

Making a Mark (Excellence - Chapter 10)

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Ready:

"Set an example of good works yourself, with integrity and dignity in your teaching." -Titus 2:7

"Example is not the main thing in influencing others, it's the only thing." -Albert Schweitzer

Set

By most accounts, Kay Yow shouldn't be one of the greatest women's basketball coaches of all time. History alone presents many reasons why her rise to legendary status was improbable at best.

Consider these facts. Yow was born in 1942—a mere 22 years after women gained the right to vote in the United States. When she took her first head girl's basketball coaching job at Allen Jay High School in High Point, North Carolina, in 1964, Title IX—key legislation that opened the door for expanded female participation in sports—was still eight years from passage. And after she took the North Carolina State head coaching job in 1975, another four years would elapse before the creation of the groundbreaking ESPN cable television network, which would eventually make women's basketball a key part of its regular programming.

Still, Yow somehow managed to turn something for which she never planned into one of college basketball's most influential coaching careers, placing her beside such names as John Wooden, Jim Valvano and Pat Summitt.

"This was just something I stumbled into," Yow says. "I know God's hand has been in every part of my life."

Yow's path to greatness began in the rural community of Gibsonville, North Carolina, where there was great support for the school and its sports programs. (Had she been born six miles east in Burlington—a city whose school had no competitive sports for girls—her story might have been very different.) Yow participated in multiple sports at Gibsonville, but when she left for East Carolina University, her athletic career effectively ended due to the lack of women's college teams in the region.

After graduating from ECU, Yow began her teaching career at Allen Jay High School, teaching English. For many years, one man had been coaching both the boys' and the girls' basketball teams at the school, and the school principal asked Yow to take over the girls' team. Although reluctant at first, Yow was finally talked into the coaching position.

Yow spent the next four years at Allen Jay before continuing her education at North Carolina-Greensboro, where she earned her master's in physical education and received her

undergraduate certification. After a year at Gibsonville High School, where she coached her youngest sister, Susan, she moved to Elon College (now Elon University), where she served as coordinator of women's athletics, was a full-time professor and coached three sports.

"I had no goal to pursue college coaching," Yow says. "I was really preparing myself to go back to coaching in high school. I had determined that I really loved the field. You work with a smaller number of people, but you just seem to touch them physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and spiritually. You didn't have all of those opportunities by just working in the classroom. It wasn't as powerful as coaching."

In 1975, Yow made the leap to North Carolina State, where she was asked to guide the women's basketball program through its earliest stages. At the same time, she also coached softball and volleyball and coordinated the entire women's athletics department. She led that very first team to the Women's National Invitational Tournament and a 19-7 record.

But something else significant happened to Yow during that first year at NC State. Representatives of Campus Crusade for Christ started to build a relationship with her through weekly visits. A young lady named Lori Moore was especially influential in Yow's life. Her persistence finally caused the head coach to set up a meeting between the ministry and her team.

Although Yow had grown up in church, thanks to the influence of her mother, and says she "felt the nudging of the Holy Spirit many times," she never fully grasped the importance of a personal relationship with Christ.

Yow didn't feel comfortable telling her players that people from Campus Crusade were coming to present the gospel to them, so she decided to devise a compromise that would work for everyone involved. The team would practice only for an hour followed by Moore's 10-minute presentation.

"I was thinking they wouldn't care who was talking for 10 minutes because they were only practicing for one hour," Yow says. "And that's exactly how it worked. So when Lori came, she brought two other girls, and they were very well prepared. They presented the message very clearly and very strongly and boldly."

At the end of the meeting, they passed cards out to the players and coaches with some questions, including one that asked if the person holding the card had prayed the prayer of salvation. Yow felt as if everything had gone well and was glad it was over. But that night around 8 o'clock, she received a call from Moore.

"She was so excited because one person had accepted Christ," Yow recalls. "And she said, 'Of course, you know that was you.' When she presented the gospel message, I was very convicted by the Spirit. I had accepted Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior that day. She was ecstatic and said, 'Coach Yow, if one person would have accepted Christ today, [I hoped] it would be you ... because as a leader you can have an impact on so many people.'"

Yow immediately got involved with a local church and was baptized. She also joined forces with NC State's active FCA group and participated in Bible studies. Up to this point, Yow had already committed to the concept of excellence, but her newfound relationship with Christ forced her to rethink her original definition. Now the first thing that comes to her mind is the apostle Paul's inspirational words found in Colossians 3:23: *"Whatever you do, do it enthusiastically, as something done for the Lord and not for men."*

"Use the talents and abilities that He's given you to honor Him," Yow says. "If that's your motive, I fully know and believe with all my heart that God will guide and direct you and give you the wisdom to have your best chance at excellence. If you do things as unto God rather than unto men and you just give everything from your heart, soul and your mind, you're going to work hard; and working hard is a cornerstone of success. That's just going to come naturally, because you're doing it out of love."

One thing that has remained constant throughout Yow's quest for excellence has been the motivation she has received from successful coaches across the spectrum of athletic competition. She has done well by her mentors—to the tune of 708 career victories and 20 trips to the NCAA tournament through the 2007-08 season. She was the assistant coach on the gold-medal women's basketball team at the 1984 Olympics and was the head coach of the gold-medal team at the 1988 Summer Games. Yow was enshrined in the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame in 2000 and the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 2002. She was also presented with the inaugural FCA Kay Yow Heart of a Coach award in 2008.

But Yow rarely if ever keeps track of any of those accomplishments. She determined many years ago to live in the moment and press forward to greater levels of excellence. In order to do that, she has keyed in on the word "attitude," which she believes is the secret to successful, excellent living—and nowhere is that better modeled than in the life of Christ. "I love to study Jesus' attitude in all of the situations that He faced and how He responded and how He dealt with things," Yow says. "That's the exciting part for me—to not just try to understand excellence in the field of sports, but in a life guided by Jesus' example. He was an example for what it takes to have excellence. And to me, excellence is all about glorifying God."

For Yow, that means taking on what she considers a serious and sobering responsibility—one she believes should be shared by all who claim to be followers of Jesus. "The scary part is I know that at emotional times, I hope that the truth is strong enough in me and embedded in me that it will come out that way," she candidly admits. "We're human, so there's the problem. I want it to be me. I want it to be who I really am. I don't want to just be doing it because I think that this is what I should be doing. I want to do it because this is where I am in life. You don't just arrive there suddenly—and you never really arrive. You just keep going deeper and deeper."

Yow has provided an amazing picture of excellence to her players, to the NC State fans and to the sports world at large for reasons that extend well beyond the basketball court. In 1987, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. It went into remission for several years, but it returned in 2004. Yow fought the disease through a combination of medical and natural treatments, but by November 2006 it had progressed to the point where she knew that she had to temporarily step away from the team.

Despite an ongoing battle with cancer, Yow made her way back to the bench after missing

only 16 games, and she continues to lead by example and by the power of her words. “You’re constantly talking to your players about what they need to do to pursue excellence,” Yow says. “As a coach, people seem and think I’m coaching basketball. But I think I’m coaching people. If you become a winner as a person, you will have your best chance to win on the court. You need to develop the characteristics and qualities that give you the best chance at being successful. I think that people without character, they always fall short of excellence. No matter how talented they are or how great a player they are, they will fall short. At the time you need them the most, they will fail you.”

That’s why Yow so adamantly follows the instruction that Paul gave his young disciple in Titus 2:7: “*Set an example of good works yourself, with integrity and dignity in your teaching.*” “In order to be successful, you must have character,” Yow says. “That’s what you always teach your players at teachable moments. You teach them about developing greater character that will help them to produce excellence.”

There are many Scriptures that describe God as a Father who disciplines His children because He loves them. Yow subscribes to that philosophy, but she is quick to point out the importance of love in the equation—along with an equal measure of truth. “You deal with people by encouraging them,” Yow says. “Of course, you have to correct, but there’s that saying ‘Truth without love is hypocrisy.’ You cannot love without truth. You’ve got to tell the truth to help them move to a higher level. But if you give the truth without love, it becomes very cold.

“What we speak and how we speak comes out of our heart,” she adds. “Each of us can let things come out of our mouth and realize that there’s a problem. Sometimes when I hear my players say certain things, I’m reminded that out of the heart, the mouth speaks. So you just have to be a role model. You have to be an example. It takes action and it takes attitude. Actions speak louder than words, and attitude speaks louder than actions. You have to live by what you say. That speaks to a person’s integrity.”

Throughout her legendary coaching career, Yow has witnessed many changes in the makeup of her players. With each passing generation, excellence has become a more-measured quality, whether that’s by number of awards, accolades in the press, or display of material wealth. Unfortunately, not everyone who achieves such things can truly lay claim to the mantle of excellence.

“When people think about excellence, a lot of times they’re thinking about the end result—the production,” Yow claims. “I think they forget about the process and about the journey. This is where all the learning takes place. People don’t always see the big picture. They see more of the short term. To so many people, success is just money or position or power or title. Yet if they haven’t given their very best and they haven’t done it in the way that it should be done—I mean some people step on people to get what they want—then that’s not excellence. A commitment to value and doing it the right way is just as important to excellence as anything else.”

With society’s misunderstanding of what true excellence looks like comes the temptation to take shortcuts to success. Few seem willing to put in the time, effort and disciplined hard work that is necessary. As far as Yow is concerned, however, shortcuts simply cheapen the end result. “Everything in life today is about getting there quickly,” she says. “But all things that are worthwhile are worth working for and worth waiting for. We’re just going for the wrong things. The price tags are on the wrong things. The price tags need to be on the value and the

character. Living successfully with our character and our values beats becoming successful by taking shortcuts.”

Yow has yet to discover a shortcut attractive enough to take. Instead, she finds great blessings and rewards in seeing the fruit of her consistent, disciplined approach to coaching and teaching. It’s in those moments when Yow can almost literally see the lights turn on in the hearts and minds of her athletes that everything is suddenly worth the effort.

“We get so many awards in athletics, but I’ve always associated rewards as something that are on the inside,” she says. “Awards get tarnished. You lose them. You break them. But rewards are something that you keep forever. I’ve always treasured the rewards so much more than awards. Seeing your players start to understand the true meaning of excellence is one of those rewards. You know that they’ve taken a great step forward in life and in understanding how to live successfully and not only to become successful. There’s a real distinction for me between living successfully and becoming successful.”

But don’t ask Yow to get too specific with those personal breakthroughs because, quite frankly, she’s too busy living for the here and now to remember them all. And besides, true excellence doesn’t keep track of itself—otherwise, it would become something else. Instead, Yow does her best to strive for the kind of excellence displayed by the selfless example of God’s Son.

“You living it is much more powerful than you saying it,” Yow says. “Jesus lived it. We have His words, but we also have His actions. That’s so powerful.”

Go

1. Kay Yow has been more than just a great coach. She has been a great teacher. Who are some people who have been influential teachers in your life? What important lessons did you learn through their words and their example?
2. Read Titus 2:7. How can a lifestyle of excellence “set an example” for others? Can you describe a time in your life when you were able to teach others about excellence through your actions?
3. Read Proverbs 3:12 and Revelation 3:19. How important do you think good character and integrity are in leading others to excellence? How easy or difficult is it for you to receive correction, whether it’s from a coach, a parent, an employer or a friend?
4. Read Luke 6:39-40. Have you ever been under the leadership of someone who didn’t seem to know what he or she was doing? What challenges did that scenario create?
5. Read Luke 6:43-45. What does the parable of the tree and its fruit mean to you? Can you give an example of how a person speaks “from the overflow of the heart”? In what ways can you make sure that the words you speak and your actions bring forth good and not evil?

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Revelation 3



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