

TALENT

and the Secret Life of Teams

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INTRODUCTION

In 1997 my assistant coaches, Cathy Noth and Nikki Best, and I were seated in the dressing room at Texas A&M University after meeting with the Nebraska women's volleyball team, which had left to begin stretching before warming up for a match with the Aggies.

We had just lost two matches in a row; something that had not happened in several years and that had created some anxiety among the coaching staff. A week earlier we had lost our two primary passers to injury and had to pull a promising but inexperienced freshman out of a redshirt season. A&M had a talented team, and as I looked at the paint peeling from the walls of the old locker room, the prospects for turning things around in the upcoming match were problematic at best.

We still had a great deal of talent on the court, but it was a team built of exceptional parts: an outstanding outside hitter and physical presence in Nancy Meendering, an All-American setter in Fiona Nepo, a dynamic middle blocker in Megan Korver, and two consistent passers in Jaime Krondak and Renee Saunders who were now unavailable with injuries. It was like having a plane with two powerful jet engines, an experienced pilot, and no wheels to taxi.

I remember asking Cathy and Nikki how much money someone would have to pay them to live in the dilapidated locker room for a year. We all agreed the figure would be north of a million dollars. The question was a way of acknowledging that there is only so much you can take charge of as a coach. It was way of saying that if we were going to win the match, there would have to be some serendipity in the play of our most experienced players. We would have to compete, win, and leave town before A&M realized how vulnerable we were at serve reception without our two primary passers.

They do not teach you how to respond to situations like this in coaching or leadership manuals. One of my favorite quotes is by leadership guru Warren Bennis who said that *leadership can't be taught, but it can be learned*. I feel the same about coaching, and I'll bet if you ask the best chefs in New Orleans or the best racecar drivers at Indy they would say something similar about their passions. So why write a book on coaching and leadership? I think there are at least a couple of answers to that question.

These essays, columns, poems, and letters reflect my own journey into coaching. Each entry is part of a story of how I came to see the challenges in my coaching development. In some ways, the writing approaches fiction because when I recall the experiences in my memory they are framed by my current understanding of what happened. When I read my own writing it strikes me as more calm and patient than the person who came to those insights.

My goal is not to persuade you to my point of view or coaching philosophy, but rather to stimulate you to reflect on your own story and begin to take responsibility for your own coaching development if you have not already done so. I am the product of a romantic view of education, which centers on the idea that if we focus on any specific discipline, such as literature, we are likely to gain a better understanding of other disciplines such as music or history. My coaching owes as much to reading Thomas Hardy as it does to listening to John Wooden, as much to reading Borges as it does to watching Charlie Rose interview Duke basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski. I cannot look at a painting by Georgia O'Keefe without thinking about color, spaces in the imagination, and intuitive intelligence.

That is why the structure of this book moves from essays to poems to journal entries and fiction, and the tone moves from serious to didactic to self-deprecating. The variety of structure and point of view are who I am, and how I have thought about coaching and leadership for the past thirty years.

As for the match against Texas A&M, setter Fiona Nepo began the match with three consecutive jump serves resulting in service aces, putting the Aggies on their heels and setting the tone for a remarkable turnaround in a memorable season. Her leadership in that situation also is a metaphor for two themes that continually emerge throughout these pages: talent and grace.

Terry Pettit
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WHAT I MISS MOST ABOUT COACHING



Not a day goes by since I left Nebraska Volleyball that someone doesn't ask me, "Do you miss it?" I could respond with a blank look and say, "Miss what?" But that would be unfair because even though I am asked the question all the time, it is fresh to them. My usual reply is, "Of course there are aspects of coaching that I really miss, but what pleases me most is that I get tremendous pleasure and satisfaction from watching a great coach (John Cook) and his talented team continue to have great success building a tradition of opportunity and excellence."

This response, while sounding a bit like a paragraph from the "Media Guide for Old Coaches" is helpful in several ways. First of all, it's true. I do have great appreciation that something I put so much of my life into continues to do well. What people are really saying is, "Are you doing OK? We appreciate what you did. We appreciate how we felt when we became so engaged in the competition that we became part of the event."

Yes, there are plenty of things that I miss. I miss watching a player have a breakthrough in her understanding of the game, when she makes the right decision at the right time, for the first time. I miss watching the players come on to the court, shy and alert as zebras before they begin to share the intimate bits of their day with each other that coaches aren't privy to, a network of communication and emotion that becomes the secret life of teams.

I miss watching videotape over and over until a pattern of vulnerability begins to emerge. No. 12 on Missouri doesn't move as

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well to her left as to her right on a line-to-line serve. The Kansas State setter always goes back to a hitter if she makes an unforced error early in a game, but late in a game she'll set someone else. If Florida loses two consecutive points in the first rotation they shift their reception pattern and set the outside hitter who is normally their third option.

It's like unraveling fishing line when you are standing in the middle of a spring creek and just around the bend rainbows are rising to caddis flies. The man who taught me to fly-fish once told me, "If you want to get serious about this (fly-fishing), you've got to love to untangle knots. Not just be willing to untangle knots. You've got to develop a love for knots." I love and miss searching for patterns that reveal strengths and weaknesses in an opponent.

I miss going for early morning walks on the day of a competition on a road trip in a new city. I miss staying up at night with the assistant coaches wondering whether the team realizes how difficult the next match will be. I miss looking into the countenance of the players before the match and seeing their noses flared for competition, their eyes looking past the game plan outlined on the whiteboard to a place farther back where their focus and commitment are moving toward trust.

I miss sitting in the locker room alone after the team has gone up to the Coliseum arena. I do not smoke, but I imagine the relaxation and anticipation that I feel sitting there by myself while the team is warming up above me is almost narcotic. We are prepared. We are ready. We are at home. Does it get any better than this? Not, at least, until the next time.

I miss walking out the door of the locker room, moving up the stairs in a predictably unpredictable pattern, moving among and with the fans, hearing words of encouragement floating through the air like maple seeds. I miss coming out from behind the curtain and the Nebraska bench, past the security guards and the paramedics, and it is all there. The band is playing. The opponent is energized by the fact that they will be playing against the best team in front of the largest crowd they will see all year. The visiting coach is keeping time to the band with his left foot. His assistant coach, dressed in a sweat suit in the school colors, is warming up the team with more purpose than ever. The general admission section has been full for an hour. The season

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ticket holders are greeting each other with the familiarity of the fans of a rock group who have traveled to every concert on this year's tour. The building is alive. This is a big match. This is a match we could possibly lose. The fans can hardly believe that they are this close to the court. They feel like they are part of the game. The players meet to join hands and recite their litany of love and responsibility one more time. No one can contain his enthusiasm. It is like dancing and watching yourself dance at the same time.

The whistle blows. We get to do it again.