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Guest Columnist

Coach Wooden can teach you how to play, too

WHEN IT COMES TO BASKETBALL, I'm a turncoat.

Call me Benedict Arnold, but even though I root for the USC Trojans in football, once March Madness arrives, you'll find me secretly pulling for the UCLA Bruins.

There's a simple explanation for my conflicting team loyalties: John Wooden. I'm a Bruins basketball fan because of the team's legendary coach, "the Wizard of Westwood."

As one of the most successful college coaches ever, Wooden guided UCLA to seven straight national titles and 10 overall, more than twice as many championships as the next best team at the time.

It's off the court, however, where Wooden's legend resonates the most. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, a three-time NCAA Most Outstanding Player, said it best: "The leadership lessons John taught me seemed corny when I first heard them. By the time I graduated, they began to make a little more sense. But it was only later, years after I left UCLA, that they had the greatest effect on my life."

That's as it should be because, in my opinion, Wooden coached more for life than for basketball.

While all of Wooden's wisdom would fill several books, there are five leadership lessons we can take off the court for immediate application.

LESSON NO. 1: Define success.

Wooden defined success by neither championships earned, games won, nor points scored. Instead, disregarding external indicators, he described success as the inner peace of mind gained from knowing you've done your best.

Have you defined success? Take a moment to pinpoint what victory means to you. Check that the prize you're chasing is one

worth having. Otherwise you might waste your entire career marching in the wrong direction.

Additionally, in defining success, include the process as well as the end results. Are you developing good character and work ethic in the course of pursuing your goals?

As Wooden wrote, "winning games, titles, and championships isn't all it's cracked up to be, but getting there, the journey, is a lot more than it's cracked up to be."

LESSON NO. 2: Be passionate.

A lukewarm leader is worse than no leader at all. Be passionate about what you do.

Unless you care enough to jump into the flames, why should your staff follow when a fire rages? No one's a leader if there are no followers.

The crux of leadership is generating passion and enthusiasm. Since enthusiasm is contagious, being passionate yourself will stimulate individuals around you to ever-higher levels of achievement. In a nutshell, personal passion leads to group enthusiasm, which spawns corporate momentum.

A side effect of passion is viewing no job as beneath you. I never ask my associates to perform a task I wouldn't do myself. And yes, that means that when necessary I move furniture, stuff envelopes, and answer phones.

Wooden shared this viewpoint. For his first 16 years at UCLA, his players practiced in a gym with the gymnastics and wrestling squads; every day Wooden swept and mopped the floor because of the dust the other teams stirred up.

LESSON NO. 3: Commit yourself.

Success is a marathon, not a sprint. In consequence, you must commit yourself to a long, hard journey. As salesman Joe Girard wrote, "the elevator to success is out of order. You'll have to use the stairs ... one step at a time."

Without perseverance and commitment, you'll stop short of ultimate leadership success.

Consider Wooden's trajectory to a national victory. Although he began coaching at UCLA in 1948, his first national championship came only in 1960. That's 13 seasons of hard work, day in, week out, year after year. How much would Wooden have missed by quitting before his 13th season?

Or, as a more recent example, consider the case of Jim Boheim. He joined the Syracuse University coaching staff in 1969, but it was only in 2003 that his team won the NCAA basketball championship. The lesson is clear: be patient on the road to success.

LESSON NO. 4: Reset your focus.

While remaining alert to external conditions, focus mainly on yourself and your internal team.

Wooden hardly scouted his opponents. Instead, he emphasized the factor within his control: preparing his players to execute to the best of their abilities.

This internal mindset motivated Wooden to tailor drills for each player. At the same time, he ran constant exercises to mesh his sometimes prima donna athletes into a cohesive, functioning whole.

Shaquille O'Neal, current Lakers center, reflected that "John Wooden sat me down in college ... and said, 'Being great ain't all about scoring and making the fantastic play. It's about how everybody else plays around you.'"

What's your focus? In my mind, the truest measure of leadership is whether you improve the people on your team. Don't let external conditions distract you from making your associates smarter, better, and more productive.

LESSON NO. 5: Never stop learning.

To the best of my knowledge, no one's discovered a leadership gene; it's an acquired skill honed over time. Therefore, there's a simple prescription for better leadership: never stop learning.

Learning keeps us from complacency and stagnation; it also encourages humility. None of these traits breeds a perfect leader, but they surely produce a better one than a know-it-all-ready attitude.

I can't believe that John Wooden is now 92. At an age when I'd be happy just to be alive, he's writing, speaking, and still learning about leadership.

If the Wizard of Westwood still has a few things to discover about this topic, I'm sure I haven't even scratched the surface. Coach Wooden may say he's just "a common man who's true to his beliefs," but in reality, he's an uncommon example of unequalled leadership.

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