

I Remember Al McGuire

Personal Memories and Testimonials to College Basketball's Wittiest Winning Coach and Commentator, as Told by the People Who Knew Him Best

by Mike Towle

[Fertig Notes]

- Al McGuire knew how to cut to the essence of life, making sense out of all that was happening around him today to compute how all this would affect tomorrow. Call it foresight; call it intuition.
- His office door was usually open, but players were told in no uncertain terms that it was open only for exceptional problems. Anything else, you were expected to figure it out for yourself. Which, perhaps, is the way it should be. McGuire didn't overcoach; he understood.
- He and I met, and once he got to Belmont he would say, "You line up the kids, and I'll charm the mothers." Which is what he did with his good-looking Irish facial features.
- He was probably the worst driver in the world. When he was driving, he would turn around to talk to you, and the car would be weaving over the white line into the oncoming lane of traffic, and you would hear these horns blaring, and he'd turn around and go "____you!" to all these cars going by, and then he would turn back around and continue talking to you.
- There was a lot of McGuire to hate because of his attitude and his way of running the ship. He was not a fatherly type coach; you were on your own. He didn't nurture us in the least. On the other hand, he would be the first one to come to your aid in time of need. He was right there for anybody who got into any kind of jam. I've seen quotes where he would tell people, "If you need a buck, don't bother me, but if you need a thousand, let me know."
- Sometimes at practice we would have only eight or nine guys, so he'd get out there and play with us. He was the worst guy on the team, and half the time practice would end with a fight – that he had started. It was all psychological, to get us rough and tough, and he got the most out of us.
- He really didn't care what his guys did as long as they did what they were supposed to do on the basketball court. Back in the sixties and seventies when there was a sort of rebellion thing going on in society, Al's mindset through all that was to live and let live. Sometimes he would get a minor complaint or one of his players from a parent or a school administrator, and he would say, "Man, don't bother me with these haircut problems, only if a guy gets arrested or something like that."
- At Belmont Abbey, we didn't want to show you the school. So I showed them some pictures of the Catawba River and Chapel Hill, and they decided to come.
- Al was incredibly street smart, but he didn't read a lot of books
- He might have been the worst coach in basketball history as far as Xs and Os go. When the game started, though, there probably was no one better at controlling the game.
- Al was always into all that psychological stuff.
- Al had the foresight to see things in people and was able to surround himself with good people.
- For our first game, the team was warming up in the gym, but Al wasn't there and we didn't know where he was. And it's almost game time. He finally arrives, walks into the locker room, and, while we're expecting some kind of great pregame speech, he says, "There's a reason why we're all here. It's because we screwed up someplace else and there's nowhere else to go, so get out there and do well." That was the whole speech, but it kind of hit us: Where do we go from here?"
- He took care of himself while growing up, and he said we would need to do the same thing for ourselves – nobody else would care. At least you got the straight story from Al. He said he had his interests, and that we had to be together for a period of time, and that was it. He always left the door to his office open, but he would tell us, "I don't really want to hear any problems. Just go to class, stay clean, play ball, and we'll go our separate paths afterward."
- Back in the early sixties, we couldn't play against black colleges. In Charlotte, Johnson C. Smith was the local black college. Al scheduled what he called a "controlled scrimmage" with Johnson C. Smith, although in reality it was an actual game. If you were to ask Al why he had scheduled that game, he would have said, "Because we could and they told us we shouldn't." That was part of Al's philosophy in that he was always somehow pushing the envelope.

- What he taught me more than anything else was to be willing to do something in the world that nobody else did. If there's something you really wanted to do and you had the nerve and the (guts), then that's what you ought to do. "Don't spend your whole life doing something you don't want to do, even if you're successful at it," he would say. He let us know that moreso by example than by actually sitting down and preaching that to us.
- Back in those days, Al was the total staff. If you had an injury, at least for 90% of the injuries, he would say, "Take two aspirin and put a Band-Aid on it." If you had a more serious injury, he would send you to Dr. Robert Duke, who would put you on this big machine on which you would lay down on your stomach and this thing would go up and down your back. It didn't cure anything, but it made you feel better, and a few days later you would be back and running up and down the hardcourt.
- At one time in practice, he told us, "You guys are cursing too much in practice, so I'm going to put out a curse box here. Every time one of you guys swears, you have to put a quarter in the box." I said, "Al, we don't have any change on us. How do you expect us to do that?" He said, "Well, you'd better find a -----ing quarter. Oh, -----, that's not going to work. ----- the curse box."
- This is a very simple game. I don't want to complicate it with too much coaching.
- Two things that McGuire emphasized with us were defense and conditioning. He would say the rest would take care of itself. His idea of planning out the offense was to create stuff through our defense, and he had a very simple way of doing it. If your man beat you on the baseline, you were on the bench. If you went back out and it happened again, you could forget the rest of that game and sit out the next game or two on top of that. As far as offense, how he would control that is if you took a bad shot, same thing. Sit down. As a result, over the long term, we would play tremendous defense because nobody wanted to sit out. So you just didn't let the guy get by you. We were adamant about that. Then on offense, you made the extra pass and always made sure that whatever shot you took was a good one.
- When the season was over, you never saw him. We went our separate ways. He didn't like the basketball players hanging around together. He wanted us to mix in with the rest of the student body.
- Lefty Driesell said, "He was a great motivator and he knew the game. Al was his own man. I don't think he took basketball that seriously. It was just a way to make money and have some fun. He was just a super guy."
- It was very intimidating. I think in some ways that Al could have made Bobby Knight look like a choir boy.
- Some of the lessons McGuire used to teach us was about cutting corners. Al would say, "Just the way they walk across this guy's grass is an indicator that they take shortcuts in other things they do in their lives. When you run laps around the court, don't cut across any of the corners. In doing that, you will find that everything you do in life, you won't cut corners. Don't cut corners. Do it properly and people will know it when you do. It's little stuff like that that is so simple, and which will give you the edge over other people." It's so simple it sticks in your mind about everything you do. Going that extra mile sets you apart from a lot of the run-of-the-mill people.
- The thing about McGuire was that his life really didn't revolve around basketball.
- Hank Raymonds said, "I had talked to him twice on the phone; once to schedule a game with Belmont Abbey and the other time when he asked me to be his assistant. But I had never met Al. When he came to get settled in Milwaukee, he stayed only a few days. When he was leaving to go back to Charlotte, he gave me a blank check to buy his home here. Needless to say, I knew right then and there this guy was something else."
- We were running through some drills designed to penetrate the full court press and all sorts of other things, and after about a half hour of watching this, Al just blew his whistle, threw the clipboard down on the floor, and hollered, "What in the hell is going on around here? You guys are making this game too difficult. You just take this round ball, put it up and through the hoop, and then get back to the other end of the court on defense before the other team gets there. That's the game! Simplify. Make it easy. Go out and play basketball!"
- Al had enough foresight to say, "I need a guy who's an Xs and Os guy, someone who can do the analysis of the Loyola press and do all that sort of thing. That is not my strength. I'm not that detailed. I'm the guy that comes in here and gets people five feet off the ground and ready to through

the wall or do whatever has to happen.” The complement of Hank and Al was a unique one. We had the technical basketball knowledge in Hank and the motivator in Al, and we put the two together, making for a very powerful combination.

- Al believed in progression, building your program up without rushing things too quickly. His first year at Marquette, went 8-18. The second year, they were 14-12. Al had always talked about coaches being in too big a hurry to succeed, especially in these last twenty years. They want instant coffee. They want to get to the finals real quickly. He always believed it was all about the job, making progress over time to build a solid foundation.
- He was special. The one thing about Al was what he would do with people when he met them; make them feel like you’re one of his best friends. And if you were fortunate to spend some time with Al, meeting him every now and then or talking to him over the phone, each time it felt like you were getting closer.
- That was one of the first times I started questioning myself, Is this guy for real? As time went on, I found him to not only be for real, but also that he was probably the most straightforward and candid human being I’ve ever met in my life. He said what other people thought but were afraid to say. He looked at life in a very simplistic, straightforward way. He was independent in his execution of something even if he wasn’t independent of thinking about it in the first place. He did all that. What you see is what you got; there’s nothing phony there. It was stirring and it was inspiring. The guy knew so much more about life than he did about basketball, and that’s what he left the university with.
- For the first hour he would bring everybody out to center court and he would talk to us; nothing about basketball, but about life, about school, about family, about friends – what’s important and what isn’t important. We’d look at each other and whisper, “What is he talking about? Why are we doing this?” You don’t realize until after you’ve been out of school for a while that he was really educating us about life. A lot of the things he talked to us about was right on the mark even though it might have gone over our heads at the time.
- There was no doubt; he was definitely in control. But he really had an effect on my life. Absolutely. I think of him all the time, and when I got into a tough situation, I think, Gee, I wonder what Al would have done. Then when I figure out what he would have done in that situation, I do the same thing. I try to think the same way he did and try to be the same competitor he was. Amazing guy.
- You wanted to play for this guy because he was so honest. You thrived on that. You wanted to be part of this. There was no fear element; this wasn’t coaching by fear. This was coaching by involvement, making you want to be so much a part of all this.
- It’s one thing to be famous, to be a celebrity, but it’s another thing to be a famous celebrity who is absolutely genuine. He wasn’t somebody to put anything over on anybody; he was who he was, and that was the greatest thing about him. He was honest and forthright, and he was a caring person.
- They had a classroom filled with sixty or seventy Italian coaches ready to listen intently to every word that he said. So Al gets up in front of all these guys, and the first thing he said was, “The most important thing to do as a coach is to always make sure you have the key to your locker room because you don’t want to be locked out of your locker room at halftime. This is one of the worst things that could possibly happen to you. The second most important thing is, whenever possible, always try to bring your band with you on the road. If you can bring your band with you on the road, it will really help you because now you can take out the crowd a little bit.” Well, they don’t have bands. This isn’t college, and yet Al is going through with all these things and it was hilarious. They didn’t know what was going on.
- Maurice Lucas sticks his head in the door to Al’s office. Coach says, “Luke, c’mon in.” Luke begins to tell a story of how he can now get a million dollars from the Kentucky Colonels of the ABA and that he would be the third player taken if he went hardship for the NBA draft. He didn’t know whether he should take it and leave or not. Al leaned across the desk and said, “Luke, here’s what you need to understand. The Jesuits don’t care if you come back. The Jesuits care if I come back, because the Jesuits know I can get another one like you. You need to do whatever’s best.” And Luke got this big smile and said, “I understand what you’re telling me, Coach. Thanks.” And he announces the next day that he’s going hardship.
- Ulice Payne: “Coach could see that he was beginning to get as big or bigger than Marquette University basketball. He didn’t want that to happen. He knew if he got bigger than the university pretty soon

good things about Al McGuire and Marquette wouldn't make news anymore. People would start to look at the bad things, and then the jealousies would come out because no one likes anybody who is too big, and then he and the university would start taking hits. Before long, he had to get out of there, and he was at that point."

- But then, everybody was ticked off at Coach. That's part of being a coach; if your players aren't mad at you, you're probably not doing a good job.
- One time after he announced his retirement effective at the end of the season, I asked him, "Why are you really doing this?" And he said, "I'm tired of telling seventeen year olds that I can't live without them."
- People loved him because he was a little bit eccentric and a lot transparent. As much as he was into basketball, McGuire had an uncanny ability to build ample time into his schedule for nurturing friendships.
- He would sometimes call out of the blue just to say hi or to get a phone number, and the thing I'll always remember is that he would end each phone conversation the same way, saying, "Let me know if I can ever do anything for you," and he would mean it.
- He was an idea guy, not an execution guy, in and out of basketball.
- Bill Cords: Al had an uncanny ability to take complex things and reduce them to their simplest, basic terms in one or two sentences. But then you would think about it for the rest of the day. Take the statement that he made during an interview on Milwaukee Public Television when he said, "Life is what you don't let yourself see." That's a powerful statement, and the first time I heard it, it didn't really hit me, so I went back to it and listened to it again and then again, and then I thought about it for a half a day trying to catch the whole thing. He was one of the best college basketball coaches in the history of the game, and yet he was able to separate that from the rest of his life.
- Al was the kind of guy who was so unselfish and willing to get freebies for friends.
- George Thompson: One thing Coach Al did was he treated everybody like crap. It was just a question of how crappy he was going to treat you on a given day. Color is an issue, always has been, still is in the year 2001, but for him it wasn't because he dealt with everybody very evenhandedly.
- Ulice Payne: At one point while we were talking, someone came into his office and asked him if he would move his car because it was blocking someone trying to get out. But he said, "Just tell them to move my car. You know, I keep the keys in the car." I couldn't believe I was hearing this. I said, "Coach, why do you keep your keys in the car?" He said, "If they're going to steal it, I'd rather them steal it without breaking the window. I always keep my doors open and the keys in the car. If it gets taken, [the police] will find it eventually." That gave me a pretty good sense of what kind of guy he was and that he wasn't trying to impress me by how he looked – this wasn't a game or anything like that."
- Pat McGuire: I was reading this story in the paper about how Al likes to turn on the shower in his hotel room to block out traffic noise and how he stretches out on the bathroom floor with a pillow, and I'm thinking to myself, Some guy in a mental hospital will be seeing this, and he's going to be wondering why he's in there and Al is out here.
- "I don't *know* basketball; I *feel* basketball. If you drop me in the middle of a game, I could coach that game based on just the ebb and the flow." If there's one way to describe Al, it would be that he had a sense of the flow and rhythm to life.
- Bill Cords: He drew people. Al just had something about him. He was warm, approachable, charismatic, accommodating...all those things. Strangers would meet him and talk to him, and they would walk away thinking that Al was their best friend. It was incredible. He had a humbleness to him and was always trying to help other people, to make them better. He had such courage and such life.
- Dick Enberg: He always said that when kids get a college degree, it doesn't mean that they're educated. "You really want to be educated," he'd say, "you get your degree, then you tend bar for six months and drive a cab for six months. Now you've got your masters and your doctorate." He's as wise a man as I've met. You listen when he talks. He cuts through life and gets to the bone faster than anybody I've ever met.

- Tom Crean: The biggest thing I gained from him when it comes to coaching? Never forget it's a people job; that you're dealing with kids and you have to be there for them. He was such a visionary. I saw in a short period of time what a lot of other people knew.
- Despite his ebullient personality, I always thought there was a well of sadness in coach McGuire. Maybe it was the Irish Catholic thing, or the fact that he identified with underdogs and fighting the system. There was no doubt he hated injustice, which led him to recruit on urban playgrounds and negotiate with players to finish their degrees, no matter what.
- He was the basketball coach, but he could have headed the philosophy department. Everybody learned from Al McGuire.
- Then we got to Guyton and Recker. But for ten minutes, he could not keep the numbers straight. He thought Guyton wore number four and that Recker wore number twenty-five. We tried to fix that, then we tried to explain what type of players Guyton and Recker were, and he would get confused. After about ten minutes, and knowing we had to get to pre-game meal real soon, we just looked at him and I said, "Coach, Guyton is the point guard, and he's black. Recker is the small forward/shooting guard and he's white." There was about two seconds of silence, Coach smiled and said, "OK, now I understand." And we all cracked up.
- I met Al through our mutual liking for toy soldiers. He came to the Pep Boys store where I was working, and he asked me if we could go to my house and do some trading of toy soldiers. We spent an hour or so talking and trading, and we finally reached a mutual agreement to what each could take from the other. While talking with him, I kept reminding myself that here was a famous college basketball coach who treated me like an equal, while we both shared the same interest in a common collectibles hobby. After he left, I always remembered our conversation on the toy soldiers and how nice and polite he was. There never was a hint of a big-headed person, but he was just a plain Joe, like myself.
- Al McGuire was one of a kind; a street-smart, rough-edged guy out of New York who could charm the socks off a cynical stranger and beat the world at college basketball with a seat-of-the-pants' approach that put rhythm, sixth sense, and a bit of spit and polish ahead of Xs and Os. McGuire knew people and was secure in knowing who he was – a brash free spirit who parlayed a hugely successful ten-year run as his sport's most expressive coach into more than twenty years as one of college basketball's most entertaining and insightful network-television commentator. Part of his success, his uniqueness, was in his language; which had its roots in the streets and asphalt courts of the inner city Back East.
- They knew what he meant because of the expert context into which he placed them. McGuire's material was stored in various corners of his head, available to surface at opportune times; there's no way that much of what he said was rehearsed. The McGuire genius. Al McGuire in front of a microphone or pen and paper was candid, not canned.
- McGuire, as a coach, once said that he could drop into the middle of any game in progress, without perusing a scouting report, and within five minutes be able to coach the game, and probably win, from feel, not facts. Intuition trumps investigation.
- McGuire grasped concepts, trends, and feelings, and he expressed what he saw with a refreshing blend of humor, foresight, and candor. Sometimes he was wrong. But in his case, even wrong was right.
- *On timing:* I need to make the phone ring, so I'm getting in the tub.
On how he is perceived by different people: For me to get a message across, many times I have to allow myself to be what someone wants me to be. To let them put me in a certain niche. Different people have different conceptions of me, and whatever they want to think of me, fine. The only difference between a nut and an eccentric is finer threads and a bigger car.
On his role as coach-dictator: I don't discuss basketball. I dictate basketball. I'm not interested in philosophy classes.
On the importance of good defense: All you have to do is play hard on defense. You can't on offense. One night the basket is a washtub; the next night it's a teacup.
On dealing with mistakes by his teams: I coach by winning! Don't accept the mistakes in a win; they are still there. Don't let the win erase all of the errors which occurred.
On game-day rivalries with opposing coaches: When you go against another coach, you should have no love affair with him or vendetta against him. You should approach the game from a completely unemotional standpoint.

On the one thing he missed most about coaching: This is gonna shock you: It's the nervousness after a loss. That was a nice feeling. It made it all human; you knew you were dealin' with the uncertainty, the fear.

On his new job as vice chairman of Medalist Industries, which he assumed after resigning as Marquette coach: The vice chairman, I believe, puts gas in the chairman's car.

On his offensive philosophy at MU: Our offense is Simple Simon. Our All-Americans know they should have the ball, and the other guys know they should get it to the All-Americans.

On being in touch with everyone: You gotta touch everyone. The world is run by C+ students.

On maintaining a star system: Know your stars. Treat them like stars. They win games. And know your other players; and give them a hug, too.

On friendship: I can't be both your friend and your flatterer.

On recruiting Butch Lee: There were some three hundred schools after Butch Lee, and he narrowed it down to Marquette and Penn. Butch lived in Harlem, and I visited his place once. I told him that freshmen weren't [at that time] eligible in the Ivy League, so if he went to Penn, his first year he'd be playing games at 5:30 on the third floor of some YMCA against guys who dribble with two hands and have underwear hanging out of their uniforms. But come to Marquette and you'll play before packed houses and on national TV. It's Park Avenue compared to a brownstone walk-up.

On how the NCAA treats coaches: There has to be an NCAA because without it three wouldn't be any [collegiate] sports. My hangup is the disrespect they have for coaches. No respect at all is shown. Coaches are treated like cattle. If a coach was in a leper colony, the NCAA wouldn't send five dollars.

On what he would do if he were in his boss's shoes: If I were the president of Marquette University, I wouldn't hire me.

On finding good help: The most expensive thing is cheap labor.

On coaching life's ups and downs: The nice thing about coaching is that one day you feel like you can play handball against a curb and the other days you feel like you can fly to the moon.

- I want them mentally tough. I keep trying to get them to go one step further. I'll tell my players, "Don't you crack; they will crack, but don't you crack!" You must be intense. Normally, I'm a very low-key person, and I want my team to be unemotional.
- I do a lot of selling ideas. I'm an idea person; I've been one since about seventeen years of age. Usually, I do promotional things. If they're successful, everybody does good; if they're not successful, I don't want to do good, either. It has to be successful.
- A team should be an extension of a coach's personality. My teams are arrogant and obnoxious.