

THE SEARCH FOR THE MEANING OF “WELL COACHED”

By Mike Neighbors, Assistant Women's Basketball Coach, Xavier University

GOOGLE search the phrase “well coached” and you get “about 2,650,000 results (in .025 seconds)”. Those results will vary from LeBron James talking about the Boston Celtics to the Idaho State Journal speaking about a local high school game team to a soccer match in Equatorial Guinea. The stories will mostly be one coach talking about another coach or team. They are either preparing to face them in a game or have just done so. Turn on ESPN GameDay and you’ll hear the phrase in every pre-game and post-game interview of coaches. While the stories and accounts will vary, the one constant is that one particular coach is paying the other a tremendous compliment by stating they are WELL COACHED.

As a young coach at Bentonville High School, WELL COACHED was the ultimate compliment in my coach-speak vocabulary. Anytime I spoke of a Charlie Berry, Mary Frances Kretchmar, Sandy Wright, Merrill Mankin, Bobby Smith, Janet Wood, Rickey Smith, or Clay Reeves coached team, I would say how WELL COACHED they were. I would tell every reporter in my best coach-speak about how prepared and disciplined they would be. I would go on and on about how fundamentally sound their players were and how difficult they would be to defeat. I would say all those things meaning every single word about their coaching excellence. But to be really honest, I also said them hoping they would say the same about me and my team in return. But, it never happened. Not once. Not a single mention. Not a single “well coached” about my team. I kept thinking to myself, “here I am complimenting all these other coaches and not one single time do they say WE are well-coached.” And after a year or so I figured out why. We weren’t well coached. My players weren’t well coached. We weren’t even close.

That realization hurt at first. It stung to admit my team was not WELL COACHED. But I wanted that compliment. I wanted it for my players and I wanted it for me. After I got over myself, I realized my efforts though well intended were focused on the wrong things. I had to make some changes. So, the following summer we took our teams to the exact same team camps that those well-coached teams regularly attended. If Northside, Prairie Grove, Greenland, Mountain Home or Southside was camping there, so was Bentonville. While my players all thought we were there for the games, I was actually there watching the other WELL COACHED. Watching them get on and off the bus. Watching them in the cafeteria. Watching them in the dorms. Watching them interact with parents. Watching them in huddles. Watching them meet after games. Watching them watch other teams. Watching their coaches manage the game. Watching their coaches in between games. Watching their best players and the coaches every move.

That summer I was witness many qualities of those WELL COACHED players and teams. I jotted them down on the backs of game schedules, pizza napkins, and hot dog wrappers. I saw a coach that was disgusted with his teams play that day drive them to a local Wal-Mart and buy them plain white t-shirts to wear the next day at camp because he didn’t want anyone else to know where they were from. I saw a coach toss a 2nd place trophy out the door of the bus as they were loading up to go home because 2nd place trophies shouldn’t be celebrated. I saw a coach ask a camp director for a rubber ball and directions to an outdoor court because they needed extra practice before their next session. It was the best summer of my professional career. Our team played a ton of games and more importantly I learned what they really needed. They needed to be and they deserved to be well coached.

Since that summer over 20 years ago, I have matured and changed coaching offices at least a dozen times but I still find myself observing other WELL COACHED teams and have been taking notes to

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stuff in the very same file that I started back in Bentonville. This July I began trying to organize some of those thoughts to once and for all develop my own definition of WELL COACHED. I think I finally have. Rather than share it now, I want to share with you some of the things that led me to my definition and some things other coaches have shared with me. A year ago I asked the Xavier Women's Basketball Newsletter group to share with me what they meant when they used the compliment WELL COACHED... Below are some who shared...

Sherry White is currently head coach at Fort Smith Southside. She has 6 State Titles on her resume and countless WELL COACHED compliments...

- 1) Disciplined on both ends of the floor
- 2) Patience on offense
- 3) Well developed fundamentals
- 4) Look like athletes with good stance, butts down, active hands, triple threat
- 5) Execute during crunch time

Nathan Morris is currently head coach at Lonoke High School. His teams are a perennial powerhouse and play into the last weekend of the season yearly...

- 1) Have players who can't be screened

Mike Green a legendary coaching icon from Prairie Grove who has forgotten more about basketball than most of us will ever learn...

- 1) Players that have bought into the coach and the system

Landon Wilkes coaching in Michigan...

- 1) Disciplined regardless of situation

Bryant Turney coaches at Searcy HS...

- 1) Under control emotionally
- 2) Don't react to officials
- 3) Stick to a game plan
- 4) Work on their own
- 5) Are disciplined during warm-ups and timeouts

William Rountree of Carlisle HS and almost as many other coaching offices as me...

- 1) Withstand early momentum swings
- 2) Don't beat themselves with excessive turnovers or silly fouls
- 3) Win more than most in close games
- 4) Are sound defensively

Jason Smith currently winning at the highest levels at Nettleton HS...

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- 1) Organized
- 2) Fundamentally sound
- 3) Knack for taking way strengths of opponents through scouting or preparation

Almost every coach who responded used the term DISCIPLINED in their definition. Leading to the natural question of “what is disciplined”... rather than turn that into another whole topic let’s just use the best source on coaching in, John Wooden, and his definition that discipline is “getting players to do what you want them to do and there are LOTS of ways to do it.”

Here are some other thoughts and observations that have been collected and contribute to the end result. These are in no particular order other than the way I pulled them out of the file. I was influenced by the Jay Bilas ESPN.COM article on TOUGHNESS in coming up with a way to present the years of hot dog wrappers and pizza napkin notes.

Well Coached teams are motivated: These teams play with an energy and a visible passion that proves they are engaged in the process that their team and coaches have established. These teams display fight and toughness and you usually cannot tell the score of the game by simply watching the actions and reactions of their players and coaches.

Well Coached teams have good shot selection: These teams have the most shot attempts by their best scorers. Those best players know when to take a shot and what shots should be taken based on time and score. Rarely do you see well coached teams without their best scorers having the ball when it counts.

Well Coached teams have little or no game slippage from practice: These teams are able to execute and they are able to play at a high intensity level. They seem to make things look easy in their execution. Their timing and spacing are usually impeccable and their movements appear rehearsed because they are in practice every single day at game speed. Few missed lay-ups, few mishandled passes, limited turnovers when dribbling all a result of having practiced at game speed.

Well Coached teams players hold the ball when their coach speaks: In viewing a practice when a coach speaks the gym is silent and all eyes are on the speaker. (I personally played for a coach that would glare down a dribbled ball across the gym even if that person were not part of our squad). It’s not the actual act of the players holding the balls as much as it is that coach commanding that respect.

Well Coached teams have genuine enthusiasm because they are invested and bought in: We can all tell the difference between genuine and manufactured enthusiasm. Have the person that films your games dedicate an extra camera to your bench one game to see if you really have your team INVESTED...Be prepared for what you might see on the video...

Well Coached teams don’t have to be coached on effort: Very rarely do you see the coach of a well coached team spending valuable game (or practice) time convincing their players to play hard, to give effort, to give extra effort. They just do it. Obviously those desires have been instilled at some point and time in the past but there is not one second wasted during a timeout for a well coached team with a coach using time to talk about effort, energy, or enthusiasm.

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Well Coached teams players display proper techniques in fundamental areas of the game: Inside pivot foot on the catch, triple threat position, butt down on defense, chin on shoulder in post defense, take a charge, dribble with their eyes up, pivot from pressure rather than dribble, make two handed passes, post with a purpose, cut hard off of screens, hold their box out on the FT line, dribble with left hand up left side, use shot fakes, make back door cuts, etc. They LOOK like players.

Well Coached teams have great spacing and timing on offense: Regardless of what style of offense a well coached team incorporates they utilize tremendous floor spacing among their players and execute with precision timing. Shot selection is also a component of this attribute.

Well Coached teams don't leave trash in visiting locker rooms, benches, or on the bus: One of the most well coached teams I ever saw was at a team camp in Neosho, MO. After each game, their players (without instruction by the way) walked the length of their bench AND their opponent's bench picking up every piece of trash they could find. That stuck with me and two good things came from it in the near future. On that trip home from camp when I got the bus back to the bus shop, I picked up every single piece of trash and put it into a box. At our next team workout, I emptied the box onto the floor of their clean locker room and told them where it came from. I then told them I was going to walk out of the room for 30 seconds and every piece of trash that was still on the floor when I got back would equal one set of dribble pull backs before practice started. (Dribble pull backs were our form of punishment rather than straight

running. Start on end line. They get two dribbles forward then one dribble backward until they complete a down and back. Great conditioner/reminder/ball handling all at once) Needless to say they about killed each other picking up the trash in 30 seconds. The 2nd thing is something we still do at our Summer Camps to this very day. During the first break I walk around and drop a piece of trash on the floor near the concession area. I watch until some camper picks it up and throws it away. Before the next session begins, that camper is called up and receives a \$10 gift certificate to the concession stand. The rest of the week campers are fighting with each other to pick up trash around our counselors!!

Well Coached teams execute set actions coming out of timeouts/quarter changes/halftimes: We all have faced those teams who were lethal coming out of situations in which their coach had time to diagram an action that their players could then come out and execute for a timely basket. This might also be changing a defense to off-set a play that you have expertly drawn up to use. Regardless of the situation, these teams always seem to be able to take what they had practiced and/or talked about onto the floor at a crucial time.

Well Coached teams don't lose their poise/composure others might become distracted: Time/score, home/away, loud gym/silent gym, good refs/bad refs, slick basketball/flat basketball, slick floor/sticky floor, fan shaped backboards/wooden backboards, chain nets/colored nets... didn't matter...well coached teams PLAY

Well Coached teams don't react to calls that go against them or their teams: Even in the most crucial of times, well coached players and teams hand the ball to the official and play the next play. There is no wasted time/energy on something that can't be changed anyway. Not to say they play without emotion. It just isn't wasted on a official and a call that didn't go their way.

Well Coached teams utilize drills in practice that emphasize many facets of the game: When you

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observe a practice of a well coached team their standards of play become obvious through their drills. Drills are either game situation, game speed, or game technique... Sometimes the drill is all three, sometimes just two, but never less than one. There is ZERO wasted time in a well coached team practice or game preparation.

Nothing to “fill in” there to reach a desired length. My all time favorite was watching a boys team at a school I coached do ten minutes of 2-line lay-ups before workouts every single day of the season. I then kept count of how many lay-ups their defense created and their offense created on the year... FIVE... So, for over 1000 minutes of practice time, they got FIVE lay-ups... They didn't press, they didn't deny passes in half-court... Does that seem like time well invested? Did I mention they actually missed one of the FIVE?

Well Coached teams move on the air time of passes on defense: It seems like well coached defensive teams have an extra player on the court. They are moving as a unit in constant harmony with effective communication. When the basketball is in the air, all players are on the move and talking about it!!

Well Coached teams use different things in practice to condition than they do to punish/remind: As a result the players understand the importance of being in condition and being reminded. Running does NOT motivate or remind every player. Well coached teams have a coach who takes the time to recognize these areas and remind/punish accordingly.

Well Coached teams have a sharp, crisp pre-game warm-up: The time leading up to tip off is an extension of these teams practices and preparation. They are moving... there is energy... there is enthusiasm... I spoke with several WELL COACHED teams coaches who mentioned they believed a sharp warm up was worth 3-5 points come game time. Another coach said it was a team goal to have the opponents glance down to their end more than once and “wish their warm-ups” were like theirs... I have seen intricate passing drills (many of which we have shared in our Newsletters). I have seen coaches physically out their putting them through a series of defensive slides... I have seen teams diving on the floor in unison to simulate going for loose balls.

Well Coached teams can run 5-on-0 offense with players going game speed: I was actually written up at one high school for calling this portion of our practice DUMMY OFFENSE, so to this day I try to call it something else... dry offense, 5on0, ghost defense, etc... Regardless of what you call it, most every team has this time dedicated to their practices to go over their SET actions or even their MOTION read/reacts...

Well coached teams can do it at GAME SPEED.

Well Coached teams players have positive body language: No poor reactions coming of the court after a substitution, no back talking a coach/teammate/official, no slumping of shoulders on the bench, no looking in stands during a time out, no throwing water bottles/towels/warm-ups at managers... With well coached teams it's difficult to tell whether they are winning or losing games without looking at scoreboard.

Well Coached teams have a distinct “language” that they speak: Terminology is consistent from player

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to player and coach to coach. Areas of the floor are called the same thing. Screening actions have a vocabulary. Offensive actions are consistent. Consistent use of terminology breeds confidence and as a result performance levels are impacted.

Well Coached teams follow the game in general and respect it's past, present, and future: We can all spot a basketball junkie a mile away by the way they speak about the game. Well Coached players know their opponents by name and/or number, they know the historical significance of their former teams, and they know the history of the game they love to play.

Well Coached teams have players who take care of academics equal to athletics: This isn't saying that every player is straight A, Deans List student. Just that they manage their books as well as their ball.

Well Coached teams make adjustments to what other teams are doing against them: We've all faced those teams who come out of a timeout or halftime with a slight change in their tactics that completely change the momentum of the game and sometime the overall outcome.

Well coached teams display qualities of passion, discipline, selflessness, respect, perspective, courage, leadership, responsibility, resilience, imagination: These qualities come from Bill Bradley's book on Values of the Game. They are all true and each comes with many different definitions and application.

Well coached teams have a consistent player rotation that always seems to place each player in a position to contribute effectively: This thought illustrates another favorite quote of “don't take ducks to eagle school”... well coached teams have coaches who have their players in the right spot at the right time more than most. They don't ask a non-shooter to hit a three to win the game. They don't have a non-rebounder in the game on defense to win. They don't have their EAGLES sitting beside them at crunch time

Well coached teams don't foul when the ball is away from scoring area: Although this is not a NEVER instance, well coached teams don't repeatedly do this putting teams in bonus earlier in half than necessary and creating foul troubles later on in game.

To me the hardest thing about coming up with a philosophy or a definition is that there are so many factors to consider and rarely can you point to one thing being an ABSOLUTE. Maybe it is the scientific thinking background I was born with or my love for court room movie drama's, but I have always been a “prove it to me” type coach. Show me some evidence. Present a case with the evidence.

So, I began taking the examples of WELL COACHED one by one to find a well coached team. Teams that DID NOT have that particular quality but was still WELL COACHED. For example, our current team has four seniors who have won 4 consecutive A10 titles and I am almost embarrassed sometimes at the lack of intensity it seems we have in pre-game warm-ups. Yet they bring it every single night come tip-off.

The UCONN Huskies who recently just ended a record 90 game winning streak that included back-to-back NCAA Championships and are obviously WELL COACHED, came out of a timeout in a recent game with a short shot clock and didn't recognize in time to get a shot off.

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Watching an SEC men's game last night with a coaching screaming to foul on the floor with a three point lead before a player could shoot, I see the team NOT do what he was yelling and the opposing player hits a three to send into overtime at the buzzer. They end up losing by double digits in double OT.

I believe you can find examples of teams everyone would agree are WELL COACHED that rarely, if ever, exhibit certain qualities that we all would agree are indicators of actually being WELL COACHED. So is this a question that has no answer???

Maybe so. Maybe the answer is like Coach Wooden says... A lot of answers.

Who knows, but I can tell you that through the years of thinking about this and observing it, I have been able to find two characteristics that all WELL COACHED teams do have. They may be displayed in different ways. They may be held accountable in different ways. They may be perceived in different ways. But in my eyes all WELL COACHED teams have these two.

- 1) WELL COACHED teams have players who have surrendered to the culture of their program.
- 2) WELL COACHED teams have identifiable standards of excellence on the court.

To me most the things we have already mentioned can be reworded to fit into one of these two categories in some shape form or fashion... but these two things sum it all up the best in my mind.

Players who have surrendered to their culture have let go of the things that make them uncoachable. They have surrendered their personal feelings to put their trust in their teams and their coaches. They have surrendered their defense mechanisms for the betterment of the team. They have surrendered their fear of being uncool in teammates eyes for being cool in their coaches eyes. They have surrendered their inadequacies to be part of team that has each other's back. They have surrendered the personal time for team time. They have surrendered distracting relationships for healthy relationships. They have surrendered negative thoughts for positive outlooks. They have surrendered the input of family/friends for constructive criticism of coaches/teammates.

Teams who have an immediate identifiable standard of play... it may be toughness, execution, enthusiasm, speed, power, athleticism, tenacity. Teams you know are going to either guard you from the time you get off the bus or have a hand in your face every time you shoot. Teams that are going to share the ball so well that you can't key on one player. Teams who have players that are listening to their coach even if their eyes or body language might suggest they aren't. Teams with players who are consistent in their "swagger". Teams that are going to get the ball into their star's hands so often you can't defend them. Teams who are going to be so prepared that they are calling out actions in your offense the second a coach signals a play call. Teams who can be summed up in a few words on a scouting report but be impossible to defeat come game time. Teams who's standard of play is synonymous with the name on the front of their jersey regardless of who's name is on the back of their jersey. Teams who are who they are every single night.

Those players are WELL COACHED. Those teams are WELL COACHED.