

# COACH WOODEN'S GREATEST SECRET

The Power of a Lot  
of Little Things Done Well

Pat Williams  
with Jim Denney



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Pat Williams, *Coach Wooden's Greatest Secret*  
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Pat Williams, Coach Wooden's Greatest Secret  
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To  
our two latest grandchildren,  
twin boys, Benjamin and Deacon

May the life principles of Coach Wooden's greatest secret  
become a part of their lives at an early age.



“It’s the little details that are vital. Little things make big things  
happen.”

Coach John Wooden



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## Foreword

I HAD THE GREAT THRILL AND HONOR OF BEING A part of two NBA championship teams, in 1999 and 2003. Yet I think the honor I received in 2004, after I retired, may have been even greater: The Keys to Life Award, personally presented to me by one of my all-time heroes, Coach John Wooden. The award is given to those who aspire to follow Coach Wooden's Seven Keys to Life:

1. Be true to yourself.
2. Help others.
3. Make each day your masterpiece.
4. Drink deeply from good books, especially the Bible.
5. Make friendship a fine art.
6. Build a shelter against a rainy day.
7. Pray for guidance and give thanks for your blessings every day.

Coach John Wooden has always been one of my role models. From observing his life and his coaching style, I learned that it is possible to be intensely competitive, to be a winner and a

champion, and still be a person of integrity, humility, character, and faith. No coach ever won more championships than Coach Wooden, and no one was ever more giving and caring and unassuming than Coach Wooden.

In his entire coaching career, Coach John Wooden only had one losing season—his very first season coaching at the high school level. After that, he was all about winning. At UCLA he won 620 games in 27 seasons, had a record winning streak of 88 consecutive wins, had 4 perfect 30–0 seasons, won 98 consecutive home games at UCLA's Pauley Pavilion, and won 10 NCAA titles in 12 seasons.

Coach Wooden won when he had superstars on his team. But he also won when there were no superstars, when most of his starters had graduated and would not be returning. All of those wins and championships were not merely the result of a superstar roster. There was something special about Coach Wooden himself, about the way he coached, about the principles he taught, about the values he instilled in his players.

He had a secret formula for success. Well, it wasn't really much of a secret. If you asked him, he would readily tell you. The key to his success, he said, was a lot of little things done well. If you would focus on the little things that escaped the notice of your opponents and competitors, you would have a slight edge over them—and that would be your winning edge.

In this book, Pat Williams, the cofounder and senior vice president of the Orlando Magic, has unpacked and explored Coach John Wooden's greatest success secret so that we can all follow the example of the greatest coach of all time. In these pages, Pat examines every facet of Coach Wooden's formula for success. You'll discover how focusing on the little things will prepare you for great things. These principles will help to safeguard your character and produce habits of consistency and excellence in your life.

## Foreword

Success, winning, achievement, influence, leadership—these are big things. But they are the result of a lot of little things done well. Whatever your dreams and goals, whatever your field of endeavor, whatever you hope to achieve in life, this book will speed you on your journey.

David Robinson  
two-time NBA world champion, San Antonio Spurs;  
founder, IDEA Carver (formerly Carver Academy), San Antonio;  
cofounder, Admiral Capital Group



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# Introduction

## Little Things Make Big Things Happen

Big things are accomplished only through the perfection of minor details.

Coach John Wooden

**I**N JULY 2000, I CHECKED MY VOICE MAIL AND HEARD a message that changed my life. “Mr. Williams,” the caller said, “this is John Wooden, former basketball coach at UCLA.” I was amazed that the greatest coach in the history of college basketball thought he needed to explain to me who he was.

Coach Wooden went on to give his personal recommendation for a UCLA trainer who had applied for a position with the Orlando Magic. He ended the message by saying, “I enjoy reading your books very much. Good-bye.”

I returned his call, and we had a wonderful chat. It was the first of many encounters I was to have with Coach John Wooden in the years to come. A few months later, as I was thinking about

writing a book called *How to Be like Coach Wooden*, I wrote to him and asked for his blessing on the project. A few days later, he called and again said, “Mr. Williams, this is John Wooden, former basketball coach at UCLA.”

I thought, *Coach, I truly do know who you are!*

“I received your letter,” he said, “and even though I’m not worthy of a project like this, if you would like to write this book, you go right ahead.”

That was the beginning of my friendship with Coach Wooden—a friendship that resulted in a series of books about his life and his philosophy. I followed *How to Be like Coach Wooden* (2006) with *Coach Wooden: The Seven Principles That Shaped His Life and Will Change Yours* (2011) and this book, *Coach Wooden’s Greatest Secret*.

During the last decade of his life, Coach Wooden invited me into his life in an extraordinary way. Not only did I have many rewarding conversations with him, but I also interviewed literally hundreds of people who knew him and had great stories to tell and insights to share. As I got to know Coach Wooden, as I heard story after story about him, it occurred to me that if everyone in the world was more like him, this world would be almost problem-free.

A number of times, I went to Coach’s condo in Encino, California, to pick him up and take him out to dinner. At five o’clock sharp, we’d head out to the Valley Inn, Coach Wooden’s favorite dining spot, located in Sherman Oaks. We’d arrive in time for the Early Bird Special. His favorite item on the menu was the Valley Inn’s famous clam chowder.

As we conversed over dinner, I was always impressed by the clarity of Coach Wooden’s thinking, the depth of his wisdom, and the quickness of his gentle sense of humor. You soon forgot that you were talking to a man in his nineties, because he had the mind of a much younger man.

Mark Gottfried, a former assistant at UCLA, now the head basketball coach at North Carolina State, once told me, “Whenever you’re with Coach Wooden, you’d better have a catcher’s mitt on. You never know when Coach might toss you an important wisdom principle, so you’d better be ready to snag it.”

I also found out, in my conversations with Coach, that it wasn’t enough to be a good listener. I had to have my thinking cap on whenever I was around him. Coach was a consummate educator, teacher, and mentor. He favored the Socratic method of asking questions and challenging your answers in order to force you to think. Many times, he would pepper me with probing questions. Whether I was answering his questions or he was answering mine, it was always a profound learning experience for me.

At one of our dinners together, I was fortunate to have both my thinking cap and my catcher’s mitt on. I asked him, “Coach, if you could pinpoint just one secret of success in life, what would it be?”

Coach would never give a glib or superficial answer. If you asked him a thoughtful question, he would take a few moments to think through what he wanted to say. He was constantly aware of his influence, and he always wanted to give people the very best of his wisdom. As I waited for his answer, I found myself leaning closer, anticipating his insight, not wanting to miss a single syllable.

He said, “The closest I can come to one secret of success is this: a lot of little things done well.”

That was a eureka moment for me.

I have given hundreds of speeches and have written dozens of books on success and motivation. Yet, in that one magical moment, in a single seven-word phrase, Coach Wooden crystallized everything I have been trying to communicate for decades: a lot of little things done well.

## The Difference between Winning and Losing

Coach John Wooden was the greatest coach who ever lived. That's not just my opinion. That's the consensus throughout the sports world.

In July 2009, the *Sporting News* published a ranking of the fifty greatest coaches of all time, in every sport, at every level, both collegiate and professional. The ranking was made by a blue-ribbon committee of sportswriters, coaches, and top athletes. The number one coach on that list was John Wooden, followed by Vince Lombardi and Bear Bryant. During his tenure as head basketball coach of the UCLA Bruins (1948–75), Coach John Wooden won ten NCAA national championships in a twelve-year period, including seven championships in a row. During that time, his Bruins won a record eighty-eight games in a row. His record is unprecedented and is likely to stand as long as the game of basketball is played.

Coach Wooden is remembered for the many inspirational talks and motivational tools he gave his players, especially his Pyramid of Success. He was also famed for never screaming, never cussing, never berating his players but always speaking calmly yet firmly. His players didn't fear his wrath, but they feared disappointing him. They loved him, and out of that love, they played their hearts out for him.

One of Coach Wooden's most famous and accomplished players was Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (known during his college days as Lew Alcindor). Kareem wrote these words of tribute to Coach Wooden in a December 2000 op-ed for the *New York Times*:

Thirty-five years ago, I walked into John Wooden's office at UCLA and began a special relationship that has enriched my life. . . . He was soft-spoken and serious, yet his caring demeanor drew me to him. He always called me Lewis, not Lew or Lewie,

the way everyone else did back then. Today, he calls me Kareem, although sometimes he slips up and calls me Lewis.

He was more a teacher than a coach. He broke basketball down to its basic elements. He always told us basketball was a simple game, but his ability to make the game simple was part of his genius.

I never remember him yelling on the court, but there was no need because he never had trouble getting his point across. I remember a close game in my sophomore year against Colorado State. During timeouts, his instructions were clear and precise. I had never doubted him before, but when the game ended, it was obvious he had been thinking three moves ahead of us, calm and cool as always.<sup>1</sup>

Coach Wooden always seemed to think three moves ahead of everyone else. Whenever I was with him, I felt like I was a student and he was the master, the mentor, the teacher. And if I needed insight, I needed only to lower my bucket into the well of his wisdom, and there would always be plenty of insight to draw from.

So on that evening when he told me that the key to success in life is “a lot of little things done well,” I felt I had fallen into a gold mine. Those seven words matched up exactly with everything I had experienced in my own journey toward success—and they matched up with the experiences of successful people in many fields.

Miami Heat shooting guard Dwyane Wade was named 2006 Sportsman of the Year by *Sports Illustrated*. He helped lead the Heat to two NBA championships (2006 and 2012). He also helped lead the 2008 United States men’s basketball “Redeem Team” to a gold medal in the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. He ascribes his success to little things, saying, “Guys who might not be superstars, but because of their hustle, because of the little things they do, these are the guys who can really mean the difference between winning and losing.”<sup>2</sup>

Swimmer Ryan Lochte, who won two Olympic gold medals in Beijing and two more gold medals in the 2012 London Summer Olympics, also says that the difference between winning and losing is the little things: “I’m going to focus on speed, doing little things like my turns and my starts—just speed.”<sup>3</sup>

But the little things are also important in fields that have nothing to do with athletic competition. Sir Roger Penrose is an English mathematical physicist. He shared the 1988 Wolf Prize for physics with Stephen Hawking. He once explained that the discovery of a grand scientific principle often takes place not as a sudden, huge revelation but as a series of small inklings, one idea building on top of another. “People think of these eureka moments,” he once said, “and my feeling is that they tend to be little things, a little realization, and then a little realization built on that.”<sup>4</sup>

Bruce Barton was an advertising executive, the cofounder of the Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn (BBDO) agency. He invented Betty Crocker and named the companies General Electric and General Motors. He also served as a two-term congressman from the state of New York. Barton once observed, “Sometimes when I consider what tremendous consequences come from little things, I am tempted to think there are no little things.”<sup>5</sup>

Samuel Johnson, the eighteenth-century English writer and literary critic, has been called “the most distinguished man of letters in English history.” He understood the importance of little things to the art of living well. He once wrote, “There is nothing, Sir, too little for so little a creature as man. It is by studying little things that we attain the great art of having as little misery and as much happiness as possible.”<sup>6</sup>

## **The Little Things within the Big Picture**

NCAA coaching legend Dean Smith coached men’s basketball for thirty-six years (1961–97) at the University of North Carolina

at Chapel Hill, retiring with 879 victories to his credit. Dave Odom, who coached basketball at Wake Forest, recalls the warm-ups before a game between his Wake Forest Demon Deacons and Dean Smith's Tar Heels.

"I saw a couple of [Dean Smith's] assistants watching the team do layups and writing something down," Odom said. "I was curious and asked what they were doing. Turns out they were charting the layups. If any were missed, [Smith] addressed that in practice the next day. At first, I thought he was crazy, but then I realized that here was a man who devoted himself to every possible facet of the game." In other words, Dean Smith was focused on the little things that can make the difference between winning and losing.<sup>7</sup>

Charles Walgreen (1873–1939) was an American businessman and founder of the Walgreens drugstore chain. It was a little thing—part of his finger—that led to him becoming a drugstore mogul. At age sixteen, he was working in a shoe factory, operating a machine that cut leather for shoes. His hand slipped, and he cut off the top joint of one of his fingers. The doctor who treated him persuaded him to take a job as an apprentice for local pharmacist D. S. Horton. As a result of his employment, Walgreen became fascinated with the drugstore trade. By the time he was twenty-eight, he owned his own pharmacy in Chicago. Fifteen years later, he owned nine stores. Ten years after that, he owned more than one hundred.

Walgreen once wrote a book called *Set Your Sales for Bigger Earnings*, and he made sure that every sales employee of his drugstore empire received a copy. In that book, he wrote, "Success is doing a thousand little things the right way—doing many of them over and over again."<sup>8</sup> Like Coach John Wooden, like Dwyane Wade and Ryan Lochte, like Sir Roger Penrose and Bruce Barton and Samuel Johnson, Charles Walgreen understood the importance of a lot of little things done well.

Writing in *Fast Company*, Alan Cohen asks, “Why do some people succeed and others don’t? Two sports teams with equal talent and the same records. One wins the championship and the other doesn’t. Why? . . . What is the difference between being successful and being mediocre? It is taking the time to do the little things. It is that simple.”

Stanford business school professor and researcher Robert Sutton reports that one of the distinguishing marks of a good business leader (a “good boss”) is that he or she is interested in the little things, the details of the organization. An ineffective and arrogant business leader (a “bad boss”) is interested only in the big picture and considers the little things unworthy of notice. “Big picture” bosses, says Sutton, tend to “see generating big and vague ideas as the important part of their jobs—and to treat implementation, or pesky details of any kind, as mere ‘management work’ best done by ‘the little people.’ . . . [They] avoid learning about people they lead, technologies their companies use, customers they serve, and numerous other crucial little things.”

Sutton cites the example of a CEO of a major cellular phone company who made a series of disastrous product development and marketing decisions because all he cared about was the big picture. This CEO was out of touch with the features consumers really wanted in their phones, the little things his customers were looking for—so the marketplace rejected his company’s products.

By contrast, Sutton says, the late Apple CEO Steve Jobs was able to envision the big picture while also maintaining a focus on the little things. From the time Apple opened its first Apple Store near Jobs’s home in Palo Alto, the CEO himself would often visit the store. Sutton writes, “Jobs constantly fussed over details such as the quality of the shopping bags, where employees stood in the store, and the color of the walls and tables,

and what they conveyed about the brand.” One of the keys to Steve Jobs’s brilliance was his ability to focus on the little things within the big picture.

As Sutton concludes, “I am all for big ideas, visions, and dreams. But the best bosses do more than think big thoughts. They have a deep understanding of their industries, organizations, and teams, the people they lead, as well as other mundane things. . . . This ability to go back and forth between the little details and the big picture is evident in the leaders I admire most.”<sup>10</sup>

Leaders can delegate tasks and authority, but leaders cannot delegate responsibility. A leader is responsible for every action and decision made by the people under his command. Great leaders build teams of creative self-starters, then empower their people to make decisions. They set clear objectives and standards, then they check in often to make sure those objectives and standards are met. By paying attention to the little things, great leaders accomplish big things.

After the end of World War I, Eastman Kodak founder George Eastman began planning a large theater for the city of Rochester, New York, where his company was headquartered. Eastman envisioned the theater as home to performances of music, dance, and silent films with orchestral accompaniment. As he examined the blueprints for the theater, which would contain more than three thousand seats, he told the architect, “We could probably add another two seats here.”

When the architect expressed surprise that Eastman would concern himself with such a small detail, Eastman explained, “Let’s say that each seat would bring in thirty cents per performance, or sixty cents for the two seats. With six performances, that would add up to three dollars and sixty cents per week. In a year, that might amount to one hundred eighty-seven dollars and twenty cents—which, by the way, is the interest on three thousand one hundred twenty dollars for a year.”

## Introduction

George Eastman got his two extra seats, and the Eastman Theatre opened on September 4, 1922. That beautiful theater stands today as the performance venue for the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra and the Eastman School of Music. Today those thirty-cent seats sell for between \$22 and \$79 each.<sup>11</sup>

Little things have a way of making a big impact over time. George Eastman clearly understood the insight that Coach Wooden shared with me one evening over steaming bowls of clam chowder: The most important secret of success in any enterprise, from sports to business to science to entertainment, is a lot of little things done well. Or, as Coach Wooden put it in his 2005 bestseller, *Wooden on Leadership*, “Little things make big things happen.”

In the following chapters, we will look at the various ways we can apply Coach Wooden’s most powerful success secret to all the arenas of our lives. Put on your thinking cap and your catcher’s mitt as we begin our journey through Coach Wooden’s greatest success secret.

Big things are about to happen in your life.

# 1

## Little Things Are Fundamental to Achievement

I discovered early on that the player who learned the fundamentals of basketball is going to have a much better chance of succeeding and rising through the levels of competition than the player who was content to do things his own way.

Coach John Wooden

SOON AFTER I BECAME ACQUAINTED WITH COACH Wooden, I was surprised to discover that he didn't consider himself primarily a coach. He saw himself, first and foremost, as a teacher. If you asked him, "How many years did you coach?" he would always correct the premise of your question: "I was a *teacher* for forty years—eleven years in high school, twenty-nine years in college."

When Coach and I got together over a meal or chatted at his condo, we rarely talked about coaching or basketball or sports at all. We talked a lot about his faith and values, his heroes

(Abraham Lincoln and Mother Teresa), his love of poetry and literature, and his love of teaching. The great joy of his life was the opportunity he had as a teacher to impact generations of young people. Even when he was coaching basketball, most of his effort was focused not on the game but on preparing the young men on his team to be effective, productive human beings.

Often, after Coach and I shared a meal together at the Valley Inn, we'd return to his home and the light on his answering machine would be blinking. There was almost always a message from at least one of his former players. Coach had been retired for more than three decades, yet he still received calls from men who had played for him from the late 1940s to the 1970s. Some called simply to keep in touch. Some called for advice. All of them called because of what this man had meant in their lives as a teacher, mentor, and role model. Coach Wooden's players kept in touch through the years because they loved him. And they loved him because he had always loved them.

As a coach and a teacher, John Wooden focused on the little things. He was a teacher of the fundamentals. Coach Wooden once wrote a short piece for *Newsweek* explaining his approach to the fundamentals:

I think it's the little things that really count. The first thing I would show our players at our first meeting was how to take a little extra time putting on their shoes and socks properly. The most important part of your equipment is your shoes and socks. You play on a hard floor. So you must have shoes that fit right. And you must not permit your socks to have wrinkles around the little toe—where you generally get blisters—or around the heels. . . . Once I started teaching that many years ago, it did cut down on blisters. It definitely helped. But that's just a little detail that coaches must take advantage of, because it's the little details that make the big things come about.<sup>1</sup>

Coach Wooden was a stickler for teaching all those little details known as the fundamentals. “In my profession,” he once wrote, “fundamentals included such ‘trivial’ issues as insisting on double-tying of shoelaces, seeing that uniforms were properly fitted, and getting players in position to rebound every missed shot. The perfection of those little things—making a habit of doing them right—usually determines if a job is done well or done poorly. It’s true for any organization.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Run to Win the Prize**

Jack Ramsay is a former basketball coach and the man who gave me my first job in the NBA. When he took over as coach of the Portland Trail Blazers in 1976, Dr. Jack’s first order of business was to talk to his star center (and Coach Wooden protégé), Bill Walton. “I met with Bill Walton,” he recalled, “to explain the game I wanted to play and his role in it. He seemed pleased with the theory, and yet I remember his comment as we finished our meeting: ‘Coach, one last thing—don’t assume we know anything.’”<sup>3</sup>

What did Walton mean by that? He was telling his new coach that he and his teammates were eager to learn the fundamentals of playing basketball at the NBA level. Even after four years of playing for Coach Wooden at UCLA, Bill Walton knew there were still *more* fundamentals to be learned and mastered at this new and more intense level of competition. When Jack Ramsay heard that Bill Walton and his teammates were eager students of the fundamentals, he knew he’d have a great team—and he was right. That season, Dr. Jack coached the Trail Blazers to an NBA championship.

Lou Holtz served as head football coach at six universities, including a decade-plus tenure at the University of Notre Dame (1986–96). He’s the only coach in collegiate football to lead six

different programs to bowl games, and he took four of those programs to top twenty national rankings. Business leader and motivational writer Harvey Mackay recalls an incident he witnessed that says a lot about Coach Lou Holtz's attention to the little things:

Lou Holtz is a stickler for details. When he was the head football coach at Notre Dame, I was able to join him for a road game at Purdue. His student athletes were instructed to wear coats and ties to the stadium because they'd be closely observed as representatives of the University of Notre Dame. They were waiting to board the bus to go to the stadium for the game. And waiting. Coach Holtz showed up. Didn't say a word. Just went down the line and looked them over. And over. Finally he went up to one of the players, smiled, reached up and straightened the player's tie, and then nodded to the driver of the bus. Not until then was the door to the bus opened and the team permitted to load up.

He hadn't said anything, but the message was as clear as if he had tattooed it across the center's fanny: If you're going to be a winner, guys, look like a winner. Little things mean everything.<sup>4</sup>

Former Major League Baseball manager Whitey Herzog has been a player, manager, general manager, scout, and farm system director. As a manager, he led the Kansas City Royals to three consecutive play-off appearances (1976 to 1978) and led the St. Louis Cardinals to three World Series appearances, including one championship. In *You're Missin' a Great Game*, Whitey observed:

Baseball, when it's played right, is made up of a lot of smaller plays, and each one gives you an edge if you work at it. It's also a game of large samples: Over 154 or 162 games, the little things accumulate and pile up and turn into big ones. That's the game's most essential fact. It's a game of percentages, and any way you can tilt the wheel your way a little, you do. Casey [former Yankees manager Casey Stengel] tilted it one degree here, another degree

there, till the ball just seemed to roll the Yankees' way and he looked up in August and saw New York right where they always seem to be, at the top of the standings, looking down. Writers and fans hardly ever notice these little things, and you hardly ever hear anybody mention 'em, but they decide championships. No good club ever won a thing without 'em.<sup>5</sup>

Baseball catcher and manager Yogi Berra spent most of his playing career with the Yankees, playing under manager Casey Stengel. Yogi agrees with Whitey Herzog that Casey Stengel was a master of the little things, a fanatic about the fundamentals. In his autobiography, Yogi recalled:

Doing the little things can make a big difference. It doesn't matter whether you're working around the house or playing baseball, there is always a right way and a wrong way, and it's the little details that mean a lot. Paying attention to the basics—in baseball, it's the fundamentals—is a little thing that's a big thing.

You always hear about not sweating the small stuff. Well, some little things they say you shouldn't worry about are more important than the big stuff. It's better to never assume anything.

I was real lucky to play for Casey Stengel, who was a stickler for fundamentals, and we practiced them all the time. Casey used to say that most games are lost, not won, meaning that when you mess up the little fundamentals—making a cutoff play, advancing a runner when making an out—you're not going to win. . . .

Casey was great with young players, too, because he liked teaching them all the little stuff that was important. He actually started the instructional league (he called it the "instructural" league) to help rookies; he knew that making them know the little things would give us an advantage.<sup>6</sup>

These insights from Whitey Herzog and Yogi Berra apply not only in sports but in business, education, politics, and every other field of endeavor. If you master those little skills called the fundamentals, you tilt the playing field in your favor. With every

new fundamental skill you acquire, you tilt it a little bit more. The difference any one fundamental skill makes in your overall performance will be minimal, almost imperceptible, but add up all those little increments over time, and they will give you a huge edge over your opponents and all the obstacles you face.

Michael Jordan's biography on the National Basketball Association's website says, "By acclamation, Michael Jordan is the greatest basketball player of all time."<sup>7</sup> Jordan's individual accomplishments include five MVP awards, fourteen NBA All-Star Game appearances, six NBA Finals MVP awards, and being named the greatest North American athlete of the twentieth century by ESPN. He credits his accomplishments to coaches who taught him early in life to master the fundamentals. "When I was young," he once said, "I had to learn the fundamentals of basketball. You can have all the physical ability in the world, but you still have to know the fundamentals."<sup>8</sup>

Tony Dungy has two NFL Championship rings, one as a Pittsburgh Steelers cornerback in Super Bowl XIII, one as head coach of the Indianapolis Colts in Super Bowl XLI (the Colts made the play-offs in every season of Dungy's tenure). He retired from coaching in 2009 and is currently the spokesman for All Pro Dad, a national fatherhood program.

In September 2010, Coach Dungy was invited to speak to the New York Yankees before a game against the Red Sox. Reporters asked Coach Dungy what he told the Yankees. He replied, "We talked about some of our experiences, focusing, hanging together down the stretch, important games. It's not necessarily who has the most talent but what team sticks together and executes their fundamentals the best. Probably nothing they haven't heard from [Yankees manager] Joe [Girardi]. But I know I have a son who doesn't listen to anything I say and if he hears the same thing from someone else, sometimes it has a little more impact."

It's true. Down deep, we all know that success demands that we master and execute the fundamentals—the little things that give us a big edge against tough competition. Like Coach Dungy's son, many of us need to hear it again, from a different person, from a different perspective, from a different direction, before it really sinks in.<sup>9</sup>

Entrepreneur and motivational writer-speaker Jim Rohn has influenced millions and has mentored such master motivators as Brian Tracy and *Chicken Soup for the Soul* authors Mark Victor Hansen and Jack Canfield. Jim Rohn once said, "Success is neither magical nor mysterious. Success is the natural consequence of consistently applying the basic fundamentals."<sup>10</sup>

The importance of mastering and applying the fundamentals is truly ancient wisdom. In Bible times, the apostle Paul wrote, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Cor. 9:24–27).

Most of what Paul says in those verses has to do with self-discipline, yet if you read carefully, you see that Paul is also talking about applying the fundamentals. It does no good to spend hours and hours training in the wrong techniques and building bad habits. If you want to win the prize, you must master the fundamentals. You have to avoid bad habits such as overstriding (leg movement too far forward) and overkicking (leg movement too far behind). You have to avoid clenching your fists or tensing your face. You need to keep your trunk at just the right angle. You must maintain a vertical head position. These are just a few

of the many fundamentals a successful runner must learn. If a runner doesn't master the fundamentals, Paul says, he'll run aimlessly, like a boxer beating the air.

So take the advice of Coach Wooden, Coach Holtz, Coach Herzog, Coach Jordan, Coach Dungy, Coach Rohn, and Coach Paul. To win the prize, master the fundamentals and apply them every day.

## **Turn a Big Challenge into a Lot of Little Things**

It's easy to see how a master-the-fundamentals approach can make a big difference in athletics and sports. But can we apply the same principle to other areas of life? Absolutely!

Former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani dramatically reduced the crime rate in that city by applying the fundamentals. When he came into office, crime was out of control. A survey of residents showed that more than half of New Yorkers said they would move out if they could afford to. New York had acquired a reputation as a dirty, dangerous, depressing city. Giuliani had his work cut out for him. Former US attorney general John Ashcroft describes how Giuliani transformed the social environment in New York:

Giuliani started by going after the little things. "I am a firm believer in the theory that 'minor' crimes and 'quality of life' offenses are all part of the larger picture," he explains. Among the first elements to go were the "Squeegee Men," drug-addicted and shady-looking riffraff who personified New York's rough edge. Armed with a soiled rag and a dirty bottle of watered-down Windex, these men would bully and badger motorists for money.

Giuliani said, "We are not going to put up with this anymore," and he brought this intimidation to an end. He then declared war on graffiti, subway panhandlers, loitering, broken windows, and petty vandalism—minor offenses that would have gone

unnoticed in days past while the police force was overwhelmed with homicides and violent crime. . . .

[Giuliani explained,] “Small problems can be the first step to big trouble. Neighborhoods scarred by graffiti or blasted day and night by boom-box radios will become besieged, vulnerable, and ultimately dangerous places. If police departments surrender on the small issues—using the excuse that they are too busy dealing with ‘serious’ crime—they soon find themselves surrendering to the latter as well.”<sup>11</sup>

Mayor Giuliani achieved big results by focusing on the little things, by paying attention to the fundamentals of a decent and law-abiding society. From 1993 to 1996, the murder rate plummeted by nearly 50 percent. Robberies dropped by 42 percent, and auto thefts dropped by 46 percent. During the previous mayor’s administration, no one dared to imagine such results were possible. The streets and sidewalks of New York became safe and inviting once more because Mayor Giuliani came in with a brand-new focus-on-the-fundamentals approach.<sup>12</sup>

The same principles apply to the world of business. As Stanford business professor Robert Sutton observes, about eleven thousand new business books are published each year by “armies of consultants, gurus, and wannabe thought leaders.” They all claim that their ideas are new and improved and that business, management, and leadership principles need to be “reinvented.” While acknowledging that such factors as globalization and the internet have impacted the business world in new ways, Sutton notes that every generation has faced change—for example, the introduction of the locomotive, the telegraph, the telephone, and air travel.

Yet in spite of all these changes, Sutton writes, “the fundamentals of what it takes to lead, organize, and inspire followers were pretty much ‘the same as it ever was.’ . . . We humans still yearn to follow others who are competent enough to bring in

resources, teach us new skills, and . . . make us feel cared for and respected. . . . The fundamentals remain unchanged.”<sup>13</sup>

I agree. The fundamentals of leadership, whether in sports or business or the military or the church, are the same now as they have always been. I call the fundamentals of leadership “The Seven Sides of Leadership.” They are:

1. *Vision*. Successful leaders are visionaries who dream of a brighter future, then lead people toward the fulfillment of that vision.
2. *Communication skills*. Successful leaders are skilled communicators who are able to convey their vision and energize their people.
3. *People skills*. Successful leaders know how to make people feel respected, empowered, and valued.
4. *Character*. Successful leaders are people of integrity, courage, hard work, fairness, and good judgment. Their good character inspires people to follow them.
5. *Competence*. Successful leaders have the experience and the ability to make their teams and organizations competitive.
6. *Boldness*. Successful leaders are decisive and courageous. Their boldness inspires confidence in their people.
7. *A serving heart*. Successful leaders are not bosses; they are servants of the people they lead.

These are the seven fundamentals of leadership. No one is born with all these traits, but they are all learnable skills—if we will be teachable leaders. Successful leaders are attentive to the fundamentals of leadership.

Many people dream of owning their own business—yet they fail to take the time to learn the fundamentals of operating a successful business. The fundamentals are not difficult to learn—that’s why they’re called fundamentals. Though the fundamentals

are simple to understand, the daily chore of applying those fundamentals takes commitment, effort, and self-discipline.

One of the fundamentals of business is *planning*—making sure you have enough start-up capital, making sure you track sales and control expenses, and making sure you market your business effectively to the public. Another fundamental is *people*—finding the right people for the right jobs and knowing how to manage them well. Another fundamental is *processes*—the actions you and your employees carry out every day to ensure consistent, high-quality products or services. To be successful in business, you have to be attentive to all the little things, all the fundamentals of running a successful business. If you lose track of the fundamentals, the dream quickly becomes a nightmare.

When a business fails, it's usually because the boss lost track of the fundamentals. When students fail, it's usually because they neglected to learn the fundamentals and therefore lacked a fundamental knowledge base to build on. When wars are lost, the defeat can often be traced to a disastrous failure by military commanders to apply the fundamentals.

The Korean War erupted five years after the end of World War II. When Lieutenant General Walton H. Walker, commander of the Eighth Army, was killed in a jeep crash, World War II hero General Matthew Ridgway took over. Upon assuming command, Ridgway was horrified to find the Eighth Army in complete disarray and in full retreat from communist Chinese forces. Ridgway toured the front and talked to the infantrymen. He found the soldiers to be completely demoralized. Many endured the cold Korean winter clad in thin summer uniforms, facing shortages of food, ammunition, and other supplies while their well-fed divisional commanders lived comfortably away from the front. Ridgway moved quickly to discipline lazy officers, promote responsible ones to replace them, and order

divisional and corps commanders to move onto the battlefield alongside their troops.

Ridgway discovered that Eighth Army intelligence had no idea of the location and strength of enemy forces because the army was violating fundamental rules of engagement. Instead of pursuing the enemy into the hills, the army stuck to the roads. The army failed to take prisoners to interrogate them about enemy positions. Some officers made excuses, saying their radios wouldn't work in the mountainous terrain. Ridgway had no patience with excuses. He told the officers that it was army tradition to be inventive and to do whatever it takes. If radios don't work, then send out runners or send up smoke signals—but find a way to get the job done.

In a scathing report, Ridgway told the Pentagon that, on his arrival, he had found the Eighth Army to be lacking “knowledge of infantry fundamentals” and in dire need of an “aggressive fighting spirit.” But he quickly turned that situation around. He revived an old army slogan to remind his forces of the fundamentals of warfare: “Find 'em! Fix 'em! Fight 'em! Finish 'em!” By returning the Eighth Army to a focus on the fundamentals, Ridgway restored morale, cohesion, and unit loyalty in his men. He took a defeated and demoralized army and within a few short weeks completely transformed it into a dominant fighting force. Under his leadership, the Eighth Army launched a counteroffensive that sent Chinese forces reeling in retreat.<sup>14</sup>

In April 1951, when President Truman removed General MacArthur as commander of American forces in the Far East, he replaced him with General Matthew Ridgway—the leader whose focus on the fundamentals had saved South Korea from being overrun. What's true in sports, in business, and in war is equally true in every other aspect of life. If we are faithful in the little things, if we master and apply the fundamentals, we will rarely be beaten by the big things.

## **“At High Speed and without Conscious Thought”**

One of the great advantages of maintaining a focus on the fundamentals is that it enables us to break down big challenges and problems into bite-sized pieces. When we face a huge, towering, lofty goal, it's easy to be intimidated and paralyzed with fear. But if we tell ourselves, “Let's break down this goal into its fundamental components; let's turn this big thing into a lot of little things,” it suddenly becomes manageable. Our fear evaporates. We feel confident because reaching the goal is simply a matter of mastering and applying the fundamentals. What is the looming challenge in your life that has you paralyzed with fear and self-doubt? Simply apply the fundamentals, cut that challenge down to size, conquer it, and move on.

This approach to teaching is known as the “whole-part” or “whole-part-whole” approach. Professor Steve Turley of California State University, Long Beach, explains that Coach Wooden's “basic teaching theory was whole-part-whole: introduce the big concept, break it down into its constituent parts, then reconstruct the whole with a new awareness of its meaning and use. . . . Wooden's method included three pedagogical ‘laws’: explanation/demonstration, imitation/correction, and repetition.”<sup>15</sup> *Sports Illustrated's* Alexander Wolff similarly observed that Coach Wooden taught by breaking every concept down into its fundamentals:

Wooden taught by using the “whole-part” method, breaking the game down to its elements—“just like parsing a sentence,” he would say, sounding like the English teacher he had indeed once been. He applied the four basic laws of learning: explanation, demonstration, correction, and repetition. And he developed a pedagogy resting on the notion that basketball is a game of threes: forward, center, guard; shoot, drive, pass; ball, you, man; conditioning, skill, teamwork.

As a coach who shunned recruiting, put relatively little stock in the scouting of opponents, and refused to equate success with winning, Wooden figured to have become a great failure rather than college sports' preeminent winner of all time. An article of faith among coaches holds that one must be intolerant of mistakes, but here, too, Wooden was a contrarian. He considered errors to be precious opportunities for teaching—preferably in practice, of course. And the games were exams.<sup>16</sup>

Author and retired basketball coach Myron Finkbeiner remembers watching Coach Wooden drilling his UCLA Bruins during the Final Four in 1975. "It was amazing to watch them," Finkbeiner told me, "because Coach put them through the same drills he had used on the first day of practice at the beginning of the season. They ran through simple little passing drills, pivoting moves, blocking out routines. John Wooden was redoing the fundamentals all over again."

Pete Blackman, who played for Coach Wooden from 1958 to 1962, recited to me some unforgettable wisdom he learned from Coach Wooden: "Do the basics right and do as well as you can with what God gave you, and you will be surprised at how far you can get in life."

Coach Wooden's single-minded focus on the fundamentals goes back to the earliest days of his teaching and coaching career at South Bend Central High School in Indiana. While in South Bend, he had an experience that transformed the way he coached basketball practices. Coach Wooden befriended Notre Dame football coach Frank Leahy, and Leahy invited him to visit a Notre Dame football practice. Coach Wooden saw how the Notre Dame players moved rapidly from drill to drill whenever Leahy blew his whistle. Practices were not long, but they were fast paced, well organized, and amazingly effective. Years later, Coach Wooden recalled:

Organization became a primary asset of my coaching methodology—the ability to use time with great efficiency. Practices were taut and fast-moving. I was able to accomplish this with three-by-five cards and the meticulous advance planning that went into what was written on them. . . .

There wasn't one second in the whole practice when anybody was standing around wondering what would come next. . . . The whole thing was synchronized; each hour offered up sixty minutes, and I squeezed every second out of every minute.

Players felt, at times, that the actual game against an opponent was slower than our practice in the gym. That's exactly the way I designed it.<sup>17</sup>

Coach Wooden's goal was to instill the fundamentals into his players in such a way that they would execute them with precision, automatically and unconsciously—and unhesitatingly. He once authored a book explaining how he schooled his players in the fundamentals of basketball. He wrote:

It is the cumulative effect of doing a lot of little things correctly that eventually makes a big difference in competition. . . . [What] is the difference between the winners and losers? What caused that errant pass, missed shot, or fumbled ball? The answer is found in the areas of fundamentals and attention to detail.

Without the ability of all players to quickly and properly execute the fundamentals of basketball at high speed and without conscious thought, following the principles of effective offense won't make much difference. All of these principles are dependent on quick, timely, and accurate passing; aggressive receiving; sharp cutting; proper pivoting; skilled dribbling; and quick shooting (with passing and receiving being the two most important fundamentals). Any coach who does not understand that his primary responsibility is to create fundamentally sound players doesn't get it.<sup>18</sup>

Whatever challenge we face, whatever goal we strive for, whatever dream or vision we reach for, it can be broken down

into a set of fundamentals. Mastering those fundamentals is a key ingredient of Coach Wooden's "secret sauce" for success. Here are some handy principles to remember about mastering and applying the fundamentals:

- *The fundamentals are the little things that make a big difference.* Knowing how to put on your shoes and socks is a little thing, a fundamental thing, so basic few people give it any thought—but Coach Wooden not only thought about it but also taught his players this fundamental skill. Did it make a difference? Would you tell a coach with ten NCAA national championships he was wasting his time?
- *If you are a leader, always assume the people you lead should relearn the fundamentals.* As Bill Walton said to Dr. Jack Ramsay, "Don't assume we know anything."
- *Always be teachable.* If a mentor, instructor, coach, or leader wants to teach you the fundamentals, be a willing and eager learner. Keep an open mind. Be humble enough to learn all over again how to put on your shoes and socks.
- *Don't try to absorb everything at once.* Learn one of the fundamentals, master it, then learn the next one, and the next one, and the next one—then put them all together. Whether in sports, business, the military, the church, or any other field, the fundamentals of your trade are learnable skills. Every time you add a new skill to your arsenal, you tilt the playing field a little more in your favor.
- *Break problems down into the fundamentals.* One of the most effective ways to tackle any big problem is to follow the example of Coach Wooden and Mayor Giuliani: start at the level of the fundamentals. Start by solving the smaller, simpler problems first. Attack the root causes of the problem. Break the problem down into bite-sized chunks instead of trying to digest it all at once.
- *Focus on mastery.* Before taking on a big, new challenge—starting a new business, pursuing a degree in higher

education, running for political office, or writing a book—take time to study and master the fundamentals. When people fail at a new challenge, it's often because they went in with ignorant overconfidence and not enough respect for the fundamentals.

- *Drill until the fundamentals become instinctive.* Whether you are teaching or learning the fundamentals, make sure you spend adequate time in practice. Remember how Coach Wooden learned to run a fast-paced, well-disciplined practice from football coach Frank Leahy? Whatever fundamentals you need to learn, learn them so well that you can execute them automatically, with precision, without having to think or hesitate. The goal of practicing and drilling the fundamentals is to transform a learned skill into an instinctive habit.

As Coach Wooden himself said, “The greatest holiday feast is eaten one bite at a time. Gulp it down all at once and you get indigestion. I discovered the same is true in teaching. To be effective, a leader must dispense information in bite-size digestible amounts.”<sup>19</sup> Coach Wooden’s goal should be your goal and mine: learn the fundamentals, master the fundamentals, teach the fundamentals to others, and apply the fundamentals in every area of our lives. Mastering the fundamentals is one of a lot of little things done well that make a big difference in our pursuit of success.