

A Good Man

The Pete Newell Story

By Bruce Jenkins

[Fertig notes]

- In his coaching years, he was able, through the wizardry of his teaching, to transform players of modest ability into effective working parts of a smooth-functioning basketball machine.
- Newell won the national championship, as he is yet proud to say, with fundamentals. Those Bears of 40 years ago represented the last gasp of "team basketball" over the star system, of defense over offense, of substance over style and, since every one of Newell's players graduated, of education over the NBA.
- Pete's players at Cal, USF and Michigan State were constantly amazed by his sense of the human spirit. He could spot winners, cheaters, tough guys and frauds from a mile away.
- This is the paradox of the coach's mind. He must communicate in positives, never dwell on how the team might lose, and I never deviated from that approach. But when the team left the dressing room, all those suppressed negatives would emerge, and for several minutes I would be in a mental hell. Maybe it was this fear of failure that made me a successful coach.
- I graduated from high school right after the Depression, jobs were tough to come by, and my family didn't have the money. Back then, college wasn't a right, it was a privilege.
- Don't ever allow yourself to think you invented the game, or any part of it. But it doesn't mean you can't refine what you borrow.
- That's something you don't see today. Offensive thinking very rarely encompasses an immediate adjustment to defense.
- I don't want a prevent defense. Football shows you how well that works – it's a big failure every time, and for the same reason it fails in basketball: you don't have pressure on the ball. You can have six defensive backs in there, but they'll still complete the pass if you don't pressure the passer. So make sure that's where you start your defense.
- The players have to know what they're doing, and why! I didn't want my players depending on me. I figured I'd teach 'em during the week, and when the game comes along, it's up to them. That's one reason I didn't like to call timeouts. I didn't want the players thinking that every time they got in a jam, I'd bail 'em out. I wanted to make *them* figure it out.
- One day we ran into an old guy who had played in that gym in 1920; he said the place was decrepit *then*. But it's like that old saying at USF: "The Jesuits take the oath of poverty, and if you work for them, you live by it." All four years I was there, we practiced in that awful building. But it was ours. When it was freezing cold and rain was coming through the roof, I'd tell the guys we'd get to the Garden someday. And I'll be damned if we didn't. We turned a national championship out of that little place.

- The standard Newell images – the dignified look, the team discipline, the flawless execution.
- There's only one way to play defense: Shuffle your feet, knees bent, hands up. That is the correct defensive position – although you'd never know it by watching some players today. Any other way is wrong. The inside hand should be in the shooter's face to disconcert him. The other arm extends almost parallel to the floor to deflect passes. The player shuffles because that allows him to slide with the man he's guarding. Cross your feet, you might lose your balance.
- You can never change a habit, or create one, with a word or a piece of chalk. You can talk all day, put all sorts of diagrams on the board, but a habit is not going to change. It's a conditioned reflex, created by a repetitive act. Coaches say, "Stay down low, you gotta get low," but that doesn't mean a thing if the kid hasn't physically practiced to stay low. Habits are created through physical acts.
- The players may have privately cursed Newell on the practice court, but they loved and respected him.
- Sometimes the old black-and-white basketball films look comical, but there is one undeniable fact: In terms of court spacing, precise passing and fancy dribbling, the elite players of the 1940s were absolutely first-rate.
- If Pete had all the money in the world, he'd give it all away. And he never took credit for anything; he'd give it to you, to me, anybody other than himself.
- As nervous as Pete was, he made adjustments better than anybody I'd ever seen. He didn't transmit any more nervousness than he wanted to.
- Pete had such a powerful sense of responsibility on his job, he couldn't be happy with "almost."
- He'd always say, "No thinking. You've already thought. React. By the time you get to the floor, you react."
- Joe Lapchick told Newell, "Man, you'd better ease up. You won't live five years if you can't learn to relax occasionally."
- We were always solid. Sound. Our offense always complemented our defense.
- As soon as you stop pressuring the ball, the quarterback becomes all-world.
- A New York grand jury had begun its probe into charges that players from City College of New York, Long Island and NYU had conspired to "fix" games. "Clair [Bee] didn't know anything," Newell said. "Coaches would never know. You see your players in every situation. You see 'em make every mistake in the world, see 'em play well, see 'em make dumb plays. It's built in that you trust them. You don't think for a moment that somebody has screwed up with any purpose."
- The Spartans were about to enter the Big Ten in basketball and were looking for someone to guide the program. "They went 4-18 the year before I got there. The money was almost twice what I was getting at USF, but that wasn't the issue. It was the Big Ten, and basketball at that time was so provincial. In the East, it was give-and-go. Out West it was really tough defense. In the Midwest it was 'Shoot, Luke, the sky's full of pigeons,' and worry about defense later. I wasn't concerned about my reputation, but how much I could learn. I wanted the challenge of going into a new arena, where they played a different game. The fact that I was going to be undermanned and inexperienced, and lose games because of it, never entered my