

42. Pat Summitt: Deep Dive into Coaching Methods

On communication: Coach Summitt would meet with each player four times per year to discuss everything ranging from player goals, fears and ambitions to the role that is expected of her from the coaching staff in an effort to really listen to and understand her players. Summitt also regularly communicates with her players in writing short notes that may offer encouragement, express concern for players' well-being, or remind players not to take her on court criticism too personally. Summitt believes the written word has a permanence that makes an impact on players in ways that the spoken word cannot.

Another dimension of communication is Summitt's demeanor on the court and off, and the importance of adjusting her tone and modes of communication to various situations. Summitt's roles range from speaking to players as confidante and advisor, or as a teacher who must communicate in a severe voice to get the student athlete's attention, and as a coach who yells out blunt, straightforward commands in tough game situations. All three situations require different modes of communication and Summitt stresses that "circumstances must dictate how you need to speak, or whether you need to shut up and just listen."

On Team Discipline: According to the coach: "Discipline is all about structure. It is the bare-bones architecture of your organization, the beams and joists that hold everything together. Maintaining the integrity of your interior philosophy is crucial. Even if it costs you a valued member of your team. Otherwise your structure will collapse."

In the past, Summitt has dismissed key players from her teams and believes it is right to do so if "the values and credibility of the entire organization are at stake."

Summitt has described how she has developed a system of team discipline in which after four years, upper classmen become the disciplinarians of the team. All team members are accountable for the actions of each other, so the group has a stake in the conduct of each individual. This way, Summitt has to do very little punishing or penalizing her athletes. The structure of discipline becomes self-perpetuating, and if applied with consistency, provides a clear cut, unambiguous formula for success as the team journeys together in pursuit of a common goal. In this respect, she is careful to distinguish discipline as a much broader concept than punishment, which she views as only a form of "temporary behavior control."

According to Summitt, "Discipline is a comprehensive form of conditioning that requires repetitive, consistent drilling and is required to accomplish anything of real quality, whether in sports, music, or academics."

On Motivation: Coach Summitt once kicked the Lady Vols out of their palatial locker room for five weeks and squeezed them into a tiny visitors' dressing room. She felt they hadn't deserved the palace. They hadn't worked hard enough.

At the end of a three-hour practice, she times the suicide sprints on the big scoreboard clock. She films every practice and then sits through it all over again, so that if a player decides to question a single one of her criticisms, Pat takes her right to the videotape in her office and stops the thing so often to prove she's right that it takes an hour to cover the first ten minutes.

After the Lady Vols fell apart in the second half of a home game, she had the team go straight to the locker room and hang up their uniforms. The next day she had them put on those smelly uniforms that had been locked in the trunk all night. She called for a scrimmage to make sure they played the second half they didn't play the night before!

But Pat knows when to pull back as well. One time she forced an All-American player to the breaking point. In tears, the players had told Pat she was killing her love of the game and while she wasn't going to quit, Pat had to back off.

The old Pat maybe wouldn't have adjusted, but the new Pat is a little more flexible. She lightened up on the player and the Vols went on to win a national title later that same season.

On Player Coach Relationships: Coach Summitt can come across as intense, authoritative, certain, and yet so caring. When she walks into a room everything about her - her ramrod posture, her confident smile, her steel blue eyes and her direct manner of speaking, seem to imply, "I love what I'm doing and this is what I'm here to talk about. You'll pay attention while I'm talking to you or you'll leave the room."

A typical practice can find Pat challenging her players. Suddenly in the midst of a seemingly good practice, Pat might shout, "Hold it! Stop! Everyone stop!"

Here is a sample conversation that follows:

"Lisa!"

"Yes Pat?"

"What have you done for your team today?"

"Well, uh...I...I don't know."

"That's exactly my point! Now everyone get back to work!"

One minute she turns players' names into an obscenity on the court, then walks off it and becomes like a mom to them in the post practice meeting.

During one on one conversations with players Coach Summitt will invariably ask what the player thinks the team needs to do to win. She will ask so intently that it seems as if the two of them are the only ones in the universe. After commanding total respect, Coach Summitt will turn around and have her players call her Pat.

In a huddle with 20 ticks left in a tie game, she will tell players...

To read the rest of this profile you will need to purchase the book – *"The Basketball Coach's Game Plan for Leadership."*