



GREG JAYNE

*Commentary*

# Huston had good view of Wooden

**B**ack in the halcyon days of John Wooden's reign, when UCLA was winning national championships with the regularity of a metronome, Denny Huston got a close-up look at the Wizard in action.

Huston, now the interim athletic director at Clark College, was an assistant basketball coach at the University of Washington. Which was akin to being a sprinter in the age of Usain Bolt.

"Our whole mission was to finish second," Huston said, recalling the pecking order of what was then the Pac-8 Conference.

Yet he jumped at the chance to attend one of UCLA's practices.

"His attention to detail, and he always worked on balance, balance, balance," Huston recalled of Wooden's coaching style. "He had drills to make sure you were always in the proper basketball position.

"His practices were boring. The players hated them because it was repetition, repetition, repetition. He didn't work on special plays."

And yet Wooden made it work. Better than anybody. Well enough to win 10 national championships in 12 years from 1964-75. And with his death Friday at the age of 99, we have been reminded of just how dominant and just how special his teams were.

For Huston, that means recollections from his 10 years as an assistant to Marv Harshman at Washington.

Harshman coached at Washington State beginning with the 1958-59 season, and then was at Washington for Wooden's last several years at UCLA.

"Marv used to say he beat John the first time he faced him and the last time," Huston said. "But he couldn't remember any of the games in between."

Wooden caused a lot of coaches to have selective memories. That's what happens when you win 80 percent of your games, including a 335-22 record over your final 12 seasons.

Wooden had great players, of course. Some of that can be attributed to Sam Gilbert, a UCLA booster whose actions after Wooden retired resulted in the program being put on probation.

But Huston says winning all those games wasn't as easy as Wooden made it look.

"He had a lot of guys at UCLA that I wouldn't have enjoyed coaching," Huston said. "But he

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was a master at getting them to buy in to the joys of winning. I'm sure there are a lot of stories — they had to do things the right way or they didn't play.”

Like the story about Bill Walton's haircut.

One time, the story goes, Walton challenged Wooden's rule about shaggy hair and insisted, “It's my right.”

“That's good, Bill,” Wooden replied. “I admire people who have strong beliefs and stick by them. We're going to miss you.”

Walton got on his bike, raced to the barber, and made it back in time for practice.

Huston tells a story about trying to lure Walton to Washington.

“I tell people we recruited Bill very hard until he made me mad,” Huston says. “They say, ‘How did he make you mad?’ I say, ‘He told me he was going to UCLA.’”

And then there's one about

trying to recruit Richard Washington out of Portland's Benson Tech.

“I told him, ‘There's one thing we can do that no other school can do — if you come to Washington, every player on the team will have your name on his jersey.’”

“He didn't buy it, but I don't think he thought about it much.”

Such was the challenge facing college basketball coaches in the West during Wooden's reign — you had to be creative. UCLA won the conference title in Wooden's final nine seasons, and his successors added four more championships to the string.

But for all the victories, the thing that stands out about Wooden is what he did off the court. His Pyramid of Success; his farm-raised humility; his aphorisms like, “Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are.”

Those are the lasting legacies of a man who last year was selected by The Sporting News

as the greatest coach in any American sport. A man who remains revered 35 years after his final game.

“He lived long enough that he could touch so many people,” Huston said. “He was still touching people and helping them to

do things the right way.”

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