

Lessons Learned from Coach John Wooden

John Wooden is one of the winningest coaches ever---in any sport. Teams coached by John Wooden won 10 National titles in 12 years (although he coached longer than that) with seven coming in succession. That says a lot. Any time someone does something that well, it demands we look at what he did and how he did it. I have a fascination with athletes who change the sport, such as Tiger Woods, but as a coach, I am deeply interested in how to coach athletes in a way that produces consistent results. Below are some extrapolations from the methods used by Wooden that are sound and effective in any sport:

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FUNDAMENTALS

- *Fundamentals are basic principles. All fundamentals must be mastered through teaching and repetition*

Never stop teaching the fundamentals. The more advanced an athlete, the deeper he must understand how to use the fundamentals. Fundamentals are the absolutes that never change--the foundation of what to do and how it is to be done.

The first lesson a team received from their coach was how to put on their socks and tie their shoes. Coach Wooden knew there was a right way to do everything and they did not go on to learn anything else until everyone put his socks and shoes on properly. His principle: A basketball player cannot play if his feet hurt.

CONDITIONING

- *Drills condition the body and the mind—physical toughness and mental toughness are developed through exercising body and the will.*

Drills are exercises designed to teach application of fundamentals while building stamina, strength and precise execution. Repetition is key. Many coaches want to vary the conditioning exercises of an athlete so that it is not boring, but Wooden did not. He ran the same drills in the same way every day. Some of his team members rebelled at this approach but the repetition resulted in confidence under pressure. These were the skills that became habitual and could be used under all circumstances.

TRAINING

- *Training is the execution of fundamentals and application of conditioning. Training includes tests and circumstances that give you development and growth.*

You can only use the fundamentals you know, play with the conditioning you have and apply what you have trained. Under pressure, the subconscious does what it has trained to do through repetition. Conditioning plus training allows an athlete to function rather than emote.

When performance is not what it should be, rather than trying to “fix” the part that went wrong, go back to the training routine. This method avoids focusing on the problem, affixing blame to the athlete and undermining confidence.

- Go back to training---don't correct failure.
- Demand excellence before the match begins.
- Don't talk about winning----teach what is needed to win.