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Morgan Wooten

Last Thursday I had the distinct pleasure of being introduced to Morgan Wooten, the legendary high school coach at DeMatha HS in Washington DC. I have read many of his books, seen many videos and have heard him speak at clinics, but this was the first time I have met him in person. It was through his connection with Mark Walton, our NEDA coach, which brought him to Hamilton to speak at an awards dinner. Coach Walton used to take players from the Hamilton region down to the DeMatha camp. Coach Wooten pointed out that he called his camp **school** because he wanted everyone involved to understand that they were there to learn. As Coach Walton's relationship grew he eventually asked Coach Wooten if could run a camp (school) in Canada, based on the one run in the USA. Not only did Coach Wooten agree he gave Coach Walton the entire curriculum. Talk about sharing!

When I met him I asked him about his other connection to Canada though Jack Donohue. For those not familiar with the story, Coach Donohue used to coach at Power Memorial HS in New York. The two teams met in a famous two games series when Lew Alcindor (Kareem Abdul Jabbar) was at Power Memorial. In the first game, in New York, Power Memorial beat DeMatha. After the game as Coach Wooten was speaking to his team Coach Donohue brought his players to the DeMatha locker room to shake everyone hands. Coach Wooten thought at the time how classy that was for a coach to make that gesture. The following year the teams met at Cole Field House on the University of Maryland campus. DeMatha defeated Power Memorial giving Lew Alcindor his only loss in high school competition. After the game Coach Wooten was telling his team that they had to go over to the Power Memorial locker room to shake hands when low and behold Coach Donohue brought his team over to shake hands again. As Coach Wooten said, "Now that is class!"

I enquired if he still did any coaching. He was emphatic in informing me that he stills gets on the floor at his coaching school. It is not just a figure head position. He operates the school with his son. He also does some work with the DeMatha high school team. I only hope I can still be coaching when I reach his age.

I also asked him about the problems he saw with the game today. He was very quick to reply; "Too many games".

He also felt that there were too many people who did not have the best interest of the players involved with youth today.

"Coaches are givers not takers."

He was also asked what separates the great player from the average.

"Heart" was his simple response.

He then went on to elaborate that players with heart were able to handle adversity. They knew their strengths and weaknesses.

My final question, before other came to talk, was why he had chosen not to move on to the NCAA. He explained that he had many offers over his years in coaching, but he always felt that he had more of an influence on the lives of the players at a high school age than those in university. He had put so much into developing the DeMatha program and was impacting the lives of so many young men it did not feel right to leave. He commented that it is important in coaching and in life to figure out what your good at and do it. Progressing in a linear fashion to the next level is not always the best decision.

What follows are some highlights from his speech. I have also included my reflective leanings. As you probably already know I am a strong believer in debriefing. When ever I hear a speaker I always ask myself what I learned from the experience.

Coaching keeps you humble

You can never get to the point where you think you know it all. His grandson's kindergarten teacher asked the boy what his favourite sport was.

"Baseball", was the reply.

"I am sure your grandfather would think differently" responded the teacher.

"I don't know anyone who knows anything about basketball", was the reply.

Successful people have their priorities in order.

They are givers not takers.

- Give energy.
- Give love.
- Give effort.
- Give knowledge

Coaches touch lives. Players never forget the time you said this or that.

He always told his players:

- Play hard.
- Play smart.
- Play together.
- Have fun.

Each person figures out priorities on his/her own. Since he taught at a Catholic High School he encouraged the boys to have the following priorities:

- God #1
- Family
- School
- Basketball

Use the rule of thumb:

For the coach - Are you the kind of coach who your own son or daughter would play for?

For the player - Are you the kind of son or daughter who would be like you?

Don't compare yourself to others. I am me; I want to be the best me I can be. God made you. God didn't not make junk.

Every possession is a new one

What do you do when you are down defines who you are.

DeMatha was playing Dunbar HS, another famed Washington area high school. Both teams were undefeated at time and the two top ranked HS in the country. It was a huge game with National media attention. At half time his team was down 18 points. He always believed you needed to start a half time talk with something positive.

“Dunbar has just made a big mistake, they won the wrong half.”

He then proceeded to talk about how they needed to “chip away”. By the third quarter they had it to single digits and won the game in regulation. The lesson here is that you do not catch up all at once. The philosophy of “chip away” is one we also use in life. You don’t go from rag to riches all at once. You don’t lose those 10 pounds all at once.

You can always comeback. Don’t let what you can’t do interfere with what you can do. Be the best person you can be. Play your aces. Do what you do best.

Best lessons he learned in coaching came from Red Auerbach the famed Boston Celtic coach. His team was playing an elite all-star team in a tournament. A who’s who in basketball was in attendance. His team lost a close game in triple overtime. The next day Coach Auerbach was at camp. Coach Wootten, looking for a complement and feeling quite proud of his team’s accomplishment the night before, asked what he thought of the game.

“You cost your team the game.” was the reply.

“You lost the feel of the game. It was your defence that was causing the problems. All you talked about was offence.”

From that point on he always worked to develop his feel for the game. What is actually going on? You need to have this as a player and a coach.

12 leadership points

1. Good values – need good people.
2. Use the most powerful four letter word – Love.
3. Call yourself a teacher.
4. Emotion is your enemy. You need emotion, but controlled emotion.
5. 10 hands to make a basket. It is a team game.
6. Little things make the big things happen.
7. Make each day your masterpiece. Today is a good day.
8. Carrot motivation rather than the stick.
9. Make greatness attainable by all.
10. Seek significant change. All change is not productive, but you can not be productive without change.
11. Don’ look at the scoreboard. Play each possession one at a time. This is the one that counts.
12. Adversity is an asset. True wisdom comes from adversity.

Remember all the things you have learned as an athlete apply to other areas of your life. As coaches never forget that we have chosen to live our life for others. For that I thank you.

Lesson learned:

Be a life long learner - How quickly the game / life will pass you by when you think you know it all.

Coaches are givers – This goes with the job. As Coach Wootten said, we give our time, knowledge, love and energy. The game does not owe you anything for your effort. I have seen too many coaches who start to take from the game because they feel they are owed something for their investment. If someone wants to give to you for your time that is fine, but when coaches take it has a negative result on the game and more importantly the athletes they coach.

Feel for the game – This is the art of coaching. Some people seem to have it where as others struggle with the concept. It begins with understanding the strengths and weakness of each team and where can an advantage be gained. I find so many coaches have not acquired the ability to detach themselves from their own team. They do not see what the other team is actually doing.

Like anything else in life we have to be careful of taking it to the extreme. If the strength of the game is getting the ball in one player's hands this might be fine if it is Lebron James and the Cleveland Cavaliers, but not if it is a 10 year old early maturing child. The feel for the game at the developmental stages is also having the feel for development. Many coaches at the developmental stages use the "feel for the game" motto as their adage to avoid the principles of LTAD to win at all cost. Watching a developmental team play three games in one day and not play two players in any of the games because they would hurt the team chances to win is ludicrous. Especially when the players who had "the feel for the game" were dying on the floor because of fatigue.

Chip Away – This was probably the biggest lesson I learned. We need to take the long term approach to solving problems. The quick fix rarely succeeds over time. You spend so much energy that you burn out. In my brief time with Canada Basketball I have seen so many people who try to solve all of the problems of the world in one swift move. The energy required to do this is immense. The problem is that they run out of energy and cannot finish the task. It beats them down. By continuing to chip away in a positive direction we are making progress.

Find your niche - This is key in everything we do. Find your passion. Avoid what is called the Peter Principle; being elevated to your level of incompetence. Moving up is not always the best choice. It doesn't mean you should not keep learning and striving to be better just recognize where you can have the greatest impact on the lives of others.

Thanks Coach Wootten for sharing your time and your wisdom.