

Learning from the **Legends:** *Leadership Tips* for **Coaches**

Leadership is a quality that aspiring and current coaches strive to develop. Sadly, there are too few programs that assist in the preparation of coaches. One avenue for learning is to seek advice and guidance from coaches of the past. The purpose of this article is to provide leadership tips from some of the elite coaches in history — the legends. It is hoped that today's coaches might glean a few tips from past legends, providing opportunity for personal and professional leadership development.



By
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Vince Lombardi once stated, "Leadership is not just one quality, but rather a blend of many qualities; and while no one individual possesses all of the needed talents that go into leadership, each man can develop a combination to make him a leader" (Lombardi, 2001, pp. 2-3). Lombardi also held to the tenet that integrity and character provide the foundation for leadership. So, a personal journey of self-actualization with purpose is the first step to being a coach who leads like the legends.

To list all the great coaches who have demonstrated exemplary leadership can be a daunting task. For this article, five legends have been selected to provide leadership tips for today's coaches: James Naismith, Knute Rockne, Vince Lombardi, John Wooden, and Bill Walsh. It is hoped that this article will serve as a springboard for coach development. Readers are encouraged to study the legends presented here and apply some of the information provided to their personal coaching styles and situations.

James Naismith

As a young man, James Naismith prepared for the ministry, which may say something about his philosophy of life and his purpose in teaching and coaching. Naismith entered the profession of physical education to serve others. He once wrote, "I thought that there might be other effective ways of doing good besides preaching" (Naismith, 1941/1996, p. 28). During a speech in 1932, Naismith stated, "I want to leave the world a little bit better than I found it" (Rains, 2009, p. xii).

Although Naismith created a sport that eventually infiltrated the entire globe, he viewed basketball more as a recreational activity than as a competitive pursuit. Naismith was more interested in the total development (physical *and* mental) of young men than in whether a team won or lost a particular game. Naismith reportedly claimed that "sports should fulfill three purposes: to play for the fun of playing, to engage in physical activity to aid the overall development of the body, and to learn sportsmanship through being a member of a team" (Rains, 2009, p. 132). Naismith also said, "Let us all be able to lose gracefully and to win courteously, to accept criticism as well as praise, and last of all, to appreciate the attitude of the other fellow at all times" (Rains, 2009, pp. 132-133). James Naismith maintained a proper perspective while seeking to positively influence young people.

Naismith was truly a complete physical educator. His plan was to use physical activity (or sport) to develop strong character traits in young people. To Naismith, education through the physical was clearly the intent: "hard clean athletics could be used to set the standard of living for the young" (Rains, 2009, p. 26). He valued teamwork, cooperation, and developing a variety of skills. Naismith never mentioned winning as an ultimate goal. It never mattered whether his team won or lost a game; how the team played and the character of his players were most important to him.

Leadership Tip: Develop and maintain a proper perspective on the purpose of the game. Education "through" the physical.

After nine seasons, Naismith finished his coaching career with an overall win-loss record of 55-60. (Interestingly, Naismith is the only head coach in the history of the University of Kansas to establish what many today would consider a losing record.) Today, there are coaches who allow the pressure to win to get in the way of demonstrating strong ethical behavior. If not careful, coaches can become caught up in the thrill of victory without taking advantage of the learning opportunities presented when a team scores fewer points than their opponents. Some coaches allow ego to obscure the true purpose of coaching — guiding men and women to personal development through participation in sport — and the role model offered to athletes may be thrown askew from the intended purpose of sport. Naismith's drive was fueled by a desire to address the physical, mental, and spiritual needs of others. Today's coaches are encouraged to maintain a proper perspective on winning and losing by constantly reviewing the needs of their athletes. Coaches might consider taking a step back and reviewing their professional and personal goals of being sport educators!

Knute Rockne

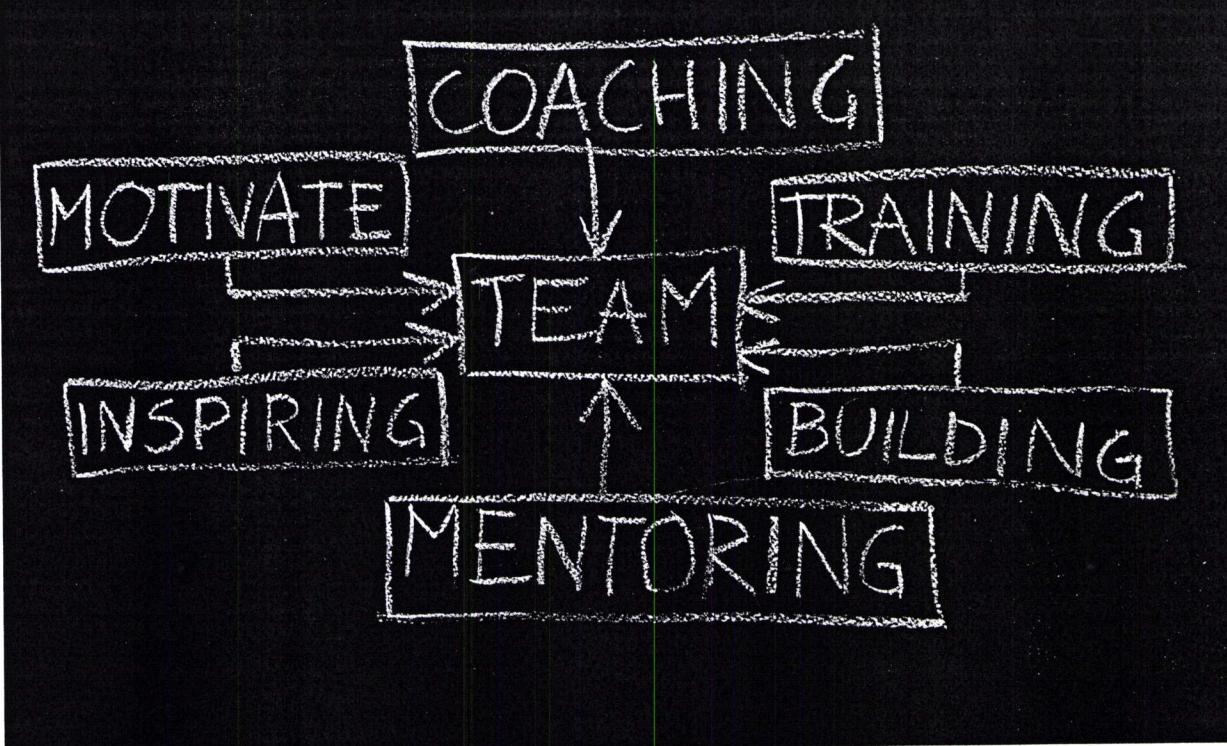
Knute Rockne did not provide an impressive appearance. His methods were once described "as though a Master Chef had just flung together spoonsful of mashed potatoes and hoped they'd land with some semblance of order" (Brondfield, 1976, p. 29). What this legendary coach might have lacked in physical stature was clearly overshadowed by his ability to motivate and lead others.

Knute Rockne was an innovator: He was one of the first to develop precise route running (early passing); he utilized a shift in the backfield; he created "shock troops," the exchange of players on a regular basis to keep players fresh; and much more. Rockne was also concerned with how his athletes played the game, and he insisted that his players adhere to the rules of the game. "One man practicing sportsmanship is far better than a hundred teaching it" (Brondfield, 1976, pp. 157-158).

In 13 years of coaching, Rockne amassed a record of 105-12-5, a winning percentage of .897. This included five undefeated seasons, three national championships, and a "worst year" record of 5-4; his teams lost two games in a row only once. How did he account for his success? Rockne said: "The secret to coaching success can be reduced to a simple formula: strict discipline in your training program and on the field, combined with a high and continuing interest in all your other relationships with your kids" (Brondfield, 1976, p. 83). He also stated, "I try to make every player on the team feel he's the spark keeping our machine in motion. On him depends our success and victories" (Brondfield, 1976, p. 83).

Leadership Tip: Develop and maintain strong relationships with all your players. Make each player feel that he/she is important to the team.

Achievement was never easy for Rockne — he had to work for everything he accomplished. This is probably one reason why he demanded so much from his players. Yet, while placing demands on his players, Rockne was able to maintain strong relationships



with them. He once said, "A coach's greatest asset is his sense of responsibility — the reliance placed on him by his players" (Brondfield, 1976, p. 83). Rockne's players relied on him; they needed him and sought leadership from him. Rockne treated his players with respect and developed strong bonds between himself and his players. Today, if coaches develop strong relationships with players and then add high demands, players will seek leadership from their coaches during troubling, stressful times.

Vince Lombardi

At the age of 15, Vince Lombardi entered the Cathedral College of the Immaculate Conception to study for priesthood. Somehow, this young man, who had a small inkling of coaching football, became one of the greatest coaches of all time. In 1958, the Green Bay Packers' win-loss record was 1–10–1. The following year, the Packers hired Lombardi. It did not take long for the Packers to win three straight NFL titles (five in 7 years), including Super Bowls I and II (1967 and 1968). In 1969, Lombardi was hired by the Washington Redskins, and he led that team to its first winning season in 14 years.

Lombardi was known for winning. As a matter of fact, he is often misquoted as saying that "winning isn't everything; it is the only thing." What Lombardi actually said, or meant to say was, "winning isn't everything, but making the effort to win is" (Maraniss, 1999, p. 366). There is a significant difference between the two quotes; one has a focus on winning, while the other has a focus on the will to win. Lombardi is also quoted as saying, "The will to excel and the *will* to win — they endure. They are more important than any events that occasion them" (Lombardi, 2005, p. 107). He also stated, "The difference between a successful person and others is not a lack of strength, not a lack of knowledge, but rather a lack in will" (Lombardi & Lombardi, 2006, p. 72).

Leadership Tip: Develop and maintain a strict commitment to excellence. Always strive for perfection.

Lombardi once told his players, "Gentlemen, we will chase perfection, and we will chase it relentlessly, knowing all the while we can never attain it. But along the way, we shall catch excellence" (Goodreads, n.d.). His drive was not about winning; it was about striving for excellence. Although Lombardi knew that his team might falter at times, he also believed that his players would strive for excellence, chase perfection, and reap the benefits that resulted.

Lombardi's game was simple: He believed in fundamental skills—blocking and tackling. If a team blocks and tackles better than an opponent, that team is likely to win the game. It was the simplicity of his approach that allowed him to place such a demand of excellence upon his players. Today, many coaches believe that they can "out-scheme" other teams. Often, coaches are seen talking into a microphone with a large placard held up in front of their face, apparently keeping the opponents from reading their lips. Lombardi would probably never do that; it would not be surprising to see (or hear) him call out a play so the other team could hear it, and then dare them to stop it! Lombardi did not worry about the other team's actions; he was more concerned with his own team's commitment to the pursuit of excellence.

John Wooden

To many, John Wooden is the ultimate coach. He is known for being a teacher and a lifelong learner. Learning was always important to Wooden. Even after reaching the pinnacle of success, Wooden continued to learn about the game he coached. He

would contact top coaches from around the country to ask them about rebounding or shooting or other basketball skills/concepts to gain a different perspective on teaching. Wooden stated many times, "When you are through learning, you are through" (Nater & Gallimore, 2010, p. 124). That mentality demonstrates this legend's desire to impact his players for life.

John Wooden defined success as follows: "Success is peace of mind which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort to become the best of which you are capable" (Wooden & Carty, 2005, p. 16). Wooden knew that players would make mistakes; knowing this, players could be satisfied knowing they did their best. Wooden taught his players to be honest with themselves and others. Honesty and integrity were indicators of character.

Character was the central focus of Wooden's teaching. To reach success, players had to maintain a willingness to do what is right. Wooden said: "Understanding that the good of the group comes first is fundamental to being a highly productive member of a team . . . It's amazing what a team can accomplish when no one cares who receives the credit" (Nater & Gallimore, 2010, p. xx). With character comes the ability to commune with others in a manner that is good and right. This legend was more about people than about basketball; basketball was a vehicle to guide his players to ultimate success.

Leadership Tip: Develop and maintain strong character in your players. "Be more concerned with your character than your reputation . . ." (Nater & Gallimore, 2010, p. 120).

Wooden used basketball to teach life skills. "What you do between practices can do more harm for your conditioning than practice can help you" (Nater & Gallimore, 2010, p. 59) — this quote indicates Wooden's desire to help his players to focus on basketball as a part of their entire lives. Today, more coaches who emphasize life outside of sport are needed. Sport is a part of the lives of young people; coaches must use sport to impact the totality of their players.

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A favorite anonymous quote often used by John Wooden demonstrates the need for coaches to address their athletes as people: "No written word, no spoken plea can teach our youth what they should be. Nor all the books on all the shelves, it's what the teachers are themselves" (Nater & Gallimore, 2010, p. 119). To develop character in their players, coaches must demonstrate good character — always. If coaches apply this to the way they live every day, the impact on athletes' academics and lives may lead to greater success.

Bill Walsh

Bill Walsh is from a more recent era, but that does not diminish his impact on coaching. Walsh was a philosopher, a planner, and a tactician, always calm and cool under pressure. He portrayed a different picture than many of the exuberant, flashy coaches who roamed the sidelines. While other coaches prowled the sidelines, arguing with officials, Walsh was typically thinking — probably three plays ahead of the rest of the game.

Many people, including coaches, regard the term "champion" as something that is assigned to a team or person after defeating opponents in such a fashion that results in the team or individual being elevated above the rest. Bill Walsh saw champions and championship behaviors in everyday work. He once stated, "Champions behave like champions before they're champions; they have a winning standard of performance before they are winners" (Walsh, 2009, p. 25). This is a mindset that coaches should adopt for their teams/players. To be a true champion, one must act like a champion, day after day, and must develop the qualities to actually win a championship.

Walsh developed a standard of performance that guided his coaching and his life. He stated, "My Standard of Performance — the values and beliefs within it — guided everything I did in my work at San Francisco" (Walsh, 2009, p. 16). Walsh's standard of performance was the basis for more than football. It impacted how people in the Walsh regime acted on a daily basis — how they greeted people, how they answered the phone, how they conducted their lives. Walsh's standard of performance is to:

Exhibit a ferocious and intelligently applied work ethic directed at continual improvement; demonstrate respect for each person in the organization and the work he or she does; be deeply committed to learning and teaching, which means increasing your own expertise; be fair; demonstrate character; honor the direct connection between details and improvement, and relentlessly seek the latter; show self-control, especially where it counts most — under pressure; demonstrate and prize loyalty; use positive language and have a positive attitude; take pride in my effort as an entity *separate* from the result of that effort; be willing to go the extra distance for the organization; deal appropriately with victory and defeat, adulation and humiliation (don't get crazy with victory nor dysfunctional with loss); promote internal communication that is both open and substantive (especially under stress); seek poise in myself and those I lead; put the team's welfare and priorities ahead of my own; maintain an ongoing level of concentration and focus that is abnormally high; and make sacrifice and commitment the organization's trademark. (Walsh, 2009, p. 16)

To Bill Walsh, philosophy provided the drive for action. He stated, "It is a conceptual blueprint for action; that is, a percep-

tion of what should be done, when it should be done, and why it should be done. Your philosophy is the single most important navigational point on your leadership compass" (Walsh, 2009, p. 16).

Leadership Tip: Develop and maintain a strong personal and professional philosophy. Then, live it!

Those last three words of the leadership tip — "Then, live it" — may be the most difficult. It is simple to sit in a room and talk about what is important, how to approach sport, and what drives teams, but living those words in the mainstream of sports (and life) is what takes true strength. Walsh did not talk philosophy — he lived it! Coaches are encouraged to develop a strong statement of philosophy and then live it; become the role model for life that athletes deserve to see in their coaches.

Conclusion

The legends provide examples that current and future coaches should imitate to enhance their coaching impact. In this case, the leadership tips provided by Naismith, Rockne, Lombardi, Wooden, and Walsh can help coaches influence others, not only in the athletic arena, but in life outside of sport as well. Today's coaches are encouraged to read these leadership tips and truly listen to the words of these legends:

- Develop and maintain a proper perspective on the purpose of the game: education through the physical.
- Develop and maintain strong relationships with all your players. Make each player feel that he/she is important to the team!
- Develop and maintain a strict commitment to excellence. Always strive for perfection.
- Develop and maintain strong character in your players. Be more concerned with your character than your reputation.
- Develop and maintain a strong personal and professional philosophy. Then, live it!

Once these tips have been contemplated, coaches are challenged to do a little homework and apply these tenets to their current coaching practices (and their lives) to become better coaches (and people). Here are seven simple steps coaches can follow to incorporate the leadership tips from these legends to develop their own *principles of excellence* philosophy statement (this can also be done as a coaching staff):

1. Consider the tips provided in this discussion; spend time in deep contemplation.

2. Develop five critical elements to your success as a coach — your principles.
3. Share your five leadership principles with someone you trust. Discuss the items at length.
4. Revise your leadership principles list.
5. Create a narrative that contains your principles of excellence, review it, and rewrite it until it is perfect!
6. Display your principles of leadership in a prominent place, where you see it on a regular basis.
7. Then, live it!

Good luck!

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To learn more about this topic, refer to these American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance resources at <http://www.ahperd.org/shop>: *Quality Coaches, Quality Sports: National Standards for Sport Coaches, Second Edition, and Principles of Safety in Physical Education and Sport, Fourth Edition*.

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