

WORDS TO REMEMBER

As a starter for two UCLA title teams, John Vallely had a front-row seat for the life teachings of legendary coach John Wooden

IT SEEMS the most difficult events for John Vallely to remember from his two seasons at UCLA—both of which ended with national titles—are those that happened on the court. Even when asked to recall details of the 1969 national semifinal, in which Vallely scored 29 points as the Bruins beat Drake 85–82, he says only this: “They left me open a lot, and I made a lot of baskets. And I fouled out with about five minutes left in the game.”

It’s far easier for the 64-year-old Vallely, who started at shooting guard for the Bruins, to recall those moments when legendary coach John Wooden first addressed him and his teammates. “UCLA had just won two consecutive championships,” says Vallely, who joined the Bruins in 1968 after playing two seasons of junior college ball at Orange Coast College. “And I came in thinking, I’m about to be coached by the best coach and play with some of the greatest players, and the first day he sat the whole team down in a room and said, ‘Gentlemen, I want you to learn how to put on a pair of socks today.’”

Not sure what to think of the speech, Vallely diverted his eyes to see how the rest of the team was reacting. He recalls Lew Alcindor (now known as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar),

then a senior, muttering, “Come on, Coach, not the socks story again...” But the rest of the Bruins were all ears.

“It’s funny to think back,” Vallely says. “Coach said, ‘Make sure the seams are in the right place. Make sure there are no wrinkles. I don’t want you to miss any practice time as a result of blisters, because you didn’t know how to put on your socks properly.’ I thought maybe Coach was losing his marbles. What I failed to understand as a 19-year-old kid was that he wanted us to make sure we had the basics down. He was teaching us to prepare.”

COMPETITIVE GREATNESS

In the 35 years that passed between Wooden’s 10th and final championship at UCLA in 1975 and his death at the age of 99 in 2010, his instructions on how to properly put on shoes and socks, along with so many his sayings, became more memorable than the titles. “Failure to prepare is preparing to fail,” is one of the most oft-repeated Woodenisms.

“I love that one,” says Vallely. “But the two that I love the most—well, one of them he actually got from Abraham Lincoln. It is, ‘Surround yourself with people and ideas that you respect,’ and the other one is, ‘Never try to be better than somebody

else, but never cease trying to be the best that you can be.’ He got that one from his father.”

After helping to lead the Bruins to the school’s fourth straight title as a senior in 1970, Vallely was a first-round draft pick of the Houston Rockets and played in the NBA for two seasons. His life’s journey took him in many different directions, but Vallely always found guidance in the words and advice of Wooden, especially through the coach’s Pyramid of Success. A visual representation of Wooden’s philosophy, the Pyramid stacks fundamental behaviors as if they’re building blocks, leading up to “competitive greatness” at the top.

In coaching youth sports, Vallely would lean on Wooden’s ideas about friendship, loyalty, cooperation and



GIANT STEPS: Vallely became a captain and NBA prospect at UCLA as the Bruins won titles in '69 and '70.

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enthusiasm. In co-founding the Newport Ski Company in 1976, he remembered what Wooden taught him about initiative and self-control. When he lost his daughter, Erin, at the age of 12 to cancer in 1991, it was Wooden’s words on faith that helped carry him through. And when he was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma in 2002, he could hear his coach telling him, “Just be the best cancer patient you can be.”

Wooden, Vallely says, taught his players to worry less about winning than about channeling their energy toward controlling whatever factors were within reach. That was the best possible preparation for challenges to come.

Vallely, who now manages real estate in Southern California and

is a motivational speaker, says that by his senior year, he could quote from the Pyramid without looking. “I was named captain, and we were the UCLA team without a dominant center,” he says. “And we were not expected to play at the same level as we’d played with Alcindor. That’s when I started to focus on what I could control, mainly my attitude. And when you step out into the game of life, that’s when it starts to resonate.”

REVISITING OLD LESSONS

The Bruins went 28–2 during Vallely’s senior year and rolled past New Mexico State and Jacksonville at the Final Four. Vallely laughs, acknowledging that to some of the program’s bigger stars, Wooden’s aphorisms may have seemed corny at times. “But

then they started having families,” he says, “and started to have to figure out what they’d do when they couldn’t shoot baskets for a living anymore. Then they reviewed their past. Then the words Coach Wooden had used became more relevant to them.”

Wooden remained an important part of Vallely’s life until the day the coach passed away. Vallely recalls how Wooden had once said of Vallely’s girlfriend, Karen, “Marry that girl.” Upon hearing the coach was nearing the end, John and Karen walked arm in arm into his hospital room and thanked him for that bit of advice.

“He could barely breathe, but he smiled and whispered, ‘I love you,’” Vallely says. “Obviously, he was a man who taught me about much more than basketball.” —Jeff Bradley