

John Wooden & Martial Arts

Ken Hartman 9/22/07

John Wooden is considered by many to be one of the greatest coaches ever. He exemplified leadership and by his example had a profound effect on countless people. How did he do it? What was different about Coach Wooden? And how can I personalize these lessons and incorporate that into my study of martial arts?

John Wooden was a great coach and teacher because that greatness bubbled out of who he was as a person. He placed an emphasis on character and integrity. This was ingrained upon him by his father, who taught him to “be true to yourself.” (Wooden & Jamison, p. 13) One of my mentors has taught me, “When you are squeezed, watch and see what comes out.” For Coach Wooden it was basketball, but for me it is karate—the place where I submerge myself in a controlled environment to the “squeezing effect.” One martial artist said it this way:

“A dojo is a miniature cosmos where we make contact with ourselves—our fears, anxieties, reactions, and habits. It is an arena of confined conflict where we confront an opponent who is not an opponent but rather a partner engaged in helping us understand ourselves more fully...” (Hyams)

Wooden said, “...be bold in execution rather than hang back in fear of failure. Mistakes are part of winning—not dumb mistakes or those caused by haste or sloppiness but mistakes made by intelligent and thoughtful individuals attempting to make something happen.” (Wooden & Jamison, p. 19) All great leaders that I have studied have had similar philosophies on execution, risk taking, and mistakes, but there is one philosophy that Coach Wooden articulates that is uniquely his—and that is his definition of success:

“Success is the peace of mind which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort to become the best you are capable of becoming.” (Wooden & Jamison, p. 33)

This definition of success is liberating and empowering at the same time! It is liberating because an individual’s potential becomes the measuring stick—not someone else’s potential or current level of achievement. As Bruce Lee said, “You will never learn anything new unless you are ready to accept yourself *with* your limitations...You must accept the fact that you are capable in some directions and limited in others, and you must develop your capabilities.” (Hyams, p. 25) Wooden’s viewpoint is also empowering because intense, focused individuals set high standards for themselves and constantly raise the bar. Because John Wooden redefined success to be consistent with his values, it also changed his behavior. As Kareem Abdul-Jabbar said, “He taught that big emotions were an extra burden that we didn’t need to contend with.” (Wooden & Jamison, p. 28) Instead of emotional volatility, Wooden valued *intensity* because it leads to consistently applied effort and concentration. Wooden believed that lack of control over emotions makes one vulnerable and inconsistent. In a similar way, karate teaches us to remain “centered” and balanced but places a great emphasis on focus. Because energy is not wasted on emotions, it can be channeled into focus and concentration to achieve competitive greatness.

No one can discuss Coach Wooden without talking about *team excellence*. For Wooden, he took the greatest satisfaction from making teams out of his players and leaders out of his teams, replicating his concept of success. In John Wooden’s Pyramid of Success there is a block called Team Spirit, which he defines “as eagerness

to sacrifice personal interests and glory for the good and greatness of the team.” (Wooden & Jamison, p. 43) Wooden states that the leadership key to Team Spirit is selflessness. In basketball, martial arts, as well as in all other areas of life, to become great one must be devoted to something that is bigger than themselves. My own karate instructor, Bill Koster, once taught me that ‘respect makes you powerful.’ When you respect your team and you respect your coach, you make personal sacrifices to make the team great and thereby become successful in the process. As I read the book, the *Essential John Wooden*, the respect that Wooden showed both his mentors *and* his players struck me as one of the most compelling motivators for his teams. It made me think of a truism in the martial arts—even masters have masters. Here is how Hyams put it:

Despite my many years of martial arts study, I recognized how little I really know compared with true masters of the arts. Only by constantly exposing myself to someone better than I have I been able to improve. It is inspiring to know that even the masters have masters, and that we are all learners.

Wooden has an abundance of greatness that bubbles out of the depths of his character. Even today, people like me that have never met the man, call him ‘Coach’ because we recognize and aspire to his greatness.

Bibliography

Hyams, J. (1979). *Zen in the Martial Arts*. New York: Bantam Books.

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