

# Wooden's Legacy Extends Beyond Titles

By BILLY WITZ JUNE 6, 2010

LOS ANGELES — If you wanted to talk to John Wooden, it was not difficult. You could check the phone directory and call the number listed for his condominium in Encino — the Wizard of Westwood did not actually live in his kingdom, or on a mountain top, but over the hill in the San Fernando Valley.

If Wooden was interested in speaking, which he usually seemed to be, he picked up when you identified yourself on his answering machine.

It seems quaint and charming that Wooden, who died Friday at 99, was not insulated by handlers, agents — or even the white pages.

But that is to miss the point — and with Wooden there always was one. In this case, that he was no more important than anyone else.

Wooden's legacy remains his unparalleled success as a basketball coach — his 10 N.C.A.A. championships in a 12-season stretch at U.C.L.A. and the Bruins' 88-game winning streak. But for those who played for him, and to many who met him, it seemed to be the last thing to define him.

“You hear from every guy who played for him how he taught us about life as he taught us about basketball,” said Andy Hill, a reserve on the 1970-72 championship teams. “But I don't know that any of us had any idea that it was

happening at the time. It's like you read a Salinger story, then you took a class and learned about all the hidden symbolism. There was a whole level of teaching going on that none of us could see."

One example, Hill said, came every day at practice. It began at 3 p.m. and ended at 5:30, precisely.

"Why? He wanted to go home and be with his family," Hill said. "I don't think it was because Coach was lazy; he just had the perspective of what was really important, and he always reinforced what he said with what he did."

For nearly 25 years after he graduated from U.C.L.A., Hill did not think much of these lessons — or of Wooden. He had become the president of CBS Productions, but he looked back on his playing days mostly with resentment. Hill starred on the freshman team at U.C.L.A., sharing the team's most valuable player award with Henry Bibby. But in three years on the varsity, Hill rarely played.

Then one day on the golf course, Hill's playing partner told him he was rushing his swing. It reminded him of one of Wooden's pet phrases — "Be quick, but don't hurry" — and as he began to consider all of the other principles he had carried from Wooden, he picked up the phone to call him and say thanks.

In 2001, he wrote a book, "Be Quick — But Don't Hurry!" detailing how the lessons he learned under Wooden were responsible for his professional success.

Wooden arrived in Los Angeles in 1948, and if others came here to reinvent themselves, Wooden never did. He always felt secure in who he had become growing up on an Indiana farm.

"He was kind of a square," said Bill Sweek, a reserve on the 1967-69 championship teams. "We were young and adventurous, and it was an era of a

lot of experimentation and political unrest. He was always trying to learn to relate to us.”

That meant taking psychology classes at U.C.L.A. and seeking out players or coaches who would challenge him. He hired Jerry Norman, whom he had kicked off the team as a player, as an assistant. It was Norman who prodded Wooden into using the 2-2-1 zone press that, before the shot clock, served to speed up the game and was the catalyst for Wooden’s first championship, in 1964.

Sweek, a hard-nosed player whose opinions were as sharp as his elbows, was upset when Wooden took him out of the 1969 national semifinal against Drake.

When he sent Sweek back into the game, Sweek pouted on his way to the scorer’s table. “He said if you don’t want to play, go sit down,” Sweek said. “So I turned around, and instead of going to sit down, I went back to the locker room. We were playing in Louisville, and I was going to hitchhike back to California.”

The Bruins squeaked past Drake, 85-82, but when Wooden returned to the locker room, he was fuming. After a heated team meeting, Wooden chose not to discipline Sweek and played him when the Bruins routed Purdue to become the first team to win three consecutive N.C.A.A. titles.

“Somehow, he was gracious enough to forgive me when I was totally wrong,” said Sweek, now a high school teacher and coach in Sonoma, Calif.

Appreciation of Wooden has grown with time. In retirement, he wrote books, became a sought-after public speaker and regularly took his place in the second row behind the Bruins’ bench at Pauley Pavilion, where he was something of an oracle. For reporters who covered U.C.L.A. as I did, one of jobs’ perks was seeking out stories that required a call to Wooden. With the Bruins traveling to Indianapolis, I spoke to him before visiting his hometown,

Martinsville, Ind.

He reminisced about the lessons learned when his family lost its farm, why he was the only one on the Martinsville High School team who was not in tears after losing the state championship by a single point (he had tried his best) and how there was not a restaurant in Los Angeles that made persimmon pudding like Poe's Cafeteria on the outskirts of town.

I called again when the U.C.L.A. football team played at Kansas because Wooden had helped build the Kansas football stadium.

The summer before his senior year in high school, Wooden and a friend hitchhiked from Indiana because they heard there was good money to be made harvesting wheat. But when they arrived, the wheat was not ready.

One day, the Kansas basketball coach, Phog Allen, noticing their letterman's jackets, picked them up while they were hitchhiking. He set them up with jobs pouring concrete for a stadium addition and let them sleep in the Kansas gym.

Asked about his skills as a mason, Wooden noted wryly that the stadium was still standing.

"I think I did an excellent job," he said, no doubt aware that a job well done — like a life well lived — can endure.

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