

The Men of March

A Season Inside the Lives of College Basketball Coaches

by Brian Curtis
[Fertig Notes]

- The reality is that we get most of our information from the media, and the media shows us what they *think* we want to see, hear, or read.
- Today's college coaches are CEO's running a business – a big business. They are cordial with their competitors, but are willing to rip their hearts out to get ahead. They are held accountable for their players graduating, for fund-raising and for garnering community support, yet they are put to the test by the bottom line – wins.
- But almost universally, every coach loves working with kids, enjoys teaching and probably would be doing this even if there weren't large sums of money involved. A coach is driven by a love for the game, a passion for teaching, and the challenge of the sport. The material rewards are obvious, but coaches also gain self-satisfaction and the comfort of knowing they are shaping lives.
- The work level is the same for all Division I coaches, but how they spend their time differs.
- Bill Self says, "Most coaches with the exception of 2 or 3% will downplay their team more than they would build them up. It looks a lot better to win and not predict it than to predict it, and not do it. I think with your team you can say we're better than these guys and we're going to win if we play with passion tonight. You can tell that to your team. You can *never* tell that to the press.
- How many coaches of Top 25 teams do you think not only enjoy the media, but would make the effort to sit and have lunch with all of them before a news conference? Sure, there may be ulterior motives – like ensuring positive coverage – but for a guy like Self, he didn't need to brown-nose; his coaching and demeanor speak for themselves.
- Being a successful coach is knowing how to teach and when to teach, including times to use humor, praise and criticism.
- After learning the game from his father, the young Alford would learn much more under Knight. His relationship with his college coach then, and now, was the subject of much speculation and rumors. That is why rumors are just that. (Steve) Alford has a great appreciation for Knight, and the ultimate sign of respect is the fact that much of what Alford does as a coach in practice and in games is a direct reflection of Robert Montgomery Knight. "What amazed me most about Coach was his organization, preparation, and competitiveness."
- Because today's sports stars, including their coaches, have become entertainment celebrities in their own right, the public comes to know these stars through the eyes and ears of the media. An article about a blowup between a coach and player; an editorial about how bad a job the coach is doing; rumors and misperceptions flying through the Internet about by unidentified sources; accusations, innuendoes, and character assassinations by those in the *don't know*. Coaches are routinely portrayed in one-dimensional terms, put in simplistic boxes that make understanding them and reporting on them easier for the media and the public.
- Overriding all other impressions is the sense that there is no one in the world (Steve) Lavin would rather be talking to than you, and nothing he would rather be discussing than the topic at hand. He has interested eyes. It is a gift. Some coaches have it; some ex-presidents are renowned for it. Lavin comes by it naturally and uses it expertly in recruiting players and dealing with the combative Los Angeles media.
- "Once your boss lies to you it is difficult to reestablish the necessary trust to make a relationship work."
- The discussion turned to the media and Wooden remarked that he left the game when the media became too intrusive.
- (Mike) Brey has a great relationship with his assistants, and he allows them the freedom to contribute to discussions and planning, something that all head coaches allow. "I don't think we have ever had a bad discussion," says Kearney, who has been with Brey for seven years. "We haven't always agreed on things, but he never makes you feel that you can't speak your mind."
- Dating back to the first team meeting on September 1, Brey told his team that success depended on two things: trust and communication.

- Inundated with statistics, messages, keys to the game, pressure reminders, and enough stimulus to override the senses, players often come out flat.
- Practices are ultimately just that – practice. Cincinnati coach Bob Huggins says, “I love practice, but you know, games are our test. How motivated would you be if every classroom never had a test? Would you be able to take a class where you never had to take a test?” The classroom is the practice court and the games are the court of public opinion.
- But (Frank) Williams is not a “born leader,” a vocal guy who people naturally follow. He was thrust into a leader role because he was the best player on a very good team.
- Lavin learned from Pete Newell and Mike Krzyzewski that player input is critical to success.
- If one player didn’t play “D” then that’s usually the player’s fault. If the whole team is like Swiss cheese, then all eyes look toward the coach.
- Lorenzo Romar continues to believe that what is more important than a chapel or Bible study is the example he sets for his players. “I try to live it because it doesn’t matter what you say if you don’t live it.” Sports and God have always been somehow linked, but never more so than now.
- “We’re not a very good team yet,” Self told his players and then the media. “We were exposed. We don’t trust each other very much.”
- “You guys are playing like country club kids,” Brey said. “We need to play like we are poor and there is no money in the bank.”
- On road trips, Brey has very few team rules, no curfews, and no problems. He treats his players like men and in return, they act like men. Maybe it is the type of young man who goes to Notre Dame or maybe it’s the buildup of trust between coaches and players.
- There are some coaches who live for the spotlight, and a few that shine that light on their players. Taking advantage of every moment to espouse encouragement or rehash information before games, some coaches talk incessantly. From the moment a team dresses for a game until the moment they leave the locker room for the floor, attention is commanded, and given, to the man in charge. Brey is not one of those guys. “The longer I coach, the less I coach. I am afraid of overcoaching. I used to say there are guys in our business who coach every dribble. Like before the game, I like to stay away so they can talk amongst themselves until I come in and set the tone. Look, a kid can only remember so much. I try to hit them with the highlights, as I like to say. One or two key things about the opponents and about our game plan. I don’t want to inundate them with information before a game.” Having honed his coaching philosophy from his years with Wootten and Krzyzewski, Brey developed his “hands-off” approach by his third year at Delaware. He came to realize that his teams responded better when they were given space, and the coach stepped out of the spotlight before games. Brey’s approach is atypical in today’s college game, but his successes at Delaware and Notre Dame have validated the approach.
- He wants his players to talk with one another, encourage each other and motivate each other.
- The wife is the rock of the family. For most coaches, their wives are their best friends. After a tough loss, they confide in their partners, not fellow coaches, often lying in bed just talking about the game. After a miraculous win, it is their wives they want to hug, not their athletic directors.
- Alabama coach Mark Gottfried said, “No success in your professional life, no matter what you do, can overcome failure at home.”
- John Wooden said, “I think I would love to coach today, but I think some of my methods and ideas wouldn’t work today. The game has changed and so has society. I was pretty old-fashioned. You have to give in to the youngsters more today. They are more individual and demanding. I guess I could make changes to my methods. I would always enjoy teaching, today, tomorrow, yesterday. But no one has offered me a job. Most things in life improve with time. There is no progress without change, I like to say. Maybe team play has improved, but not nearly in relation to individual play. The athleticism is outstanding so most coaches let them go on their own. That can certainly hurt team play. I believe there is too much catering to the players today by coaches. I think you can be firm without being stubborn. How many coaches insist that when we leave the dressing room that there should be no orange peels left? I didn’t want any towels anywhere or gum wrappers. How many coaches insist on that today? I think it all has to do with giving in. If you give your children at home a piece of candy, and then another piece, and another piece and ask them to be quiet, they’ll continue to ask for more. We give in.”

- Wooden continues, “Television is the worst thing that’s happened to intercollegiate basketball. It’s made actors out of players, coaches, officials, and to some degree, even fans. But there are always two sides, and we must remember that. It’s been the savior of nonrevenue-producing sports. We couldn’t be doing what we’re doing for women’s athletics if it wasn’t for the TV income in many cases.”
- Pete Newell insists, “Coaches get used to a certain lifestyle, but they can go from the penthouse to the outhouse overnight. There are so many pitfalls. The media is one of them. There is a certain element in the media who make a reputation by knocking or bad mouthing coaches and teams. So many fans are influenced by first impressions which are scripted by the media. Would I want to coach today? No. I would rather coach when I did and make less money. It was more enjoyable.”
- The aim of a recruiter in the information-gathering stage is to identify and make friends with the prospect’s closest confidantes. Along the way he has to weed out the hangers-on, the guys down at the playground who profess to know what’s going on, but really have no clue. The sooner a coach can determine the main characters in the player’s life, the faster he can get a foot in the inner circle.
- He must first gain the confidence of the recruit and his family, before doing what coaches do best – sell.
- Perhaps with so much talent and such high expectations, (Self’s) players were afraid to have fun, afraid to fail.
- Coaches have become ambassadors of their schools, as one of the most visible and recognized figures on the university campus, and in some cases, around the nation. With that recognition comes a responsibility to the school and community, to be the face of the university and to represent it to the world. Everyone wants a piece of the coach. Alumni want him to speak at gatherings; the development officers want him to have dinner with a potential donor; civic groups want the coach to “just do this one” engagement; professors request his presence in classes to talk about leadership. And these requests are on top of the media interviews, recruiting visits, and personal player issues that coaches deal with every day.
- Self is flexible enough that he is willing to adjust his practice plan when needed, and observant enough to know when that is necessary.
- What is a coach’s role in the academic progress of his players? How much accountability should be placed on the coaching staff for making sure players go to class? Should coaches be responsible for players graduating? Coaches and administrators have divergent views on these issues. Most coaches would like to see their players graduate, but believe that they are not empowered by the schools to make that happen. Many administrators believe that part of a coach’s job is to fulfill the university’s academic mission by placing a premium on academics. Perhaps they are both right.
- No matter how the NCAA calculates the graduation rate, it is clear that many college basketball players are at schools to play basketball, and little else.
- Is it a coach’s job to make sure a player graduates? “It’s not a coach’s job,” (Bob) Huggins emphasizes. “Why is it a coach’s job? You have academic counselors; we have five. What is their job? Why is it coaches are accountable for everything? I can’t bring a kid to my house to study. I’m not really allowed to sit down with a kid and tutor him. I can’t go see a professor to see how a student is doing. Academic support staff can do all of those things. The problem is we have all of the accountability, but none of the resources. We have associate ADs for academics and faculty representatives who sign off on everything. What is their charge? Not that I don’t bear some of the responsibility, but what about the faculty and the academic support staff?” His views on the role of the coach in academics may seem a bit brash, but they are not out of balance with his colleagues. Many coaches agree they are being unfairly held responsible for their players’ education, though most would not go as far as Huggins in articulating their frustrations. Perhaps this is because they have not encountered the avalanche of criticism that he has seen.
- Gene Keady said, “You know why a graduates? Because he wants to.”
- At the same time, those with athletic interests understand the magnitude of signing a particular player and keeping him eligible, particularly with so much on the line for the coach, and for the school. Coaches need to justify why they need a player and the school needs to justify letting him

- in. All the while, the bottom line is money. College presidents understand this, which is why they allow for below-standard student-athletes to play at their schools, and when criticized for that practice, they can claim they are doing something about it. Whether or not coaches should be held accountable may be up for debate. Most student-athletes will tell you that balancing a sport and a course load is beyond the scope of many of their peers.
- Get in and get out. The Mike Brey philosophy holds true to preparation as well. The scouting report takes no more than 10 minutes, with the team writing down the information in their notebooks. (Studies have shown that subjects are more likely to recall information if they have written it down as opposed to simply listening to it.)
 - (Bruiser) Flint never felt he was on the same page as the Massachusetts people. As an assistant to John Caliperi there, Flint had seen the highs and the lows and came to understand that UMass wanted basketball to provide for all of the other sports, which meant winning deep into the NCAAs. The problem: he was not given the resources to get it done. (A common complaint among fired coaches.) For all the talk about pursuits of victory, graduation rates, and the drama of the NCAA Tournament, coaching college basketball is, at its very core, still a business. The best and brightest are in the highest demand and can command the largest contracts. The market is highly competitive and the stakes are high. The process of hiring a coach at the Division I level has become an exercise in preparation, relationships, and time constraints.
 - **Preparation.** The motto of the Boys Scouts is “Be Prepared,” and the majority of athletic directors and presidents must have been Eagle Scouts. Though some will not admit it on record, they are always prepared to hire a new coach. In today’s environment, when coaches are hired and fired at an alarming rate, switch schools for more lucrative deals, or hop to the NBA, athletic directors never know when they might lose their coach. Instead of starting from scratch, they are prepared, if and when, they need to conduct a search.
 - **Relationships.** If there are “six degrees of separation” in the world, then in the athletic realm, there are only three degrees. It is very hard to find a current head coach, or assistant coach for that matter, who has not worked with, or does not know, an athletic director or prominent coach. It is a small world indeed, which makes putting together a candidate list easier than you might think.
 - **Timing.** Many coaching changes occur during or after the NCAA Tournament, which coincides with an allowable recruiting and evaluation period for coaches starting the day after the Final Four. Not having a head coach in place during this time means critical days lost building a recruiting class.
 - ESPN basketball analyst Jay Bilas, a former player and coach at Duke said, “You don’t always have knowledgeable basketball people making decisions about hiring. A lot of programs don’t really understand it internalizes who they are. There are a lot of terrific coaches out there that are not going to make you a stunning press conference and get you patted on the back for two weeks after you make the hiring, but are going to do a hell of a job with your program. I think too many people hire based upon the short-term jolt they’re going to get out of hiring a sexy coach, a hot name, or someone who’s going to make them a really good press conference for a good *SportsCenter* bite.”
 - During that time, (Billy) Hahn realized what so many other fired coaches learn, and only they can learn. “You find out how valuable your job is and how you should cherish it, instead of taking it for granted and trying to see where you are going to be next.”
 - Coaches get paid well to do a job they love, but the job is not an easy one. It comes with a personal and professional price. After each heartbreaking loss, coaches cannot shake it off just because they make a decent living.
 - Older coaches may be jealous, envious of the rapid ascent to the top of the profession by some of the younger coaches, but not jealous of their salaries. To them, it’s about paying dues. “I don’t think they can appreciate what they have,” believes (Gene) Keady, “because they haven’t worked their way up the ranks. The step process to a coaching job is not to be a grad assistant, be an assistant coach, coach junior college, and at 45 get your head coaching job. Now you can get your head job in your twenties. There is no way they can appreciate it, but I don’t know if they need to appreciate it – they need to win.” Keady concedes that younger coaches “know what they are doing” and doesn’t characterize them as unprepared. He does, however, believe that the younger coaches do not give back to the game enough, a sentiment echoed by many older coaches.

- Steve Alford wants, in fact expects, his players to want it as bad as he does and to be capable of doing what he did. It is reflective of Alford's competitiveness, of his desire for perfection. He does trust his players' fundamentals, but doesn't seem to trust their ability to understand and desire. The amount of information that Alford provides his players is overwhelming and he expects them to remember it all – because he can.
- Sometimes though, losing brings out a more critical eye from coaches, as they look for someone to blame, someone to take out their frustrations on, someone like a ref.
- A good official has a feel for the game, is not bigger than the game, and understands that he makes mistakes.
- Knight told Alford to stick to his principles, that they were more important than any wins and losses.
- When is a crisis really not a crisis? What may seem like a crisis to fans may really be nothing more than a bad loss or two to a coach. Or what may seem like an innocent loss may be masking a real crisis in the locker room. Regardless of how one defines a crisis, or to which situation coaches may apply it, it is clear that coaches manage minicrises every day and some must face the larger abyss every season.
- The morning after the Stanford loss, John Wooden sat down and penned this letter to Lavin:
1/25/02
Dear Steve,
I was severely criticized when I permitted Notre Dame to score the last twelve points and break our eighty-eight game winning streak, permitting North Carolina State to overcome our eleven point lead in the second half and seven point lead in the first overtime in the Final Four in 1974 and told if a humming bird had my brails in his tail end, it would still fly backwards.
Others could not understand why it took me fifteen years to have a national championship team and why I did or did not do many things that all knowledgeable basketball fans knew.
Best of luck against California tomorrow and for the rest of the season. Those who know you, love and are with you and as Pearl Mesta said, "Those that mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind."
Keep it up.
Sincerely,
John
- In most cases, coaches will tell you that the media can do much more harm than good for them and their teams. Especially since the goal of the media is to sell and make money. And in 2002, what sells is scandal, negativity, crises.
- The Internet has not changed the way coaches coach, but it certainly has made them more conscious of who is watching.
- With the advent of ESPN in 1979 and the explosion of televised games in the 1980s and 1990s, coaches have become stars. "The positive is that many are making millions and the negative is that there is such intense scrutiny and critique on these coaches – unbelievable pressure," says Vitale. But no one forces coaches into the profession and though coaches at times complain about the pressures and the unfair criticism, they cherish the lifestyle their work has afforded them. Is it worth it? Legendary coach Pete Newell, who earned \$12,000 a year coaching at Cal in the late 1950s, believes the issues and problems coaches face today are not worth the price. "There are so many pitfalls in coaching today, from kids leaving to the NBA to a focus not on education but performance. The exposure on coaches has made them known, but also encouraged second-guessing."
- "I think the kids now are very different from when I first started," says the 68-year old Lute Olson. "I think there are a lot of reasons for that, but I think the single biggest one is the lack of family environment that was there when I first started. It seemed like everyone had a mom and a dad and they had a schedule and everyone got together for dinner. Now it seems there are an awful lot of kids who have one-parent homes."
- As Self says, borrowing a phrase from Roy Williams: They are players when they are here and family when they leave."
- It is really hard to imagine what life was like for coaches before the emergence of the VCR and videotape. Coaches rely on film more than they rely on themselves. A tape of a game doesn't lie.

- Lute Olson has been involved in basketball at various levels since the 1960s. He has seen the advent of the shot clock, the three-pointer, and cornrows on top of players' heads. He has witnessed the explosion of media coverage, changes in recruiting rules, and an evolution of men patrolling the sidelines. But if you ask Olson what one thing changed the way he coaches, what revolutionized the game and created a new form of basketball, his answer is surprising: the VCR. Its impact is immeasurable, to the delight of coaches, but perhaps to the ire of a coach's family.
- With the increased pressure on coaches to win, and to win now, it means the door is open for coaches to use any means necessary to get there. Coaches, particularly young ones, will often break rules to get the players who will get them to the Tournament, who will get them exposure, which will lead to a better, high profile and higher paying job. It's all about the Tournament.
- Though Frank Williams had only seven points, there were no postgame criticisms, accusations, or questions surrounding his effort. It's funny how winning seems to solve problems, or at least put them under the rug.
- What sets Alford apart from other coaches, however, is that he stayed up until 2:00 A.M. five months before watching tape of a *preseason* game – twice. He is a competitor who wants to win, who learned from an early age that hard work is the answer, and the only answer, for success. But the same characteristics that made Alford a great player may make coaching a challenge for him. His insistence and demands on himself are often projected onto his players with consequences. He wants them to want it as bad as he does. He wants them to come in at midnight to shoot 1,000 free throws before going to bed. He wants them to have the internal drive to get up for every game. But in reality, most players do not have what Alford has. So he feels let down, and his players feel that they have let him down, creating a combustible climate for the Hawkeyes. When the team struggled in the 2001-2002 season, digging out of the hole was hard.
- The UCLA players and coaches listened intently and the room was dead silent. The man before them had won at the college and pro level and had won five Super bowls, something no other coach had done. What he had to say had meaning. "What you are playing with is the skills you learned at an early age. You don't have to play better and don't think you need to do that extra thing. If a NASCAR driver decides he needs to go faster to win, he ends up in the hospital. If Tiger Woods decides he needs just a little more length on his drives, he loses his rhythm. You just have to focus on these two games. And who do you play for? The coaches? No, I don't think so. Your school? Maybe, but probably not. You play for each other, your teammates, that's what makes this so special. You will never forget these experiences.
- Self kept his remarks to his players short. "Win or lose, I could not have been prouder of you guys. You know in life, there are winners and losers. Winners are rewarded and losers are not seen in the same light. But I could not have asked for anything more."
- "It was a unique year that required a lot of energy on all of our parts. This was not the most difficult year I have had as a coach, but it certainly was the least enjoyable. But you know, that is what coaching is. Dealing with those distractions and still being able to get your team to play hard." The hurt and pain from the Sweet Sixteen loss for Self was doubly hard, considering how close to the Final Four he had been the past three seasons. Sometimes it is harder to get close to the goal and fail to reach it, then it is to fail miserably. "To come so close the last few years, knowing that we had a shot this year makes it very difficult."
- Illinois' season did not play out the way he had envisioned it back in October, but then again, most seasons don't. Coaches must routinely adjust, finagle, and manage their teams to get the most out of them as the season progresses, and certainly in March. What fans and alumni may see as seasons of failure, may actually be seasons of success.
- The problem, as it is in so many professions, is money. When we pay coaches large sums of money, we should demand that they go beyond drawing up plays. Unfortunately, too many fans and administrators see the large contracts as a promise to win – and win fast. They neglect to see the sacrifices that coaches make on a daily basis; they don't see the bonds forged between coach and player that last a lifetime; they don't see the midnight staff meetings or the hours a coach sits at home breaking down film; they don't see how much coaches truly care about their players and their futures. All they see is the record and the Tournament brackets.