

## **Achieving Greatness: The Value of Association**

*By Don Yaeger*

Association leaders and corporate executives have long recognized that great lessons – lessons in leadership, team building, handling adversity, and managing success – can be learned from their peers in the world of sports.

This explains why some of the most sought after public speakers at corporate events are sports greats – Miami Heat President Pat Riley, Duke basketball coach Mike Krzyewski, former Pittsburgh Steeler running back Rock Bleier and former LSU basketball coach Dale Brown are among the most popular speakers on the circuit. The lessons they teach and exhibit in their world translate perfectly into yours.

In my 20-plus years as a writer for *Sports Illustrated* and author of more than a dozen books, I have been blessed to spend hours interviewing great winners like Riley, Krzyewski, basketball legend Michael Jordan and Hall of Fame running back Walter Payton.

Some of the best lessons I have learned, however, have come at the foot of the greatest winner of them all, the late John Wooden, former UCLA basketball coach and winner of unprecedented 10 NCAA championships. Wooden also was an oft-tapped corporate consultant on the subject of leadership.

Before Wooden's passing, I often traveled to Los Angeles to talk with him about Greatness and the traits of those who have achieved it. One characteristic he was passionate about was that the truly "great" understand that value of association. They know they can only become great if they surround themselves with others who are headed in that direction.

Just a couple of years ago, the then 97-year-old Wooden, his mind sharp as any 30-year-old I had met, got a twinkle in his eyes when told me he had a story to share, one I would enjoy sharing with others.

"Many people, when they ask me about coaching great players, always ask me about my two most famous centers, Lew Alcindor (who became Kareem Abdul-Jabaar) and Bill Walton," the coach said, "But one of the greatest I have ever coached is a player many wouldn't suspect. It was Swen Nater."

I think Coach enjoyed the look of surprise on my face. I remembered Nater, but just barely. What I remembered was that he was cut from his high school basketball team as because, even at 6-foot-11, he was too clumsy to offer the team any value. He didn't give up, though, and several years later made a community college team. He became talented enough that several four-year colleges offered him scholarships.

At the time, UCLA and Wooden were in the middle of one of the most spectacular runs in all of sports, winning seven of eight national championships. Alcindor had graduated, but Wooden had a new center, Walton, who he thought might be even better.

Nater's community college coach asked Wooden to consider his player. "I was told he could, at the very least, be a great practice opponent for Walton," Wooden recalled. "So I spoke with Swen. I was honest. I told him he could go to a small school and play all the minutes he wanted, or he could come to UCLA, where he likely would never start a game, but where he could play against the best center in the country every day. That's the best I could offer him."

Nater didn't flinch. He accepted the opportunity and, as Wooden had promised, he didn't start a single game at UCLA.

"Swen understood that to become the best he needed to associate himself with the best he could find," Wooden said. "There was no better than Bill Walton."

Or John Wooden.

When his three years at UCLA were complete, Nater had been part of a team that won a record-breaking 88 straight games and had played for three more national championships – all as Walton's backup.

Nater then made history when he became the first player selected in the first round of the professional basketball draft without ever starting a college game. He played 12 years professionally and now is a senior executive in the corporate offices of COSTCO. His career "is absolutely and directly the result of having made the decision to associate myself with folks who were the very best," Nater told me. "I learned that you are who you associate yourself with."

Coach Wooden was succinct: "Mark these words... You will never out-perform your inner circle. If you want to achieve more, the first thing you should do is improve your inner circle."

At its core, that is exactly why associations hold annual events. Those conventions are a member's opportunity to improve his or her inner circle, to learn and associate with the very best.

Like Swen Nater, I hope that each of you have identified those in your profession from whom you could learn, those who share your passion for greatness. Then, while attending your state or national conferences, introduce yourself, spend time asking and learning what it is they do that makes them successful. These lessons are often transferable.

Then take the lessons home with you. Make your aspirations known to your staff and your membership because they want to associate themselves with greatness, too. You'll be amazed by what you can achieve when you surround yourselves with those headed in the same direction.

At each of these steps you'll understand why John Wooden agreed that the value of association is one of the most significant traits of greatness.

<p>Don Yaeger is a nationally acclaimed inspirational speaker, New York Times best-selling author and longtime associate editor of Sports Illustrated. He speaks on the subject of Greatness, taking lessons from the world of sports and translating them to business and professional audiences. He can be reached through his Web site: <a href="http://www.donyaeger.com">www.donyaeger.com</a>.</p>
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