You Haven’t Taught Until They Have Learned: John Wooden’s Teaching Principles and Practices.

By Swen Nater & Ronald Gallimore. Copyright 2006, Fitness Information Technology ($19.95). 262 Coliseum, WVU-PE, PO Box 6116, Morgantown, WV, 26506-6116.

Reviewed by Gordon Bloom, Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, H2W 1S4

At first glance it may be surprising to see a book about John Wooden listed in the TSP book review section. First, most books are more academically oriented. Second, given Wooden’s legendary status, there have already been books authored by him (Wooden, 1988, 1999, 2004), books written about him (Walton, 1992), academic studies on him (Gallimore & Tharp, 2004; Tharp & Gallimore, 1976), and a website devoted to him (www.coachwooden.com). Thus, one might mistakenly suspect that everything about this great pedagogue has already been recounted. This book goes beyond what we already know about John Wooden by providing rare insight into his teaching and motivational methods. The titles of some of the chapters reflect this point and also highlight its connection to this special edition on coach education: “They are all different: Teacher-student relationships are the foundation of effective teaching,” “The motivation to learn comes from focusing on reaching your own potential,” and “The laws of teaching and learning: John Wooden’s pedagogy.”

Wooden is most notorious for his on-court successes: four perfect 30-0 seasons, 88 consecutive victories, 38 straight NCAA tournament victories, and 10 national championships, including seven in a row. Yet, his off-the-court philosophy about the growth and development of his players into role models and respectable citizens is equally if not more impressive than his records and championships. Perhaps the essence for including this book in a special edition on coach education can be seen in the first two sentences on the back cover: “Not only was John Wooden a great basketball coach, he was a master teacher. In fact, he was a great coach because he was a master teacher. What Wooden has learned from others in the classroom and perfected on the court are fundamental principles of effective teaching.”

Having read most of the literature on Wooden, I was amazed and pleased to acquire new insights about his methods of teaching, coaching, thinking, interacting, and analyzing. In many ways, this book could be viewed as a case study for coaching and teaching, including how to deal with people, prepare lessons, motivate, and sell a vision. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this book is the mix of co-authors: former player Swen Nater and UCLA professor Ronald Gallimore. For those younger than 45, you are likely unaware of Nater’s unique career. Playing under Wooden at UCLA from 1970-73, Nater did not play any meaningful minutes during his entire college career. Despite this, he went on to a successful professional basketball career that was highlighted by his rebounding prowess in
the NBA. How many other substitute players would think fondly of the person who did not play them during their college careers? Furthermore, how many basketball players who sit on the bench for their entire college career could still have a very productive 12-year professional career? Both of these points are a tribute to Coach Wooden and provide an interesting subplot to this book.

As a coach, it is important to keep your players motivated and learning. This book provides a lesson in motivational psychology that is applicable in the classroom, the basketball court, or the boardroom. How did Coach Wooden manage to motivate Nater without giving him any meaningful minutes? To begin, Wooden was very honest with Nater when he enrolled at UCLA, saying that he would play very little in actual games because he had a more talented player in the perennial all-star Bill Walton; however, the coach told Nater that if he worked hard in practice that he would be able to get a pro contract after graduating. Nater admits to feeling frustrated and discouraged at various times because he rarely played in a game. On page 3, Nater reveals how Coach Wooden kept him motivated: set challenging goals and expectations in practices; know the abilities of each individual on your roster; care about each athlete as a person; adapt your feedback based on the personality of each athlete; treat everyone with fairness and respect. All of these points are deftly expanded upon in chapter 1.

Perhaps the chapter with the most practical teaching information for those interested in coaching psychology is chapter 6, “The laws of teaching and learning.” It explains Coach Wooden’s famous “whole-part method” of teaching. This involves grounding his players in the technical aspects of basketball as well as the tactical problem-solving elements necessary for sport success. Wooden always showed his athletes the entire concept before breaking it down into smaller, more learnable parts that involved an explanation, followed by demonstration, followed by repetition of the correct way to perform the skill. Technical learning cues were reiterated throughout his practices, such as “get your elbow in,” “your feet should be wider than your shoulders,” or “hands close to your body.”

Although this book meets all of its objectives, and likely its intended audience, there is one area where I felt it could have been improved. Some of Gallimore’s research on Coach Wooden as well as information about learning and classroom teaching are woven into parts of chapter 6. I found the inclusion of this information helped elucidate the value and sometimes uniqueness of Coach Wooden’s teaching methods. Furthermore, in chapter 7, I found it very interesting when the authors listed 11 common practices of good teaching (although a reference was not provided), with examples from John Wooden. Seeing how informative this was, I would have liked to see more research integrated into other parts of this book. I realize this is a difficult task, given this book was not intended for an academic audience. Still, introducing sound teaching strategies from successful classroom teachers or expert coaches into various parts of this book may have enhanced the reader’s view of John Wooden as a master pedagogue.

In sum, after reading this book, it is not difficult to understand why both ESPN and Sports Illustrated named him the greatest coach of the 20th century. Even more impressively, in 2003 he received the Medal of Freedom from the President of the United States, which is the nation’s highest civilian award recognizing exceptional meritorious service. Obviously, these awards are a testament to both Wooden the exceptional coach/teacher and human being. This book brings to light his