

Subject: John Wooden

Wizard of Westwood turns 99

John Wooden, Sporting News' all-time greatest coach, continues to Inspire. John Wooden, who turns 99 on Wednesday, was honored last summer by Sporting News as the greatest coach of all-time. A sampling of comments about Wooden shared with SN's Mike DeCourcy:

Dan Guerrero, UCLA athletic director:

"His spirit, his presence, his teachings permeate the halls and the walls of the Morgan Center. We constantly talk about the principles that we've been taught by Coach Wooden. They serve as the mortar and steel, the glue that holds our program together. It's the foundation that makes us the type of program that we are."

Ben Howland, UCLA head coach:

"He was the greatest teacher ever. He's also continued to teach 30-plus years after his coaching career. His integrity, his honesty, the way he lives his life is a model for all of us. If I could just try to be more like Coach, in terms of being a good person-you look at all his players, the love they have for this man is unbelievable."

Andy Hill, UCLA guard, 1969-72

"The records show he retired in 1975. Who are you kidding? He was just getting started: books, speeches, letters, appearances, more books. Go to the bookstore-they've got a whole section on Coach now. But his teachings have always, through all these different venues, taught millions of people about what makes him special."

Marques Johnson, UCLA forward, 1973-77

"The thing that I take away from my experience playing for Coach Wooden is that sense of family. That's the enduring thing. We were there four years. A lot of us won championships. When the grandkids and the kids and Mrs. Wooden, Nell, would come on trips-the example he gave us in that area is one of the things that's outlasted all the basketball accolades and awards and everything else."

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, UCLA center, 1966-69

"Some nations designate their outstanding citizens as 'national

treasures.' Coach Wooden fits that mold perfectly. He has enriched all of our lives through his leadership."

Don Yaeger, co-author with John Wooden of "A Game Plan For Life."

"Over the last 10 years as I've worked with Coach Wooden I have marveled at his wit as much as his wisdom, his humor as much as his humility. There's nothing this amazing man enjoys more than making himself laugh and he is quite good at it. Even as his health has weakened-he is 99, after all-his mental agility has been what constantly inspired me. He could just as quickly and accurately tell you about a conversation that occurred during a game played 40 years ago as he could the previous night's Dodgers or Angels game. They don't make them like Coach anymore ... what a credit to the world of sports."

Three questions with The Wizard

Excerpts from an interview conducted by Sporting News' Steve Greenberg with UCLA coaching legend John Wooden last winter:

Q: If you could relive any one day of your life, feel those feelings again, which would it be?

A: The day I married Nellie. That's the greatest day. She said, "I do."

Q: What was that day like?

A: We were married on a Sunday. On Saturday, I went to the bank-I had saved up, played a little pro basketball; I had \$900 and a nickel-but the bank was closed. We were going to have difficulty getting married on Sunday. I got a call from a fellow by the name of Snyder; Nellie's closest friend was his daughter. He asked me to come see him, and I did. He said, "What are you and Nellie gonna do?" I said, "Well, I don't know, Mr. Snyder, but something will work out." He said, "Pay me back whenever you can, but you and Nellie go ahead," and he gave me \$200. So the next day, my brother and his girlfriend, who had a car, drove us to Indianapolis, and we were married by a pastor that had married Nellie's older brother and older sister. My brother and his girlfriend stood up, along with the minister's wife, and after we married we went to eat at the Bamboo Inn on the Circle in Indianapolis. And from there we went to the theater where the Mills Brothers made their very first appearance in Indianapolis. They've always been my favorites.

Q: Why have you lived this good, long life?

A: That's very hard to say. I honestly feel that one of the reasons could be that I've practiced moderation in almost everything. I never used alcohol in any way. Does that have anything to do with it? I don't know. George Burns had a lot of it every day, and he lived to be over 100. I smoked a little bit when I was in the Navy, but that's all. Did that have anything to do with it? I don't know. But I do know this: I am very much at peace with myself. I'm not afraid of death. I'm at peace. Certainly as I get older, it's hard to ... (long pause)

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On your 99th birthday -- if you get there -- do you think you'll be launching your new book?

John Wooden is. It's called A Game Plan for Life: The Power of Mentoring (with Don Yeager, \$25, Bloomsbury) and it came out yesterday, the day before the great man's birthday.

John Wooden Turns 99 On Wednesday

Three weeks ago, I spent an afternoon in his Encino condo, which must be one of the most amazing 1500 of square feet in all of Los Angeles. His Presidential Medal of Freedom hangs next to one from the local YMCA. His letter from Mother Teresa hangs near his great grand daughter's report card. There are far more signed baseballs (his favorite sport) than basketballs, and nearly as many books about Abraham Lincoln (his hero) than there are jellybeans (his weakness.)

I like going to Wooden's house for the same reason people like going to church: It makes me want to be a better man.

The last time he swore? 1924. The last time he drank alcohol? 1932. Number of girls he ever kissed? One, his beloved Nell, who passed in 1985. He's never gotten over it. Still writes her a love letter on the 21st of every month -- the date of her death.

Every time I go, I learn something new about the Wizard of Westwood (a name he hates.) For instance, did you know --

-- Wooden helped build Memorial Stadium in Lawrence, Kan., still the home of the Kansas Jayhawks? He was 20, hitchhiking across the country at the

time. "I wore my state championship sweater," he says. "It helped me catch rides." He needed some money, so he stayed and worked construction for two weeks.

-- Wooden once made a hole in one and a double eagle in the same day? It was in 1976 -- a year after he retired -- at the Balboa course in Encino. He made the ace first and then, a few holes later, holed a fairway wood (yes, wood) from the middle of the fairway for his second shot. He was a four handicap at the time. He did not celebrate with a beer.

-- Wooden used to predict how his UCLA teams would do that season and hide the prediction in his desk drawer? Only once did he predict the team would go undefeated: "Lewis's first year," he says. He means Lewis Alcindor, of course, who later became Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. And he was right. Alcindor's sophomore year (his first with the varsity), the Bruins went 30-0 and won the national championship, Wooden's third. "I just felt Lewis was so good and so different that it was going to be hard for opponents to catch up to him." Wooden had three other undefeated teams, two with Bill Walton.

-- Wooden didn't like it at UCLA at first and wanted to leave? After his second year he wanted to take the head coaching job at his alma mater, Purdue. Nellie didn't like Los Angeles. But he had a year left on his contract. "There was a lot more money and everything else," Wooden says. "But UCLA reminded me that I was the one that insisted on a three year contract, which was true. So I talked it over (with Nell) and I said, 'You know I gave my word.' And I haven't broken it yet."

It's amazing, isn't it? How a man who can't get out of a wheelchair
Still manages to stand taller than everybody else?

See all of Rick Reilly's Too Short For A Column