A coach should be a philosopher of hoops.
—Digger Phelps

LIKE MOST OTHER sports, basketball as such doesn’t teach anything about values or character. If your daughter learns to play soccer from the win-at-all-costs coach played by Will Ferrell in the 2005 film Kicking and Screaming, she’ll learn that the rule is “play dirty, but don’t get caught.” Likewise, if your son learns basketball from watching ESPN’s Streetball, he’s not going to learn a great deal about discipline, respect, fair play, or teamwork.

Clearly, basketball can teach rotten values if a player has bad coaches and role models. But is the reverse also true? Can basketball teach good values if a player has good coaches and good role models? In the language of Eastern philosophy, can a basketball court be a dojo, a “place of enlightenment” in which disciplined athletes train their hearts and minds through the pursuit of physical excellence?

To help us think about this question we looked at the coaching philosophies of four highly successful college basketball coaches: Dean Smith, Rick Pitino, Pat Summitt, and Mike Krzyzewski. All of these coaches are widely respected for their high ethical and professional standards, and all have written books explaining their values-based coaching philosophy. Studying these coaches’ philosophies, we came to see that basketball can teach fundamental lessons about character and success, both on the court and in the greater game of life. What’s more, these are precisely the same lessons that great philosophers have been teaching for thousands of years.

Four Famous Coaches, Six Key Principles

The four coaches we’ve selected will need no introduction to most readers of this book. Dean Smith coached the North Carolina Tar Heels for thirty-six years, winning 77.6 percent of his games and two national championships, and graduating more than 96 percent of his players. His 879 career victories are the most by any coach in college basketball history. He is the coauthor (with Gerald D. Bell and John Kilgo) of The Carolina Way: Leadership Lessons from a Life in Coaching (Penguin Press, 2004).

Mike Krzyzewski has coached the Duke Blue Devils for more than a quarter century. A five-time ACC Coach of the Year, he has won three national championships. He is the author (with Donald T. Phillips) of Leading with the Heart: Coach K’s Successful Strategies for Basketball, Business, and Life (Warner Business Books, rev. ed., 2004).

Pat Summitt is the legendary coach of the University of Tennessee Lady Vols. In her thirty-three years at Tennessee, she has won six national championships, led her teams to fifteen Final Four appearances, and graduated 100 percent of her players. Her 1998 book Reach for the Summit: The Definite Dozen System for Succeeding at Whatever You Do (cowritten with Sally Jenkins) was a New York Times Business Bestseller.

Rick Pitino has coached the New York Knicks, the Boston Celtics, and four college teams, including the 1996 national champion Kentucky Wildcats. Now head basketball coach at the University of Louisville, he is the author (with Bill Reynolds) of Success Is a Choice: Ten Steps to Overachieving in Business and Life (Broadway Books, 1997).

Though differing greatly in their personalities and coaching styles, these four coaches have remarkably similar philosophies of success. Each sees basketball as a microcosm of life, a Bally’s gym of the heart in which the fundamentals of success on the court are also the cornerstones of success in life. Although there are minor differences of emphasis, six key principles stand out in these coaches’ philosophies of success:
Set Demanding Goals

- Set demanding goals.
- Make hard work your passion.
- Establish good habits.
- Be persistent.
- Learn from adversity.
- Put the team before yourself.

Let's examine these six principles to see why these famous coaches—as well as some of history's greatest thinkers—view them as critical to success in sports, business, leadership, or virtually any other worthwhile endeavor.

Set Demanding Goals

"The quest for success," says philosopher Tom Morris, "always begins with a target. We need something to aim at, something to shoot for." To achieve success in basketball, or any challenging task, Morris says, "we need a clear conception of what we want, a vivid vision, a goal or set of goals powerfully imagined." Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) would strongly agree. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, his classic work on excellence and achievement, he argues that all conscious human activity is done with some goal or end in mind. Some goals are obviously more important than others. What should be our ultimate goal, our highest good, the thing we should work hardest and most persistently to achieve? For Aristotle, it is making the most of our potential, striving for excellence in all that we do, but particularly in those capacities of heart, mind, and spirit that make us distinctively human. Being all that we can be, living at the top of our powers—this, for Aristotle, is what each of us should strive for, however humble or exalted our station in life may be.

To achieve one's potential in something as difficult as basketball requires years of hard work, dedication, and practice. We need goals in this process both to motivate us and to guide us.

In basketball, as in life, the road to mediocrity is paved with good intentions. It's easy to lose focus, to become lazy or distracted. Goals can motivate us to stay the course. As Coach Pitino reminds us, goals "give us a vision of a better future. They nourish our spirit; they represent possibility even when we are dragged down by reality. They keep us going."

Pitino tells the story of Billy Donovan, a little-heralded 5'11", 170-pound point guard who played for Providence College in the mid-1980s. Donovan was a classic underachiever his first two seasons at Providence, playing only part-time and averaging fewer than three points a game. When Pitino took over as the Providence coach prior to Donovan's junior year, he met with Donovan and asked him about his goals. It quickly became apparent that Donovan had no real goals except maybe getting a little more playing time and scoring a few more points per game. Pitino challenged him not to settle for such modest goals but to work hard and aspire to excellence. That summer Donovan worked his tail off and dramatically improved his conditioning and his skills. By his senior year he averaged 20.6 points per game, led his team to the Final Four, and was drafted in the third round of the NBA draft by the Utah Jazz. Today he is the highly successful head coach of the 2005–2006 NCAA champion Florida Gators.

Goals not only motivate us to aim high, but they also keep us on track and guide our progress along the way. As Pitino remarks, "goals provide our daily routine. They show us where to start and they establish our priorities. They make us organized and create the discipline in our lives."

The key to sustained excellence, Pat Summitt says, is to "think big, focus small." Dream big, shoot for lofty general goals, but also have clear, specific, short-term goals for daily and weekly improvement. Like UCLA's legendary John Wooden, Dean Smith was famous for his detailed, minute-by-minute practice schedules, which stressed daily improvement achieved through intense conditioning and repetitive drills. Smith also made it his practice at the end of each season to give each returning player two or three specific areas of improvement to work on over the summer. By setting ambitious yet realistic long- and short-term goals and working hard to achieve them, we can often do more than we imagined we could.

Make Hard Work Your Passion

For former U.S. senator and New York Knicks great Bill Bradley, basketball "was a clear example of virtue rewarded." Why? Because in basketball Bradley found an unambiguous demonstration of one of life's most important lessons: that there is no greater secret to success than hard work.
The value of hard work is something that all great coaches teach. As Rick Pitino observes, “If you look closely at all great organizations, all great teams, all great people, the one common denominator that runs through them is a second-to-none work ethic. The intense effort to achieve is always there. This is the one given if you want to be successful.”

Pat Summit also puts hard work at the core of her coaching philosophy. She writes:

How am I going to beat you?
I’m going to outwork you.
That’s it. That’s all there is to it.
You’ve just learned my most valuable secret... [T]here is no great intangible quality to success. It’s not a gift people are born with... or a knack. It’s a simple matter of putting your back into it.

Throughout history, great philosophers have stressed the importance of effort and hard work. Aristotle taught that happiness is an activity, an exemplification of excellence, rather than any kind of feeling or state of mind. Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121–180), the famous Roman philosopher-emperor, believed that humans naturally find fulfillment in “action and exertion” rather than in idle pleasure or creature comforts. John Locke (1632–1704), the great seventeenth-century British philosopher, maintained that one of the first duties of a teacher is to teach his or her pupils “vigor, activity, and industry.” And American philosopher William James (1842–1910) argued that effort is the true measure of a person, because “effort is the one strictly undervived and original contribution we make to this world.”

In emphasizing the importance of hard work, our coaches often sound much like the ancient Stoic philosophers. Stoics like Seneca (4 B.C.–A.D. 65) and Epictetus (around A.D. 50–130) believed that we can control our thoughts and attitudes but we cannot control “externals” like wealth, reputation, or health. Happiness, they believed, lies in learning to accept hard knocks with equanimity and to concentrate our energies instead on developing healthy, positive thoughts and a good character. In a similar spirit, Summit writes: “There is not much you can control in this life. Freak accidents, good or bad luck, these things are out of our hands. But how hard you work is within your control. Rather than com-
plain about bad breaks... make a few breaks of your own.” Likewise, Dean Smith used to tell his players: “Never let anyone play harder than you. That is part of the game you can control.”

Few basketball players ever worked harder to improve their skills than New York Knicks forward Bill Bradley. In high school, Bradley practiced three to four hours a day on Monday through Friday, and five hours a day on Saturday and Sunday. He put weights in his shoes to improve his vertical leap, wore a blindfold to prevent him from looking at the ball when he dribbled, and stacked chairs to practice shooting hook shots over an imaginary seven-footer. To improve his shooting, he shot set shots and jump shots from five different places on the floor. Only when he hit twenty-five set shots and twenty-five jump shots in a row did he move to the next spot. If he missed number twenty-three, he started over.

Teams built on a strong work ethic tend to draw closer because of all the shared suffering, hard work, and sacrifice. There’s also a motivational factor eloquently expressed by Michael Jordan in a note to U.S. Olympic basketball coach Bob Knight just prior to the gold-medal game against Spain in 1984. Jordan wrote: “Don’t worry. We’ve put up with too much shit to lose now.”

Teams with a passion for hard work tend to play harder in clutch games. Why? Because they feel like they’ve worked too hard and suffered too much to accept anything short of victory.

Establish Good Habits

Philosophers have long recognized the powerful role that habit plays in human life. For Aristotle, forming good habits of character and intellect is crucial to leading a happy, fulfilled life. The greatest thinker of the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas (around 1225–1274), thought habits were so important that he devoted a whole treatise to the subject in his magisterial Summa Theologica. And American philosopher William James believed that “all our life, so far as it has definite form, is but a mass of habits... systematically organized for our weal or woe.”

A habit is a stable and not easily altered disposition to act in a certain way, usually acquired by repetition of such acts. Good habits, like punctuality, politeness, and diligence, help us do good things easily, readily,
and without much thinking. Bad habits, like eating a bag of chips every night while watching ESPN, can be a curse.

Since so much of what we do is based on habit, and habits are so hard to break, it is important to form good habits. As Rick Pitino writes: "Good habits prevent laziness. They prevent floundering. . . . Good habits create organization and discipline in our lives. It’s virtually impossible to achieve success without having good habits. . . . And in times of stress, times when you are being severely tested, good habits become even more important. They become the rock, the standard of behavior that we must stick with so that we don’t get off track." Good habits are especially important in basketball, because so much of the game is repetition. By forming good habits when we shoot, dribble, or defend, we make muscle memory our ally and avoid the dangers of overthinking.

Great coaches and players understand the power of habit. John Wooden, who coached the UCLA Bruins to ten national championships in twelve years, said, "I believe in learning by repetition to the point that everything becomes automatic." And Dean Smith writes that in his years at Carolina, "we worked hard on fundamentals in practice. . . . We repeated things until they became habits. I believed that once we introduced something new, we should cover it in practice for several days to make sure the players got it. We hammered it home: repeat, repeat, repeat until we got it right."24

Few NBA players worked harder on developing good habits than Boston Celtics star Larry Bird. Each summer Bird would go home to French Lick, Indiana, and work tirelessly to improve some aspect of his offensive game. One year it was shooting with his left hand. Another year it was the up-and-under shot coming off a fake. During the first week of the Celtics’ preseason camp, the other players liked seeing what new dimension Bird had added to his game.25

When Phil Jackson became coach of the Los Angeles Lakers in 1999, he gave his superstar center, Shaquille O’Neal, a copy of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics. Aristotle, as we have seen, taught that the key to a happy, successful life is sustained excellence through the formation of good habits. After reading the book, Shaq said that he’d like to be known as "the Big Aristotle," because "it was Aristotle who said excellence is not a singular act but a habit."26

Great thinkers have long emphasized the value of persistence. To achieve long-term success and fulfillment, the Roman philosopher Seneca said, we must "work hard with all the courage we can muster, ignoring any distractions, and struggle with a single purpose."27 Samuel Johnson noted that "great works are performed not by strength but by perseverance." And contemporary philosopher and corporate adviser Tom Morris reports that in his experience "the biggest difference between people who succeed at any difficult endeavor and those who do not is not usually talent. It is persistence."28

Socrates (470–399 B.C.) was a model of persistence, as he was of many other virtues. Early one morning when he was on a military campaign, Socrates stopped to ponder some philosophical perplexity he wished to think through. Around noon, word began to spread around camp that Socrates was lost in one of his (in)famous fits of abstraction. When evening fell, some of Socrates’ fellow soldiers spread their bedding around him to see if he stood there all night. He did, and when dawn came, he offered up a prayer to the sun and went on his way.29

Persistence seems to be something of a lost virtue today. Our newest university graduates expect to find top-level jobs immediately out of college, and athletes expect to achieve success without struggle. But every successful person must learn the lesson of persistence, a personal quality underscored by each of our four coaches. Persistence is holding steadfast to a purpose despite obstacles and setbacks. It is perseverance and tenacity in the face of hardships and disappointments. It is sticking with something even when you don’t feel like it or see the final goal. As Pitino says, "It’s persistence that makes you great. It’s persistence that allows you to reach your dreams. It’s persistence that enables you to perform at your fullest potential."30

Dean Smith tells the story of an unnamed Carolina basketball player who was better at football than he was at basketball. He was a player Smith loved having on the team, but after two years it was clear he didn’t figure into the team’s future plans. Before summer break, Smith told this player that he wasn’t going to get much playing time in the future and encouraged him to think about whether he wanted to return. To Smith’s
surprise and delight, a week later the player called and said he was returning. The player "spent hours and hours each day over the summer working on his shot, his ball handling, all his basketball skills," Smith writes. "I couldn't believe my eyes when practice opened on October 15. He was vastly improved. He won a starting position for us and made All-ACC first team before he graduated."31

Learn from Adversity

Persistence is easy when things are going smoothly, but the true test of character comes when one encounters adversity. As many philosophers have noted, a world without challenges and disappointments would be a world without growth. Coaches have shortened this to "no pain, no gain." Winners don't give up in the face of failure; they become more determined to succeed the next time. Adversity teaches self-knowledge, revealing our true strengths and weaknesses. As Seneca remarked, "If a man is to know himself, he must be tested. No one finds out what he can do except by trying. . . . Disaster is virtue's opportunity."32

Learning to turn negative events into positive ones is essential to success. Summitt points out that failures often cause people to reevaluate their lives and recommit themselves to excellence.33 Krzyzewski notes that adversity can sometimes work in one's favor. "Instead of feeling sorry for yourself and using it as an excuse," he recommends, "accept the situation and try to make the most of it. That's how a team develops resilience and character."34

Sport teaches us the inevitability of failure. No one makes every shot or wins every game. As Pitino reminds us: "The best hitters in baseball fail to hit seven out of every ten times they come to the plate. Many of the best home run hitters strike out a lot. The best salespeople have days when they don't sell anything. Artists have days when nothing creative happens. We all fail sometimes. The question is what do you do with that failure?"35 Again the Stoic approach to life is relevant in knowing what one can control in life. As Summitt remarks, echoing a constant Stoic theme, "You can't always control what happens, but you can control how you handle it."36

Krzyzewski recalls: "One year I received a note from a former player

I had coached back in the early 1970s. It seemed that he had recently received a double-lung transplant and was told by his doctors that the main reason he survived was due to his will and determination. Then he credited me for instilling that quality in him at a young age."37 The player had learned as a young man to persevere through adversity without falling into despair. As St. Paul—a man well acquainted with adversity—stated, "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character" (Romans 5:3).

Put the Team before Yourself

Thomas Hobbes, a seventeenth-century British philosopher, believed that humans are naturally nasty, violent, brutal, and selfish. Hobbes's view may be extreme, but basketball coaches know firsthand that teamwork must be drilled into athletes because it is against their natural inclinations. Summitt writes: "Teamwork does not come naturally. . . . We are born with certain inclinations, but sharing isn't one of them. . . . When two or more children get together in one room, what do they fight about? Sharing, that's what. They hate to share. . . . I've seen whole teams act that way. . . . My point is, teamwork is taught. . . . As a coach, I have to be at my most inventive and articulate when I talk about teamwork. But basketball happens to be a wonderful tool with which to teach it."38 As LA Lakers coach Phil Jackson points out, creating a successful team "requires the individuals involved to surrender their self-interest for the greater good so that the whole adds up to more than the sum of its parts."39 But this is a tough message to communicate in our increasingly individualistic and celebrity-crazed culture.

Self-interest shouldn't be confused with selfishness. Self-interest can operate in ways that are not selfish. Was Michael Jordan a selfish player because he took more shots than anyone else or because he wanted to take the climactic final shot of a game? Not at all. If Jordan had refused to take last-second shots to avoid appearing selfish, this wouldn't have put the team before himself; it would have made him appear to be a team player while actually hurting the team.40 Similarly, Dean Smith has been criticized for overemphasizing team play, thereby delaying the development of individual skills. But as Jordan aptly remarks in Smith's defense:
“The one thing I was taught at North Carolina, and one thing I believe to the fullest, is that if you think and achieve as a team, the individual accolades will take care of themselves.”41

Summitt offers a great example of individual/team synergy. Her 1996 team was filled with high-profile players like seniors Michelle Marciniak and Latina Davis, but it also had a dynamic freshman, Chamique Holdsclaw. Summitt called in Marciniak and Davis and told them they probably wouldn’t be All-Americans but that Holdsclaw would. She then challenged them by asking whether they would rather be All-Americans or win a national championship. Both said that they’d prefer to be national champs. Summitt writes: “Michelle and Latina swallowed whatever feelings they had. What happened next is a credit to both of them. Latina became the Most Valuable Player in the NCAA East Regional. Michelle was the MVP in the Final Four. Chamique was named Kodak All-American. And Tennessee was national champion.”42

To help her players appreciate the value of teamwork, Summitt often uses a simple analogy. “Let’s say I hand out pencils to our twelve players. I tell them, ‘Now I want each of you to break your pencils in half.’ They will do it, no problem. You’ll hear the snapping of pencils all over the gym. But what if I take twelve pencils, and I bind them together with a rubber band? Now try to break them. You can’t. That is the basic principle of teamwork.”43

Basketball’s Enduring Lessons

During the 2005 NCAA basketball tournament, CBS ran an American Express commercial featuring coach Mike Krzyzewski. In the commercial Coach K says:

I don’t look at myself as a basketball coach. I look at myself as a leader who happens to coach basketball.

When [my players] get into the workplace, they’re armed with more than just a jump shot or a dribble, but I want you armed for life. I want you to develop as a player. I want you to develop as a student. And I want you to develop as a human being.

Some fans objected to the commercial, claiming that it gave Duke an unfair recruiting advantage over other schools. Maybe so, but the commercial was nevertheless an effective and much-needed reminder that basketball is ultimately a game, and that “success” is about something much larger than simply “winning.” Basketball, when well coached and well played, can prepare us to succeed in the greater game of life. At the end of the commercial, as Krzyzewski walks across the court in Duke’s venerable Cameron Indoor Stadium, we are reminded that a basketball court can be a “place of enlightenment”—a place where vital life lessons are taught, and spiritual warriors aim not simply at baskets but ultimately at themselves.

Notes

2. Morris, True Success, 35.
4. Pitino, Success Is a Choice, 47.
10. Summitt, Reach for the Summit, 117.
15. Summitt, Reach for the Summit, 132.
27. Quoted in Tom Morris, *The Stoic Art of Living: Inner Resilience and Outer Results* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 44.
36. Summitt, *Reach for the Summit*, 266.
40. Once when Chicago assistant coach Tex Winter reminded Jordan that “there’s no I in the word team,” Jordan responded, “There is in the word win.” Halberstam, *Playing for Keeps*, 259.
42. Summitt, *Reach for the Summit*, 165.
43. Summitt, *Reach for the Summit*, 163.