

What We Can Learn from the Wizard of Westwood (John Wooden)

What can a law firm learn from a former UCLA basketball team? If they pay attention, they can learn and apply the principles of success, how to win in the legal marketplace. The UCLA teams coached by John Wooden, "The Wizard of Westwood," remarkably won the NCAA championship 10 out of 11 years from 1964 through 1975, with a wide variety of different players and different teams. In those days there was no 45-second clock. Some teams tried to beat UCLA by stalling and holding the ball until the last second of the half. No matter what the opposition tried, UCLA prevailed.

There are many things the majority of sports fans do not know about John Wooden. He actually became the UCLA coach in 1948, so he had coached the Bruins for 15 years before UCLA won its first national championship. Even his early teams had winning records every year. In fact, John Wooden is one of the few players and coaches who never played on or coached a team with a losing record.

UCLA's first championship season, 1964-1965, featured no player taller than 6' 5". Next, Wooden coached Lou Alcinder who was over 7' 2" tall, and was a difficult personality to coach. During the Alcinder years, UCLA was expected to win every game. UCLA won national championships in 1967, 1968 and 1969. Next Wooden coached a team of great forwards named Sidney Wicks and Curtis Rowe, with a little known center named Steve Patterson. Finally, Wooden coached Bill Walton, who made Alcinder look like an easy player to coach, and Keith ("Smooth as Silk") Wilkes. Once again, UCLA set records for consecutive wins.

John Wooden concluded his coaching career in 1975 with a record of 885 wins and 203 losses, an unequalled winning percentage of .813. He coached UCLA to 88 consecutive victories. He also coached teams to a never-equalled four perfect seasons of 30-0. His UCLA teams won a record setting 38 straight NCAA Tournament games.

What can be learned from this truly remarkable man? First, John Wooden is a man of impeccable character and an unwavering allegiance to principle. He set the example for his players by his work and his deeds. He was trusted by Lew Alcinder, by Bill Walton and all those players who played for UCLA between them. He didn't permit one of his players to criticize another or to use profanity. He required that his players be clean shaven. When Bill Walton told Wooden he would not shave, the coach replied: "Well, I have great respect for people who stand up for what they believe, I do, and we're going to miss you." Wooden believed it was important to back up the rule, regardless of the player. Walton did shave and recognized this event as a turning point in his development.

While he coached outstanding teams with outstanding records, John Wooden defined success differently than the final score. He once said it was possible to win and be outscored or to lose even when you outscored an opponent. To Wooden, success is a peace of mind that is the direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best you are capable of becoming. He believed anything stemming from that success is simply a by-product, whether it be the score, the trophy, a national championship, fame or fortune.

The Wooden-coached UCLA teams did the little things well. In fact, it was the combination of doing a lot of little things well that enabled UCLA to win the big games. UCLA was always in superb condition. Wooden's philosophy was that UCLA would play you even for one half and wear you down the second half. He stressed fundamentals, discipline on defense and quickness. His teams rarely ran into foul trouble because they didn't reach. His teams blocked out on the boards and filled the lanes on the fast break.

I think John Wooden also created public impressions and perceptions that made a difference. John Wooden had a clear vision of who he was and of UCLA being recognized as the most outstanding basketball program in the United States. He

communicated that vision to his players, his recruits, his opponents, the media, and the public.

When UCLA won that first NCAA championship with Walt Hazzard and Gail Goodrich and a team with no player taller than 6 feet 5 inches, a certain mystique surrounded both UCLA and John Wooden. The game of basketball actually changed to re-emphasize quickness. As a result of the image of UCLA being a winner and John Wooden being the master innovator, it became easier to recruit superstars to UCLA. Lew Alcinder came all the way from New York. The media also began writing stories and doing television shows calling UCLA a team of destiny. The UCLA players just simply knew they were going to win. They believed they were in better condition, were quicker, and more disciplined than their opponents. Other college teams, while they desperately wanted to beat UCLA, found it difficult in part because they held UCLA in awe. UCLA's public image was so striking that when Lefty Driesell was hired to coach at Maryland, he stated in his initial press conference that his commitment was to make the University of Maryland the UCLA of the East. Lefty never achieved the lofty goal he set for Maryland. Nor has any other coach. John Wooden-coached teams won more NCAA championships than Dean Smith, Bob Knight, Jerry Tarkanian, Mike Krzyzewski and Rick Pitino combined.

John Wooden prepared his UCLA teams to win. While UCLA scouted the other teams and knew what their star players could do, practice time was spent on planning and preparing to play UCLA's game. John Wooden spent 75% of his practice time on the fundamentals: shooting, passing, cutting, dribbling, blocking out on rebounds, and defense. John Wooden also had a practice philosophy. He used to say: "Don't mistake activity for achievement." His practices were well planned and focused on specific goals. While the actual game generally took about two hours, a good twenty hours went into planning and preparing for the game. More important than that, however, is that John Wooden prepared for the season ,not for any individual game.

Finally, I think it is instructional for us to analyze how John Wooden updated his team plan and strategy. He did so when his players changed and he did so when his teams lost a game. John Wooden had many fine teams before he ever won a national championship. But, he became the coach of a championship team when he adjusted his plan by changing from a man-to-man press to a full-court-zone press. That change emphasized the quickness of his players. During the Alcinder years, he played a low post offense, which got the ball to Lew close to the basket. The year after Alcinder graduated, he went back to a high post offense, which gave forwards like Sidney Wicks and Curtis Rowe room on the side of the court to make their moves.

There were times (not often) when UCLA lost. Believe it or not, there were times when John Wooden felt a loss would do his team good. It would jolt them back to reality. It would also transform them from playing not to lose to playing to win. Whenever UCLA teams lost, John Wooden maintained his dignity and class. He was totally in control. He simply believed the loss helped his players learn about themselves and grow, and he supported his players and concentrated on preparation for the next game.

Well, for me, John Wooden teaches lawyers and law firms six principles:

1. Character and principles of the firm's leadership are critical to sustained success..
2. Principles must consistently apply to everyone, including the stars. .
3. Do the little things right and the big things will follow.
4. Public perceptions and impressions can make a difference.
5. Preparation and planning are the keys to success, and
6. Update the plan to stay on top.

John Wooden created “The Pyramid of Success” which provides a deeper understanding of his ideas for creating a successful team.

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John R. Wooden, Head Basketball Coach, Emeritus, UCLA

