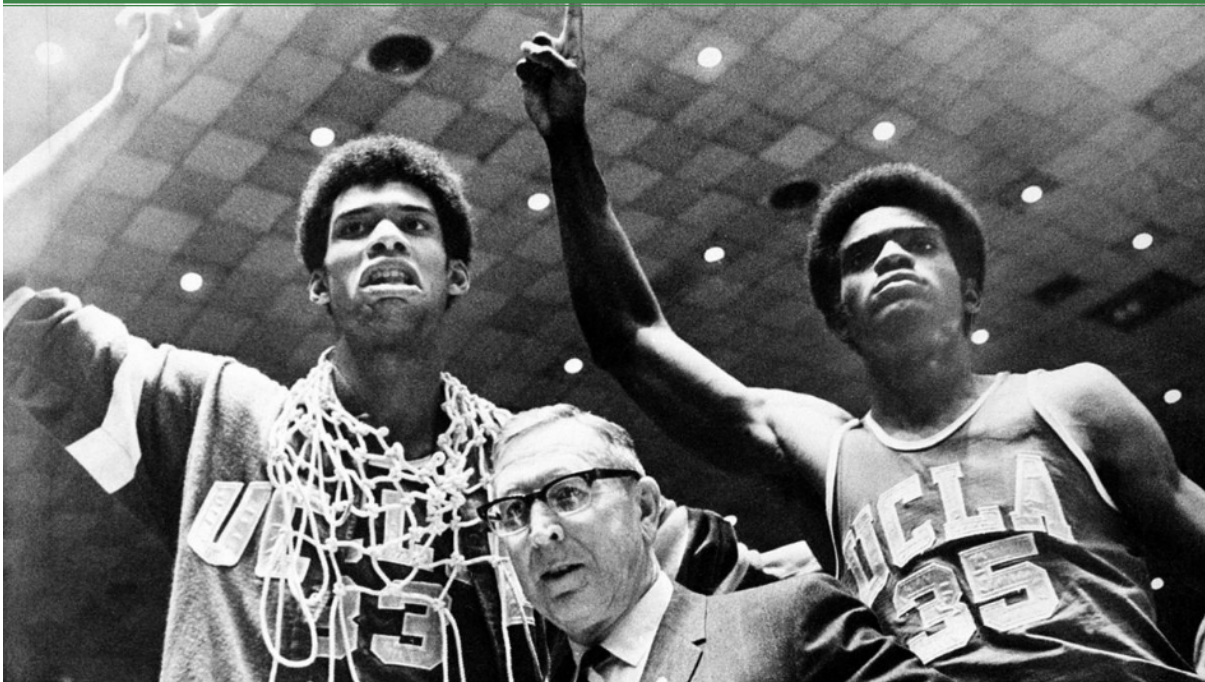


BASKETBALL

Be quick, but don't hurry – sporting philosophy that conquered basketball

David Bodanis deconstructs how the great coach John Wooden mastered an approach that brought his team unparalleled success



Wooden marks a third NCAA title in succession in 1969 with Abdul-Jabbar, left, and Sidney Wicks

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It was distressing to play college basketball in the US in the 1960s and early 1970s, if you were anywhere else but at UCLA, because you knew, almost certainly, that if you showed any signs of success you would ultimately meet John Wooden's team.

And you would lose.

One time a powerful, undefeated Houston squad made the mistake of beating them by two points — when UCLA had one top player injured (and another half-sulking on the bench). The next time they played, Wooden let rip and UCLA wiped them out by more than 30 points. “I feel like a dead

man,” the Houston coach said. “That’s the greatest exhibition of basketball I’ve ever seen.”

His players dominated their conference, winning with season records such as 30-0, 28-2, 30-0, 29-1, 30-0 and 30-0. Then, when they played winners from other divisions for the national championship, they were equally masterful: in Wooden’s final 12 seasons before retirement they gained the national championship ten times. At one point they had a winning streak of 88 games in a row. No other team has ever come close.

Occasionally Wooden had standout players, especially the three years in which the great Kareem Abdul-Jabbar — the Michael Jordan or LeBron James of his era — was in the squad. But most of the time his individual players were no better than elsewhere, and indeed often smaller. Scouts from other teams on reconnaissance missions reported no especially long practice sessions or strategy meetings; no secret playbook — or at least none that anyone could find; no secret signals sent from courtside during the game either.

All they saw was a benevolent Midwesterner — like TV’s Ted Lasso but without the wildness and frenzy: married to the same woman for decades; never storming up and down the sidelines during a game; never yelling at his players or critical of them in public. If he came across a coin on the pavement, he would — with a slightly embarrassed look, but unable to resist — nip down to drop it into his left shoe for good luck. (In an emergency, chance-found hairpins worked as well, though he had to stick those into a piece of wood to guarantee their luck.)

What everyone missed was the power of the motto that Wooden constantly repeated to his players: BQBDH — “Be quick, but don’t hurry”. “That’s important in most everything,” he would say. “You make mistakes when you hurry.” This didn’t mean you could go to the other extreme and be slow. “If you’re not quick you might not get [anything] done.”

Quickness comes when you decide what to do. Hurrying comes when others force you to respond to what they want to do.

The principle applies more widely than in basketball. When Floyd Mayweather avoided a punch he was very, very quick. But he never looked rushed. It was his opponents who ended up hurrying, anxious, defeated.

In the British Army, similarly, close-combat troops are taught not to hurriedly lunge for their weapon when drawing it from a holster. That way, unwanted firing or a stuck weapon lies. Rather, they master what’s termed a “careful rush” — making a conscious effort to slow down ever so slightly.

It feels impossibly sluggish at first but, with practice, becomes just as swift as their arm can move. Yet having habituated to thinking it through, they're in control and smooth.

The approach is commonplace in business too. An investment fund that's always slow in responding to fresh opportunities is going to suffer. Opportunity knocks, but it doesn't nag. Yet a fund that always, frantically, jumps on the latest new thing is unlikely to do well for long either.

But if being quick yet not hurrying is so simple, why doesn't everyone do it? The answer is that it's hard to get right: to advance all the way to the border of quickness, where you're hurtling along very fast . . . yet not slip across into counterproductive, anxious hurrying.

Wooden couldn't master it at first. His final 12 years at UCLA were magnificent, but he'd been there for more than a decade before, achieving little. It didn't help that players at this level had all been stars in their secondary schools, where they "knew" that what got them out of trouble was simply to go faster than everyone else. What he had to do was get them used to going slowly, almost over-deliberately. Only then, gradually, could he speed them up. When he saw someone make a skilled move he'd say: "Good, now do it faster." But — the crucial "but" — they also had to learn to recognise when they were skidding at the upper edge of what they could control, and never go faster than that.

Since quickness comes from within, not from without, the players had to trust their inner choices. That's why he stayed quietly on the side during even the most tense games. Inwardly he might be frantic (and his wife would sometimes make sure that a hairpin was left on a path he would have been likely to follow that day, so he could "discover" it for the necessary good luck). But if he started telling the players what to do, he would be shifting their mindset from what they needed: getting them used to responding to him, rather than trusting themselves.

That's also why, although he would be open-minded about who was going to be in the squad during pre-season try-outs, the moment the season started he had it down to seven or eight, and they were the only ones who were going to play. This was intensely irritating for the players, who were stuck on the bench for months on end — some still complained about it decades later — but when it came to winning, benevolent Wooden had a hard edge. They would have a chance in the next pre-season.

Until then, the starting team would know that he trusted them. They didn't have to worry they were going to be cut or benched if they were in a slump.

Almost no one from other colleges believed it could be this simple, and they kept on copying the wrong lessons. Wooden frequently used the full-court press, where instead of having his team wait on their own half of the court for defence, they pressed forward on to the opponent's side. That's a common way to try to force a turnover, and when other coaches copied the full-court press that's what they encouraged their players to aim for.

But forced turnovers are actually fairly rare, and Wooden had no particular interest in that. Rather, he was getting his team to pressure their opponents so they would skid across the deadly dividing line between quick (where they were in control) and hurrying (where they were not). That's when an opponent would lose their game plan, and begin a multitude of strategic mistakes.

And where John Wooden's quick, never-hurrying UCLA would kindly take control of the game, once again.

*David Bodanis is the author of *The Art of Fairness: The Power of Decency in a World Turned Mean**