

John Wooden – American basketball player

I coined my own definition of success in 1934, when I was teaching at a high school in South Bend, Indiana, being a little bit disappointed, and disillusioned perhaps, by the way parents of the youngsters in my English classes expected their youngsters to get an A or a B. They thought a C was all right for the neighbors' children, because they were all average.

But they weren't satisfied when their own — it would make the teacher feel that they had failed, or the youngster had failed. And that's not right. The good Lord in his infinite wisdom didn't create us all equal as far as intelligence is concerned, any more than we're equal for size, appearance.

Not everybody could earn an A or a B, and I didn't like that way of judging, and I did know how the alumni of various schools back in the '30s judged coaches and athletic teams. If you won them all, you were considered to be reasonably successful — not completely.

Because I found out — we had a number of years at UCLA where we didn't lose a game. But it seemed that we didn't win each individual game by the margin that some of our alumni had predicted. And quite frequently I really felt that they had backed up their predictions in a more materialistic manner. But that was true back in the 30s, so I understood that.

But I didn't like it, I didn't agree with it. I wanted to come up with something I hoped could make me a better teacher, and give the youngsters under my supervision, be it in athletics or the English classroom, something to which to aspire, other than just a higher mark in the classroom, or more points in some athletic contest.

I thought about that for quite a spell, and I wanted to come up with my own definition. I thought that might help. And I knew how Mr Webster defined it, as the accumulation of material possessions or the attainment of a position of power or prestige, or something of that sort, worthy accomplishments perhaps, but in my opinion, not necessarily indicative of success.

So I wanted to come up with something of my own. And I recalled — I was raised on a small farm in Southern Indiana, and Dad tried to teach me and my brothers that you should never try to be better than someone else. I'm sure at the time he did that, I didn't — it didn't — well, somewhere, I guess in the hidden recesses of the mind, it popped out years later. Never try to be better than someone else, always learn from others. Never cease trying to be the best you can be — that's under your control.

If you get too engrossed and involved and concerned in regard to the things over which you have no control, it will adversely affect the things over which you have control.

Then I ran across this simple verse that said, "At God's footstool to confess, a poor soul knelt, and bowed his head. 'I failed!' he cried. The Master said, 'Thou didst thy best, that is success.'" From those things, and one other perhaps, I coined my own definition of success, which is: ***Peace of mind attained only through self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort to do the best of which you're capable.*** I believe that's true.

If you make the effort to do the best of which you're capable, trying to improve the situation that exists for you, I think that's success, and I don't think others can judge that; it's like character and reputation — your reputation is what you're perceived to be; your character is what you really are.

And I think that character is much more important than what you are perceived to be. You'd hope they'd both be good, but they won't necessarily be the same. Well, that was my idea that I was going to try to get across to the youngsters. I ran across other things.

I love to teach, and it was mentioned by the previous speaker that I enjoy poetry, and I dabble in it a bit, and love it. There are some things that helped me, I think, be better than I would have been. I know I'm not what I ought to be, what I should be, but I think I'm better than I would have been if I hadn't run across certain things.

One was just a little verse that said, "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." That made an impression on me in the 1930s. And I tried to use that more or less in my teaching, whether it be in sports, or whether it be in the English classroom. I love poetry and always had an interest in that somehow. Maybe it's because Dad used to read to us at night, by coal oil lamp — we didn't have electricity in our farm home. And Dad would read poetry to us. So I always liked it.

And about the same time I ran across this one verse, I ran across another one. Someone asked a lady teacher why she taught, and after some time, she said she wanted to think about that. Then she came up and said, "They ask me why I teach, and I reply, 'Where could I find such splendid company?'"

There sits a statesman, strong, unbiased, wise; another Daniel Webster, silver-tongued. A doctor sits beside him, whose quick, steady hand may mend a bone, or stem the life-blood's flow. And there a builder; upward rise the arch of a church he builds, wherein that minister may speak the word of God, and lead a stumbling soul to touch the Christ.

And all about, a gathering of teachers, farmers, merchants, laborers — those who work and vote and build and plan and pray into a great tomorrow. And I may say, I may not see the church, or hear the word, or eat the food their hands may grow, but yet again I may.

And later I may say, I knew him once, and he was weak, or strong, or bold or proud or gay. I knew him once, but then he was a boy. They ask me why I teach and I reply, 'Where could I find such splendid company?' And I believe the teaching profession — it's true, you have so many youngsters, and I've got to think of my youngsters at UCLA — 30-some attorneys, 11 dentists and doctors, many, many teachers and other professions. And that gives you a great deal of pleasure, to see them go on.

I always tried to make the youngsters feel that they're there to get an education, number one; basketball was second, because it was paying their way, and they do need a little time for social activities. But you let social activities take a little precedence over the other two, and you're not going to have any very long.

So that was the idea that I tried to get across to the youngsters under my supervision. I had three rules, pretty much, that I stuck with practically all the time. I'd learned these prior to coming to UCLA, and I decided they were very important. One was "Never be late."

Later on I said certain things — the players, if we were leaving for somewhere, had to be neat and clean. There was a time when I made them wear jackets and shirts and ties. Then I saw our chancellor coming to school in denims and turtlenecks, and thought, it's not right for me to keep this other rule, so I let them just — they had to be neat and clean.

I had one of my greatest players that you probably heard of, Bill Walton. He came to catch the bus; we were leaving for somewhere to play. And he wasn't clean and neat, so I wouldn't let him go. He couldn't get on the bus, he had to go home and get cleaned up to get to the airport. So I was a stickler for that. I believed in that. I believe in time; very important.

I believe you should be on time, but I felt at practice, for example — we start on time, we close on time. The youngsters didn't have to feel that we were going to keep them over. When I speak at coaching clinics, I often tell young coaches — and at coaching clinics, more or less, they'll be the younger coaches getting in the profession. Most of them are young, you know, and probably newly-married. And I tell them, "Don't run practices late, because you'll go home in a bad mood, and that's not good, for a young married man to go home in a bad mood. When you get older, it doesn't make any difference, but —"

So I did believe: on time I believe starting on time, and I believe closing on time. And another one I had was, not one word of profanity. One word of profanity, and you are out of here for the day. If I see it in a game, you're going to come out and sit on the bench.

And the third one was, never criticize a teammate. I didn't want that I used to tell them, I was paid to do that. That's my job. I'm paid to do it. Pitifully poor, but I am paid to do it. Not like the coaches

today, for gracious sakes, no. It's a little different than it was in my day. Those were three things that I stuck with pretty closely all the time. And those actually came from my dad.

That's what he tried to teach me and my brothers at one time. I came up with a pyramid eventually, that I don't have the time to go on that. But that helped me, I think, become a better teacher. It's something like this: And I had blocks in the pyramid, and the cornerstones being industriousness and enthusiasm, working hard and enjoying what you're doing, coming up to the apex, according to my definition of success. And right at the top, faith and patience.

And I say to you, in whatever you're doing, you must be patient. You have to have patience to — we want things to happen. We talk about our youth being impatient a lot, and they are. They want to change everything. They think all change is progress.

And we get a little older — we sort of let things go. And we forget there is no progress without change. So you must have patience, and I believe that we must have faith. I believe that we must believe, truly believe. Not just give it word service, believe that things will work out as they should, providing we do what we should.

I think our tendency is to hope things will turn out the way we want them too much of the time, but we don't do the things that are necessary to make those things become reality. I worked on this for some 14 years, and I think it helped me become a better teacher. But it all revolved around that original definition of success.

You know, a number of years ago, there was a Major League Baseball umpire by the name of George Moriarty. He spelled Moriarty with only one 'i'. I'd never seen that before, but he did. Big league baseball players — they're very perceptive about those things, and they noticed he had only one 'i' in his name. You'd be surprised how many also told him that that was one more than he had in his head at various times.

But he wrote something where I think he did what I tried to do in this pyramid. He called it "The Road Ahead, or the Road Behind". He said, sometimes I think the Fates must grin as we denounce them and insist the only reason we can't win, is the Fates themselves have missed. Yet there lives on the ancient claim: we win or lose within ourselves. The shining trophies on our shelves can never win tomorrow's game. You and I know deeper down, there's always a chance to win the crown. But when we fail to give our best, we simply haven't met the test, of giving all and saving none until the game is really won; of showing what is meant by grit; of playing through when others quit; of playing through, not letting up.

It's bearing down that wins the cup. Of dreaming there's a goal ahead; of hoping when our dreams are dead; of praying when our hopes have fled; yet losing, not afraid to fall, if, bravely, we have given

all. For who can ask more of a man than giving all within his span. Giving all, it seems to me, is not so far from victory. And so the Fates are seldom wrong, no matter how they twist and wind.

It's you and I who make our fates — we open up or close the gates on the road ahead or the road behind. Reminds me of another set of threes that my dad tried to get across to us: Don't whine. Don't complain. Don't make excuses. Just get out there, and whatever you're doing, do it to the best of your ability.

And no one can do more than that. I tried to get across, too, that — my opponents will tell you — you never heard me mention winning. Never mention winning. My idea is that you can lose when you outscore somebody in a game, and you can win when you're outscored. I've felt that way on certain occasions, at various times.

And I just wanted them to be able to hold their head up after a game. I used to say that when a game is over, and you see somebody that didn't know the outcome, I hope they couldn't tell by your actions whether you outscored an opponent or the opponent outscored you. That's what really matters: if you make an effort to do the best you can regularly, the results will be about what they should be. Not necessarily what you'd want them to be but they'll be about what they should; only you will know whether you can do that. And that's what I wanted from them more than anything else.

And as time went by, and I learned more about other things, I think it worked a little better, as far as the results. But I wanted the score of a game to be the byproduct of these other things, and not the end itself. I believe it was one great philosopher who said — no, no — Cervantes. Cervantes said, "The journey is better than the end." And I like that.

I think that it is — it's getting there. Sometimes when you get there, there's almost a let down. But it's the getting there that's the fun. As a basketball coach at UCLA, I liked our practices to be the journey, and the game would be the end, the end result I liked to go up and sit in the stands and watch the players play, and see whether I'd done a decent job during the week.

There again, it's getting the players to get that self-satisfaction, in knowing that they'd made the effort to do the best of which they are capable. Sometimes I'm asked who was the best player I had, or the best teams I can never answer that. As far as the individuals are concerned — I was asked one time about that, and they said, "Suppose that you, in some way, could make the perfect player, what would you want?"

And I said, well, I'd want one that knew why he was at UCLA: to get an education, he was a good student, really knew why he was there in the first place. But I'd want one that could play, too. I'd want one to realize that defense usually wins championships, and who would work hard on defense.

But I'd want one who would play offense, too. I'd want him to be unselfish, and look for the pass first and not shoot all the time. And I'd want one that could pass and would pass.

I've had some that could and wouldn't, and I've had some that would and could. So, yeah, I'd want that. And I wanted them to be able to shoot from the outside. I wanted them to be good inside too. I'd want them to be able to rebound well at both ends, too.

Why not just take someone like Keith Wilkes and let it go at that. He had the qualifications. Not the only one, but he was one that I used in that particular category, because I think he made the effort to become the best. There was a couple I mention in my book, "They Call Me Coach," two players that gave me great satisfaction, that came as close as I think anyone I ever had to reach their full potential: one was Conrad Burke, and one was Doug McIntosh.

When I saw them as freshmen, on our freshmen team — freshmen couldn't play varsity when I taught. I thought, "Oh gracious, if these two players, either one of them" — they were different years, but I thought about each one at the time he was there — "Oh, if he ever makes the varsity, our varsity must be pretty miserable, if he's good enough to make it." And you know, one of them was a starting player for a season and a half. The other one, his next year, played 32 minutes in a national championship game, did a tremendous job for us. The next year, he was a starting player on the national championship team, and here I thought he'd never play a minute, when he was — so those are the things that give you great joy, and great satisfaction to see.

Neither one of those youngsters could shoot very well. But they had outstanding shooting percentages, because they didn't force it. And neither one could jump very well, but they kept good position, and so they did well rebounding. They remembered that every shot that's taken, they assumed would be missed. I've had too many stand around and wait to see if it's missed, then they go and it's too late, somebody else is in there ahead of them.

They weren't very quick, but they played good position, kept in good balance. And so they played pretty good defense for us. So they had qualities that — they came close to — as close to reaching possibly their full potential as any players I ever had. So I consider them to be as successful as Lewis Alcindor or Bill Walton, or many of the others that we had; there were some outstanding players. Have I rambled enough? I was told that when he makes his appearance, I was supposed to shut up.