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"Play Hard, Play Smart, Play Together": Lessons From My Teacher (Who Did Not Know He Was My Teacher)

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Winthrop University

“Play Hard, Play Smart, Play Together”: Lessons From My Teacher (Who Did Not Know He Was My Teacher)

I stared at my phone in shock and disbelief, even though I knew it was coming, and even though I knew death was a relief for him. And then I wept. Hard, uncontrollably. Dean Smith is dead.

I have written about Coach Smith's impact on me before, the life lessons he taught me that have changed the way I act and live and work, and especially what he has taught me about being a teacher. I thought about those things as I cried after hearing that he was gone.

The old saying is “Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach.” Woody Allen added the joke, “And those who can't teach, teach gym.” The old saying is wrong, of course, and Woody is especially wrong on what he added. Some of the best teachers are coaches. Coach Smith was the greatest coach ever, and also one of the greatest teachers.

His innovations changed the game of basketball,

and many of those innovations have become nearly universal. A Carolina player who made a basket had to point to the player who passed him the ball. Before a foul shot, the other four players gathered around the shooter for a quick conference about the next play. Double-teaming the opposing ball handler up high, trapped near the sideline or the timeline. The secondary fast break. Shifting defenses and offenses. Almost all teams have adopted some or all of these innovations.

In the tributes that have flowed in since his death Saturday, almost all of them point to his role as a teacher. He taught his players the fundamentals of the game in a way that made already talented players even better and helped a player named Michael Jordan become the greatest player of all time.

But his former players focus more on what he taught them about life, about being a man, about

dealing honestly and fairly and justly with others. Before each practice, he wrote a “thought for the day” on the blackboard. These thoughts often came from sports, but they also came from his vast reading in philosophy, theology, history, and biography. He made his players memorize the thought for the day. If the player who he called on to recite it could not remember it, all the players had to run.

My favorite of his mottoes is “Play hard, play smart, play together.” I realize now that saying forms the bedrock of my teaching philosophy. Substitute “learn” for “play” and you've got it.

Coach Smith taught me to look deeper than points scored when I look at the box score after a game. He often gave his highest praise to players that others would overlook, so-called “role players.” My late friend Bimmy used to make fun of Coach Smith for saying, “He does all the little things that nobody notices.” But

“He taught me to praise my best students, my smartest students, but also the less-gifted student who tries hard, who always comes to class, who asks an important question, who supports her classmates, who works hard in a group. Just like the role players make the team better, the classroom role players make the course better. And I should point to them so others will notice.”



Continued from page 1

Coach Smith taught me to notice the player who passed the ball, who set a screen to set up someone else's shot, who blocked out for a rebound, who dove to the floor for a loose ball.

He taught me to praise my best students, my smartest students, but also the less-gifted student who tries hard, who always comes to class, who asks an important question, who supports her classmates, who works hard in a group. Just like the role players make the team better, the classroom role players make the course better. And I should point to them so others will notice.

Coach Smith taught me the value of having a clear plan, of having a system that works and can be transported from class to class. He had the run and jump; I have class blogs. He had the thought for the day; I have today's writing tip of the day du jour. He had pointing at the passer; I have my giving out quarters for good answers.

Yes, Dean Smith was my teacher. But he never knew it.

• We who are teachers are our students' teachers, of course, but we also teach

people that we don't know we are teaching.

The other day, a staff member at Winthrop asked me how my eyes were doing. I thanked her and said "Fine," but I must have looked surprised. I didn't ask how she knew about my recent Lasik surgery before she said with a smile, "I read *The Weekly Reader* every week. My friend and I read it and talk about it." I was incredibly touched, and also humbled. And also a bit ashamed.

I write primarily about teaching issues, so I am guilty of thinking of my audience as the teachers here at Winthrop. I am going to take a good lesson from my staff colleague and remember that we are all teachers. She teaches the people she serves. She certainly taught me!

I said that Dean Smith did not know he was my teacher, but suddenly I remember that I wrote him a letter about ten years ago and thanked him for all he had taught me, thanked him for the way he had made me a better teacher. To my surprise, he wrote back and thanked me. He said he wished his mother, a teacher, was alive to read it.

Forgive me. I am crying again. I am thinking about the profound effect Coach Smith had on me and on so many others. But I am also thinking about the effect all of us have, all of us teachers, even when we do not know we are teaching.

While I was writing these words, an email popped up from a former student, thanking me for something I did over 20 years ago that changed her life. Something I had totally forgotten, but something she says she thinks about nearly every day. In my office that day, I held her paper in my hand and told her, "You have the jump shot." Wow.

Her first book was published last year. She is thanking me for setting her on the road to being a writer. Over 20 years later, she is pointing at me and thanking me for an assist.

Thank *you*, Wendy Morrow. Thank *you*, Dean Smith.



Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

We also thank those of you who have attended TLC sessions. Your time is valuable, and we appreciate you taking some of it to enrich yourself through professional and personal development.

A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

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People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: <http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop> See you there!

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The 2nd Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

Many thanks to the presenters and attendees at our 2nd Annual Conference on Teaching and Learning, Saturday, January 31, 2015. It was a great day! Make plans to join us next year. Special thanks to TLC program coordinator Dana Bruneau for making the conference run so smoothly!

Thought For the Week

"The coach's job is to be part servant in helping each player reach his goals within the team concept."
--Dean Smith