

The Legacy of Coach John Wooden

by Ken Hartman

On the day that I had heard on the radio that Coach John Wooden had died I remember thinking, "Wow, what a legacy this man has left." Coach Wooden became world-renowned as a symbol of both excellence and simpler times.ⁱ I started to think about all the lives he has touched through the years, including lives such as mine that he did not even know of. I also wondered about those that were closest to him during the big moments of his life and in the final days. What was it like to be in his presence?

Of all of the articles covering Coach Wooden that I've read, the one that gives the best look into his life was written by Eric Neel for ESPNⁱⁱ in October 2005 as Coach was celebrating his 95th birthday. This article talks about the various basketball players that he is touched throughout the years, many of whom were present at his birthday celebration. These players didn't show up just to salute a coach from their college days but to spend time with their friend and mentor. Decades after their retirement, these players were an integral part of Coach Wooden's social life in his late 90s. "Ask him to explain that chock-full calendar of his, ask him why it is that he and so many of his boys have stayed so close for so long, and he'll tell you it's just an extension of what all coaches and players share. 'You deal with each other in so many different ways,' he says. 'You deal with each other physically, emotionally and mentally, and through times of stress, and I think you just get to know each other better.'ⁱⁱⁱ

What was it like for those players closest to him? Eric Neel put it this way in his article:

They speak of him in hushed tones, with wide smiles on their faces. They gush. Do they risk deifying him? They don't care. They know what they know. Wilkes tells you how moved he was, how much he learned, by Coach's absolute devotion to Nellie. Washington speaks of Wooden's unflinching support of Kareem at a time when the center was marginalized by race, size, politics. Shackelford marvels still at his steady habits of study and preparation. Hill raves about his memory, of names, faces and lines of poetry he loves. Walton, who unabashedly calls Wooden "an enduring flame of hope," says it's all these and more: "It's the totality with Coach. It's the example he sets by the way he does all the little things and all the big things in his life."^{iv}

Simplicity and modesty were important values to Coach Wooden who did not tolerate flashiness and appears to have been unaffected by fame. Coach also loved maxims and repeated them frequently. One maxim, "you can't let praise or criticism get to you. It's a weakness to get caught up in either one"^v reflects how he was deeply rooted in his core values.

Virtually every article and obituary written about John Wooden refer to a seven-point creed that his father gave him on his 8th grade graduation. The creed goes as follows:

Be true to yourself. Make each day a masterpiece. Help others. Drink deeply from good books, especially the Bible. Make friendship a fine art. Build a shelter against a rainy day. Pray for guidance. Count and give thanks for your blessings every day.^{vi}

He remembered each word. "I was built up from my dad more than anyone else...I tried to live by this and I tried to teach by it."^{vii} Wooden credits his father for shaping his life more than anything else. Wooden's father shaped his life with maxims that succinctly encapsulated his teaching point. The sign of a great teacher is the ability to make important concepts simple to understand and easy to remember. As modeled by his father, John Wooden shaped the lives of his players like a master tending to a bonsai tree, repeating the appropriate maxim as needed. I think what made Woodenisms so powerful is that they were consistent with who he was and when they were invoked, the words carried the full force of John Wooden's essence.

The coachwooden.com website is replete with the most famous maxims of John Wooden. Some of my personal favorites are:

- *Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do.*
- *It's the little details that are vital. Little things make big things happen.*
- *Never mistake activity for achievement*
- *Success comes from knowing that you did the best to become the best that you are capable of becoming.*

A former player, Andy Hill stated "No one's perfect, and of all people, I know he's not. But he's closer than anyone else I know, and by that I mean he truly does live in congruence with the philosophy he espouses."^{viii} What a fantastic statement to have made about you during the sunset of your life. At the 95th birthday interview that Eric Neel conducted, Coach Wooden said, "There is a line from Socrates, when he was unjustly imprisoned and facing imminent death, the jailers asked, 'Why aren't you preparing for death?' and Socrates said, 'I've been preparing for death all my life by the life I've lead.'"^{ix} Wow, what a legacy.

ⁱ Litsky, Frank, and John Branch. "John Wooden, Who Built Incomparable Dynasty at U.C.L.A., Dies at 99." *The New York Times*. 4 June 2010. Web. 31 Oct. 2010.

ⁱⁱ Eric, Neel. "ESPN.com - E-Ticket: The Wizard At 95." *ESPN: The Worldwide Leader In Sports*. 14 Oct. 2005. Web. 31 Oct. 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Neel

^{iv} Neel

^v Mitchell, Houston. "John Wooden Quotes: Some of Coach John Wooden's Favorite Maxims ('Woodenisms') | The Fabulous Forum | Los Angeles Times." *Los Angeles Times*. 4 June 2010. Web. 31 Oct. 2010

^{vi} Litsky

^{vii} Neel

^{viii} Neel

^{ix} Neel