

## **UCLA/UC Santa Cruz Researchers Offer New Perspectives On Basketball Coaching Legend John Wooden**

Date: June 2, 2004

Contact: Dan Page (dpage@support.ucla.edu)

Phone: 310-794-2265

A study by researchers at the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute and UC Santa Cruz reveals the daily, detailed and deliberate planning behind the unprecedented coaching success of UCLA basketball legend John Wooden, who led teams to an unprecedented 10 NCAA championships. The researchers also revisit their methods and offer assessments of what they might do differently were they to conduct a similar study today.

Outlined in the June 1, 2004, edition of the peer-reviewed journal *The Sports Psychologist*, the findings expand on a quantitative study published by the research duo in 1976 that analyzed Wooden's teaching methods on the hardwood floor of UCLA's Pauley Pavilion. The original study defined, counted and analyzed Wooden's interactions with his players. The new study adds qualitative information to the original data, including reports from Swen Nater, a former UCLA player, other published sources and a 2002 interview with Wooden.

"We wanted to better understand the context of his practices and his underlying pedagogical philosophy," said Ronald Gallimore, study co-author and a research scientist at the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute's Center for Health and Culture. "We learned that exquisite and diligent planning lay behind the heavy information load, economy of talk and practice organization."

The original study, conducted during the 1974–75 season, relied on quantitative analysis of Wooden's utterances during practice, recording the number of instructions, comments intended to intensify behavior, praises and other instructional moves. In addition, the original study took note of the concise nature of Wooden's teaching acts, including use of dense and rapid information frequently delivered, brevity of speech and tight organization.

"If we could do the study again to gain a fuller interpretation of the observational data, we would press harder to obtain the perspective of players, assistant coaches and Coach Wooden himself," said co-author Roland Tharp, professor of education and psychology at UC Santa Cruz.

The new study, funded by LessonLab, revisits previous results and brings new perspective to Wooden's practice of creating opportunities to teach, his use of

praise for a larger purpose, his views on pedagogy and his emphasis on teaching by example. It also examines lessons learned by the researchers.

### **Creating opportunities to teach**

During their quantitative analysis of the 1974–75 season — a season often judged as the best of Wooden's career — the researchers observed the coach working with a young player struggling to learn the fine points of his center position. The player received more than his share of attention during one practice, in this case related to passing after a rebound.

Information from the biography "Wooden" and from the 2002 interview reveal that earlier in the morning Wooden had created a lesson plan of important instructions to deliver as "teaching moments" arose during drills — a regular practice for both individual and group instruction. The plan was detailed in 3- by 5-inch cards carried by Wooden and his assistant coaches and managers. Whenever the young center hesitated or erred, the coach was ready with a brief but pointed correction. No lectures, no harangues, just brief statements packed with information delivered at the exact moment the learner will benefit the most. The ability of a teacher to do that depends on planning, the researchers say.

"They are all different," Wooden said of his players in his 2002 interview. "There is no formula. I could name players, all who were spirited but in a different way. You can't work with them exactly the same way. You've got to study and analyze each individual and find out what makes them tick and how you can get them under control."

Wooden believes he hadn't taught until the student or player had learned.

### **Praise for a larger purpose**

In the mid-1970s, teacher praise was a major topic of classroom research. Gallimore and Tharp were surprised that Wooden so seldom praised or reproved his players. Of the 2,500 utterances the researchers recorded, about 6 percent were praises and 6 percent were reproofs. About 75 percent of everything Wooden said was recorded by the researchers as instructional.

The co-authors asked Wooden about praises, reproofs and instructions in their 2002 interview, and the coach offered an alternative perspective. Wooden emphasized that focusing player attention on specific, fine points of how to play basketball properly was a motivating, positive response.

Nater confirms the assessment: "Had the majority of Coach Wooden's corrective strategies been positive or negative, I would have been left with an evaluation, not a solution. Also, corrections in the form of information did not address or attack me as a person. New information was aimed at the act rather than the actor."

Wooden also noted three decades later that he singled out reserves for positive attention that regular players got from the fans and media. The praising of reserves was intended to let them know he appreciated their role in helping regulars prepare for stiff competition. By extending themselves in practice, the reserves would create the conditions that he needed to reach the regulars.

### **Some of Wooden's views on pedagogy**

Wooden is well known for his observation that "everyone's a teacher." Because everyone's been taught, scholars, practitioners, policy-makers and the public have debated for years about what makes for good and bad teaching.

For example, many believe drills will kill student interest and learning. For others, it is fundamental to learning. Wooden advocates the drill when used properly within a balanced approach that also involves developing understanding and initiative. Drill for the coach is intended to achieve a mastery of fundamentals that open up opportunities for individual creativity and initiative.

"I teach according to the whole part method," Wooden said in his 2002 interview. "I would show them the whole thing to begin with. Then I'm going to break it down into the parts and work on the individual parts and then eventually bring them together ... I never wanted to take away their individuality, but I wanted that effort to put forth to the welfare of the group as a whole."

### **Teaching by example**

Years after his retirement, many players say he taught about life as well as basketball and that he practiced what he preached, whether on the practice floor or in private sessions he often held with individuals to discuss personal issues, their role on the team and other matters.

"I tried to teach by example, too," Wooden said in his 2002 interview. "I think that's very important. I think it made me feel that my actions away from the basketball court or tennis court or baseball diamond were important, and I must be consistent in the things that I did. I must set an example. I feel that anyone in the public eye has a responsibility to conduct themselves in the proper manner."

## Lessons learned since 1976

Tharp and Gallimore conducted their original study as principal investigators of the Kamehameha Early Education Program, a multi-disciplinary research-and-development program studying culture and education for which they won the Grawemeyer Award in 1993. They believed that an intensive study of a single exemplary coach/teacher could provide dependable information not available by any other method.

Their view has held up through the years. Subsequent research by others has revealed, for example, that coaches spend more time conveying information than praising good performance or scolding errors. They also learned recently that Professor Wade Gilbert's (California State University, Fresno) review of research on coaching credited their 1976 investigation of Wooden as one of the first of its kind.

At the end of the article, the authors imagine coaching their younger selves to do better research. They would make two changes to their approach were they to replicate the original study today. First, they would describe John Wooden's intensive planning behind the teaching they observed on the practice court.

"His limited use of praise and reproofs and the density of information conveyed, in which we were so interested in the 1970s, may have made more sense to us if only we had asked him what he was doing," the researchers note in their new article.

Second, the researchers would have reached beyond their data to draw in the perspective of players, assistant coaches and Wooden himself.

"So if we could coach those two young researchers of 1974–75, those are the two points we'd put on 3 by 5 cards," they note. "Beforehand we'd work to get the instructions phrased more tersely. We might even show them some demonstrations of how to do it better. We'd give them a hustle (encouragement) or two.

"But we wouldn't give them a scolding nor even a reproof ... Neither would we praise them. They don't need it. They got that reward from others and especially from the privilege of watching a master at the peak of his craft. His teaching changed the way they thought about all teaching. We know they'll never again see his like."

Gallimore is a professor-in-residence of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, a professor at the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at UCLA, and the co-director of the 1999 TIMSS Video Study of Mathematics and Science Teaching.

He also is a research psychologist at the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute's Center for Culture and Health, an interdisciplinary research center composed of anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists and other biobehavioral social scientists whose research focuses on the impact of social and cultural factors on physical and mental health. More information is available online at <http://www.npi.ucla.edu/center/culture/research.html>

The UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute is an interdisciplinary research and education institute devoted to the understanding of complex human behavior, including the genetic, biological, behavioral and sociocultural underpinnings of normal behavior, and the causes and consequences of neuropsychiatric disorders. More information is available online at [www.npi.ucla.edu](http://www.npi.ucla.edu).

Tharp is research professor of psychology and education at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and director of the national Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence.

-UCLA-

DBP261