistic

expectations (music that is beyond the true ability of your ensemble) does not sustain quality musicianship and foster skill development.

His play book consisted of just a few simple plays that he insisted be executed with perfection. Every team they ever played knew exactly what plays they were going to use and how to defend them but it didn't seem to matter because each player was so well conditioned and trained fundamentally they played with a very high level of confidence that became difficult to stop. I know what most of you are thinking, who couldn't win with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Bill Walton or have the best ensemble if all the principal players and vocalist in our All State groups attended our school. Wooden hated recruiting and likewise very rarely scouted high school players. He had a rule that he would only make contact with a student after they notified UCLA in writing of their interest. The tallest player on his first NCAA Championship team, 1964, was only 6' 5", Fred Slaughter the center. Wooden does not rate teams or players but feels that this may have been his best team because they played with tremendous determination and courage all of the time. They had an undefeated season, 30-0, by out hustling and outlasting each opponent.

John Wooden is well known for his leadership and motivational tool known as the Pyramid of Success (www.coachwooden.com/pyramidpdf.pdf). The Pyramid was developed over a period of fourteen years while teaching at all levels. He was troubled with a true definition of success that he could share with his English classes and as a coach while realizing that each of us is blessed with a unique set of talents. He became disturbed by the extreme pressure placed on his students by their parents in his English classes. Anything less than an "A" was often viewed as failure even if the student had worked hard and done their best. He was always troubled by the parent's reaction to their son's secondary role on a team when he felt that the student athlete was giving their very best each and every time. How does a person feel when you have worked hard, paid attention, done your best only to be called a loser by someone you respect? (Wooden, Jamison, 2009). To John Wooden success was not recommendations, promotions, points, scores, trophies, medals or money. Such items may define status but status is not necessarily success. In 1934 he penned a definition of success that was a direct influence from his father and additional research: ***Success is peace of mind that is the direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best that you are capable.***

With this definition he began work on the Pyramid of Success. He never placed a copyright on his Pyramid because he wanted others to use it and share it. "The

first two blocks of the pyramid are the two cornerstones because to be strong, you have to have a strong foundation,” said Wooden. “The cornerstones of success to me, in anything, are hard work and enjoy what you’re doing. So, one cornerstone is industriousness and the other is enthusiasm.” Each block builds upon the other and offers wonderful direction for personal development and group growth. His teaching was built around this Pyramid, hard work, energy and enthusiasm, self-control, etc. Wooden wanted players to work with him not for him. Wooden was always looking for ways to credit and praise others for outcomes and he readily accepted responsibility for failures. Crediting others is of paramount importance when you’re involved in any creative endeavor. The people in your organization must feel your approval and support to do their best work (Hill, 2001).

Wooden was stoic and rarely displayed emotion on the bench during games and rarely raised his voice during practice unless he needed to encourage effort. His leadership philosophy in this regard was to “seek consistency, avoid peaks and valleys.” The next game (performance) is merely the next step in your development. Peaks and valleys, the emotional “roller-coaster,” are an intrinsic part of the human condition. It is up to the group leader to stay calm, emphasize focus and continuous effort and never lose sight of long term goals (Hill, 2001). Steady, constant, reliable, and complete effort that leads to improvement that was manifested in performance at an increasingly high standard was his goal (Wooden, Jamison, 2009).

Concentrate on your team not the opposition or other groups (Wooden, Jamison 2009). Wooden did not spend much time scouting other teams. He concentrated on developing his players to the best of their ability. Likewise we should know our ensemble and concentrate on developing the skills that they need to become better musicians. Make teaching musical concepts our first priority by selecting music that will assist our desired outcomes. Constant evaluation of practice and performance is needed to recognize weaknesses and formulate plans to address the needs of our ensemble.

Best wishes for a musically rewarding 2010-11!

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