

Coach Wooden – A sad day for us but a glorious day in heaven

Everyone who ever met, heard or observed Coach Wooden probably has some impactful memories.

I was fortunate enough to have several personal experiences with Coach Wooden including sharing a table, a meal and conversations while being the “other” presenter at a day-long conference at Fresno Pacific University in 2005. It was a thrill of a lifetime for me, listening to him speak and having him give me feedback on my presentations. But during that day, I got a chance to share a story and thank him from the first time I met him in the early 70’s.

I was a young coach attending a clinic in Seattle primarily to hear John Wooden. As I sat there, I said to myself, I just need to go shake his hand and tell thanks. As he concluded his presentation, I made my way out to the hallway hoping to get a chance to meet him. Obviously, many of the other coaches in attendance had the same idea, and I found myself last in a long line of coaches. I waited, growing more nervous as the line shortened. When it came my turn to talk to Coach Wooden, I introduced myself as, “Bruce Brown, a coach at Hyak Junior High in Bellevue Washington.” In the excitement of the moment I do not remember much else of what I said except for something about using his “Pyramid of Success” for football and basketball players. He seemed genuinely interested and sincere while he was asking me how we used the pyramid during the short conversation. The entire interaction could not have lasted more than two minutes, but as I drove home in my Volkswagen bug, I was about twenty feet off the ground, just shaking my head thinking I had actually talked to John Wooden.

About two weeks later, I received a letter addressed to. “Coach Bruce Brown, Bellevue Junior High, Bellevue, Washington,” with a UCLA return address. Inside was a copy of the “Pyramid of Success,” signed, “Best Wishes, John Wooden.” Needless I placed it in a frame I could afford as a beginning teacher and put it in a safe place.

As I have thought back over the years, I am amazed at many small but significant lessons that were demonstrated during that period of time. First of all, Coach Wooden had the courtesy to stay afterward and personally greet every coach who wanted to meet him. How different is it today when “big name” coaches are brought in and exit by a side door so that people in attendance will not bother them. Secondly, the greatest coach of our generation had listened to what we had

talked about, remembered my name and approximately where I had taught. Finally, he took the time to sign a copy of the “Pyramid of Success” and mail it to me. What a great lesson in humbleness. This lesson has stayed with me through four decades of working with young people. I have continued to keep the copy of the Pyramid in the same inexpensive black frame to this day. It reminds me to always be available for players or coaches who need individual assistance or just time. The profession of teaching and coaching can have such eternal value. We have daily opportunities to go the extra mile, to demonstrate humbleness, to aspire ourselves and inspire others to greatness.

Thanks Coach Wooden for being a model for some many educators in our generation.