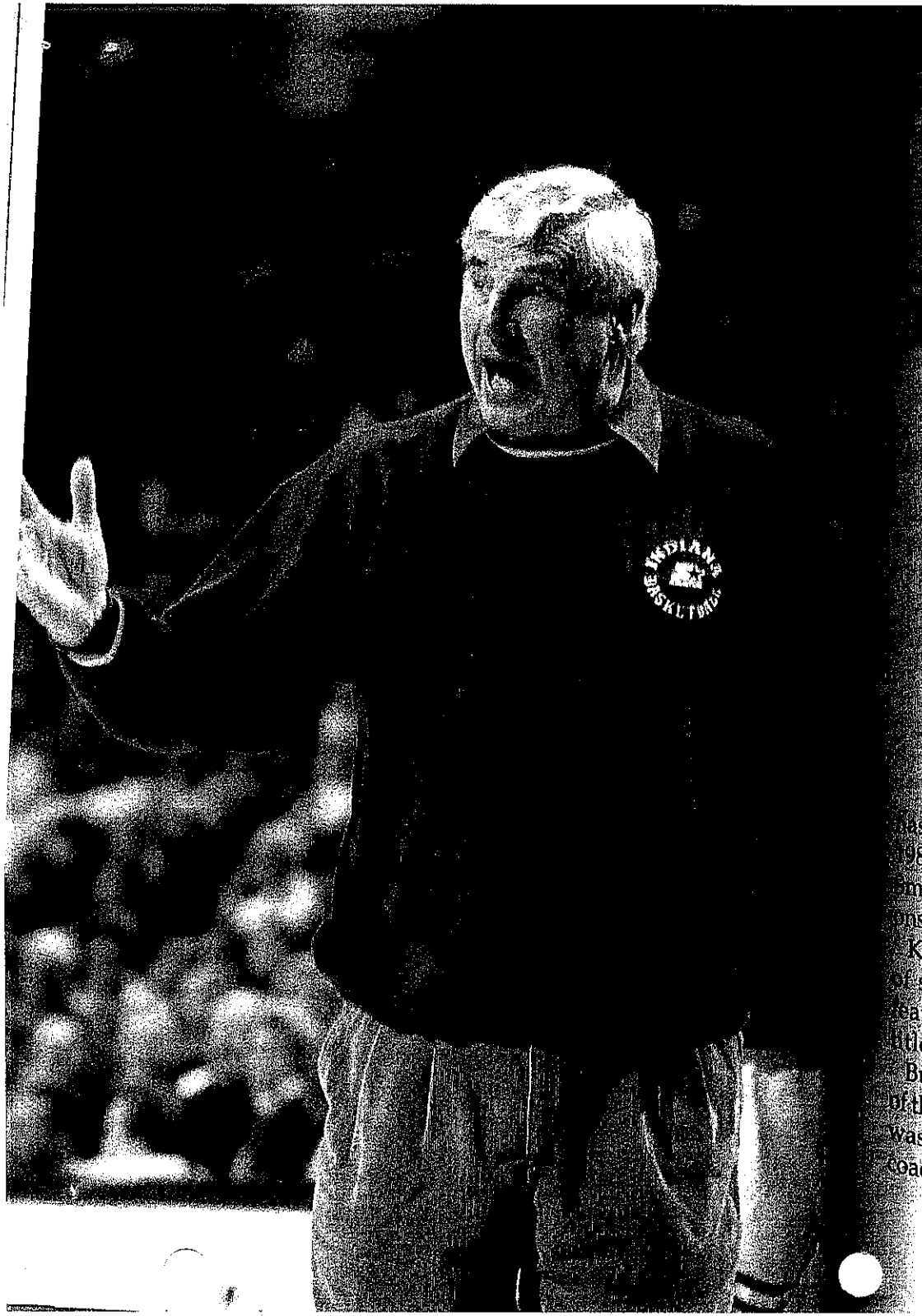

Bobby Knight

Indiana University coach Bobby Knight has coached his Hoosiers to three NCAA championships. His 1987 title team, led by Steve Alford, Dean Garrett, and Keith Smart, defeated Syracuse in one of the most thrilling championship battles in Final Four history.

Knight's 1981 championship team showcased the talents of sophomore point guard Isiah Thomas and handily defeated the University of North Carolina for the national title.

But Knight's pride and joy remains his 1976 team. It was one of those rare occasions when everything fit perfectly. The coach was perfect for the players, and the players perfect for the coach. And on their way to a perfect 32–0 record, the 1975–76

Indiana Hoosiers set the standard for modern team play. They were perhaps the most balanced, efficient squad of all time.

There is the vivid image of coach Knight, then just 35 years old but wise beyond his years. And driven. And then there is the not-so-vivid image of his players, a collection of determined athletes with lots of substance and very little flash. They played physically. The defense always seemed excellent, the offense structured and precise. They scored inside and out, depending on what opposing defenses gave them. And when something wasn't given, they took it.

Knight knew he had a great team. He was confident that just about anything a basketball team had to do, his could do. The final factor was his unwavering will. "Coach wasn't going to leave it up to us to be as great a team as we could be," recalled Quinn Bucker. "He was going to push, be it psychological, physical, whatever it took, to be the best team we could be."

This hard-driving approach was already established as a Knight trademark. As a player, he had been a reserve on Ohio State's 1960 national championship team. His real talent appeared when he took his first college head coaching job at Army in 1965. He was perceived as something of a martinet in pushing the Cadets to a 102–50 record over the next six seasons. His Army teams were hampered by the Academy's 6'6" height restrictions, but Knight instilled a fierce man-to-man defense. His Cadets three times led the nation in scoring defense, the kind of tenacity that would make him an icon in Indiana basketball.

"The will to win is grossly overrated," Knight often said. "The will to prepare is far more important."

Prepare was Knight's mindset for the 1975–76 campaign. He drilled it into his players' minds that they had to work doubly hard to realize their vast potential. There were extra windsprints after practice each day that served as a reminder. Beyond that, he wanted his players to focus not on playing against opponents, but against themselves.

They humbled the Soviet national team to open the 1975–76 schedule and then faced second-ranked UCLA. John Wooden's last UCLA team had won the '75 championship, and the defending champions were now coached by Gene Bartow. The Hoosiers whipped them by 20 points, then polished off Florida. In the next game, they blew a 14-point lead against Notre Dame and Adrian Dantley before winning, 63–60. A week later, Benson rebounded a miss by Abernethy and scored with seconds left to send a game against Kentucky into overtime, where Indiana prevailed again, 77–68. From there they moved to the Big Ten schedule. Ohio State fell by two, and Michigan State forced an overtime. But the Hoosiers had an arrogance that seemed to rattle other teams. Even the bench players carried it. In one game, reserve Wayne Radford made six of seven from the field on his way to 16 points and five rebounds. Against Minnesota, guard Jim Wisman had 12 points and seven assists. They all carried a confidence that emanated from Knight.

Continuing their string, the Hoosiers entered the Mideast Regional as the nation's raging power. May scored 33 and center Kent Benson 20 as they blew by St. John's, 90–70. They struggled a bit with Alabama, but May's 25 points and 16 rebounds helped them over the hump. In the regional finals, second-ranked Marquette was the challenge. The Warriors led by one at intermission, but Knight's players turned on the afterburners in the second half to win, 65–56.

To help celebrate the United States' 200th birthday, NCAA officials held the 1976 national championship in Philadelphia's Spectrum.

Indiana's opponent in the final was Big Ten rival Michigan, featuring Rickey Green, Steve Grote, Phil Hubbard and John Robinson. The Wolverines had reached Philadelphia via the Midwest Region and were eager for another shot at beating Indiana.

Michigan took a 10-point lead in the first half, and held a 35–29 margin at halftime. Benson thought Knight might come into

the locker room screaming. Instead, the coach quietly told his players that they had 20 minutes to prove they deserved to be national champions.

Indiana answered with a burst of power in the second half. Scott May and Benson scored 25 each, and the Hoosiers rolled to win number 32, 86–68. Benson was named the tournament's Most Outstanding Player and was joined on the all-tournament team by May and Abernethy.

Knight, of course, went on to coach Indiana teams to his other NCAA championships and led the United States to the 1984 Olympic gold medal, a bittersweet accomplishment in that the powerful Soviet Union team missed the games because of a political boycott.

In 1986, John Feinstein published a very fine, phenomenally successful book on Knight and his program, *A Season on the Brink*. It captured a somewhat manic Knight in full midlife crisis, caught at his worst, during great upheavals in his professional and personal lives.

Like other great coaches, such as John Wooden and Henry Iba, Knight has been a consummate student of the game who developed into an exceptional teacher. The difference between Knight and the others is that he has a private persona that created success and a public one that often took away from it.

Knight often came across as an egocentric genius who threw chairs and bullied the basketball world. But that image wasn't wholly accurate.

Certainly he had a unique intensity. Knight is demanding, of himself, his players, and the officials. As trite as it sounds, what Knight demanded was not winning but the absolutely best effort possible. When he got that, he could be quite peaceful after an Indiana loss. Conversely, there were wins that left him disgusted.

After the '76 championship, there wasn't much need for reevaluation. "One of the major emotional feelings in '76 was relief at winning the championship," Knight said. "I was just

so pleased that that team won because it was one of the truly great college basketball teams. You know your team will always identify with that accomplishment. That stays with you, and you like to see kids have a part of it. I tell our players that some day they will be watching the tournament with their kids or grandchildren and they'll say, "Hey, I played in that." And it's a helluva lot better to say you won it."

Billy Packer: Bob, is there such a thing as the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat?

Bobby Knight: You can look back upon a season with satisfaction, that's where winning is pleasurable. "Thrill" would not be a word that I would pick. It would be that you can be satisfied, that you can take pleasure in what happened. I really have never felt that way when we've won individual games. We've tried to put the game in a position where we can win, and that's it with the winning part of it. Agony of defeat, I think there are some games that are really excruciatingly painful to lose, based on how you've played, the opportunities that you've had that you didn't take advantage of, and how you got beat. And I think there are other games, when you've lost, that you just go on to the next game.

Q: Bob, is there ever an agonizing feeling when you look up at the scoreboard even though you've won the game?

RA: Yes, I think it's a feeling of disappointment that you haven't played better. The greatest sense of satisfaction during the course of a game is to see a possession played well by your team, whether it's on offense or defense. If it's defensively, you've pressured the ball; you've helped; you've blocked out; you've gotten the ball back. Offensively, it's that you've executed things well; you've made good passes; you've

cut well; you've screened well, and then I think if that continues throughout the course of a game, in all probability, you're going to win. And so, then you feel good about what you've done. But there have been games along the way that we've won that had I been a fan, I would have far and away rather have seen the other team win.

Q: You've had so many championship clubs in your career. What do you think is the key ingredient when you look back on a championship team?

RA: In basketball it's really simple. I think it's an understanding of how you win. The majority of players never understand about how to win, and I think there are a lot of coaches that don't understand how to win. And when players understand what has to be done to win, then you've got a chance to be pretty good. And the very first thing that has to be done to win, in any team sport, is play well defensively. I mean, there's never been a team that has won championships, in whatever the sport, that has not been very good defensively.

Q: The answer wasn't obvious, "well, talent is the thing." Did you ever feel that you had a team that won championships that was not the most talented club?

RA: Yes, but talent was always circumvented by understanding how to play, and by doing the things that won. You know, talent alone doesn't win anything. And talent that's not well-used doesn't win. And talent that is wasted doesn't win. The game really is exactly what it looks like. It's a team game, and I go back to the point about understanding how to win. And that, to me, is more important than anything that a kid can bring to the game.

Q: How do you start to develop the championship attitude? Whenever you see teams win championships, there's something about them, there's just an attitude. They know how to win. How do you start to develop that, or can it be developed?

RA: I think that winning really has to be important to the players. I've talked to kids after games when we've played, that I know immediately that they may have played well, but winning really isn't important because the game is over and they've kind of forgotten about it. It's been a game where we might have happened to have won. With the best teams that I've had, there have been kids who have had a determination to win that was contagious. And now everybody wanted to win. They just wouldn't let other guys feel that, "We're just going to play; we're going to play and do our best." Well, that's not going to be good enough for those kids who really want to win. "We're going to play and we're going to win," is their attitude. Not all kids are going to react that way. And if you don't have two or three players that really do want to win, then I think you're not going to be a championship team. But two or three who do want it can really develop that same attitude among the rest.

Q: Is motivation a factor on behalf of the leader, the coach? Or does motivation have to come from within?

RA: I think that you're constantly trying to do things. I remember hearing Lefty Driesell once at a clinic years ago, when I was still an assistant coach at West Point. Lefty said, "I may not always be right, but the one thing I'm going to do is show my players that I'm always working and that I'm always trying to figure out how we can win. And that they can look at me and say, well, he is really committed to winning."

I don't think Lefty is Socrates, but that was a pretty good point. And I think that you work and you come prepared every day, and you come wanting people to play well,

and you come not accepting anything other than the best effort, and not accepting poor play. I think that eventually carries over to how players feel about how they're going to play individually in a game.

I think peer pressure is important. Calbert Cheaney was always the first kid at practice and the last kid to leave. Having a leader like that means that you can say to other players, "How the hell can you do what you're doing when Calbert does what he's doing, and he's better than you to begin with?"

Trying to get kids to play well is, I think, a very, very difficult thing to do.

Q: Is it important for a coach to be liked by those guys that he is coaching?

BK: When I first became the head coach, within the first week of being the head coach when I was down at West Point, I went down to see Joe Lapchick. And I still remember his address. It was 3 Wendover Road in Yonkers. I said, "Coach, I came down to talk to you about coaching and some things." So, the first thing he asked me was, "Is it important to you that you're liked?" He didn't say by the players, just liked in general. And I thought for a second, and I said, "Well, no, it really isn't. I think it's important that I'm honest, and that people know that I'm honest. And consequently, they respect me for being honest. As a coach, I would like to be respected for what I know and how I teach, but I don't think it would really be important to me that I be liked."

And so from that first meeting that I had with him, that's been my approach all the way through.

Q: Did he have a response to that?

BK: He said that when you make decisions on what's going to please the most people, you are not going to be a good

coach. And when you worry about how people are going to feel about what you do, you're not going to be a good coach. You, the coach, have got more facts than anybody. You're the guy that watches kids practice every day.

A great example of this is a circumstance that seems to happen everywhere. I've got two kids, Smith and Jones, and I bench Jones and start Smith. Almost without exception, is the story going to be benching Jones or starting Smith?

Q: Benching Jones.

BK: Without exception. And that just boggles my mind. And when I quit coaching, it'll still boggle my mind because if I moved you into the starting lineup, my feeling is that that is great for you and what a great chance that is for you. But you're not the story. It's the guy who got benched, and that's such a shame, I think, today with kids.

Q: Is it important, while they're playing for you, to have a personal relationship with the players?

BK: What's a personal relationship?

Q: I'm going to say a buddy-buddy, an understanding of everything they're doing in their personal lives.

BK: I think what a kid has to feel with me is that he can come to me with any problem that he has and I'll do whatever I can—whatever I'm allowed to do—to help him. And if I can't help him, I'll find somebody who can, and do whatever they're allowed to do to help him. I think a kid has to feel that he can trust me, and I think a kid has to feel that I have his best interests at heart.

And I don't think that that has to be, as you phrase it, a "buddy-buddy relationship." I think a buddy-buddy relationship is that which you have with the guy you go fishing with, or go hunting with.

Q: The word "potential"—is it a blessing or a curse for a ballplayer or a ball team?

BK: Well, it depends on who's using the word. I mean, how many teams have you seen that are just bad? I mean, you've seen them play, and you just say, "Gosh, that team is not that good. They're not as good as people say they are." Or people can say that about a player with a big reputation. Sometimes you'll see a guy who just isn't as good as he's built up to be. You know, at Indiana we've had certain players for four years of potential, and it hasn't taken us anywhere. And I think that in the initial stages of a player's development, that potential is important. His potential to be a player is a factor in how you're going to work with him to get him to realize that potential. But then, as things go, potential has to be changed into reality. And I think that if as a player works toward development, if we're continually talking about potential, then we're talking about a kid that, for whatever the reason, is not going to become as good as we once thought he would be. So when we first decided how good we thought this kid was going to be, there was something wrong in our analysis. And it might have been something that we knew absolutely nothing about.

Q: Does the scrutiny of the coach today by the press and the fans make it more difficult to do the job than in the past?

BK: I think that depends. I think it goes back to what coach Lapchick had to say. What is it that is important to you? What do you want? Do you want to be everybody's friend? Did you ever read the book *The Best and the Brightest* by David Halberstam? If you'll recall, it was a book about the 60's, but mostly it was a book about the Kennedy administration. A major thread that he wove through the book was planning for the reelection. And so many decisions about our policies in the Vietnam War were

discussed and based on what's going to fly best so far as the reelection is concerned. The decisions the Kennedy administration made were often horrible decisions. On a much smaller scale, it's like that in coaching. If you're always running for reelection, then you're going to make a lot of bad decisions.

Q: Your greatest satisfaction as a coach, looking back?

BK: I think it's what the players who have played for us have gone on to do. Here, right now, we have two kids that were four-year players who don't have a degree. And one of them will get it. We have nobody that isn't in a really good situation today. All these kids that have played for us for four years, they've all gone on and done really well.

Q: How about disappointments? If you had to look back at the biggest disappointment?

BK: Obviously, there are games you could pick out, but I don't think you pick out a single game as the biggest disappointment. I think, probably, the biggest disappointment for us here was in 1975 when (Scott) May broke his arm. And I say that because I think it deprived us of a chance to win a national title.

You tell me if you'd agree with this: Indiana, Kentucky, and North Carolina are the three schools with the greatest level of fan support for basketball. Now maybe Kansas is really close, but Duke doesn't have enough support. Would you agree with that?

Q: Duke's alumni base is different, more spread out geographically, not as intense. The other three schools reside at the heart of great regional basketball cultures.

BK: Exactly. And Duke has kind of a little holier-than-thou sort of thing. Maybe a little bit like Michigan's. At Indi-

ana, we've got farmers and people who haven't even been on a college campus, for Pete's sake. So does Kentucky, and so does North Carolina. The atmosphere is just rabid. College basketball is one of the things people care about most.

Which means the disappointments can loom pretty large. That's how it felt in 1975 when May's injury deprived this whole atmosphere surrounding Indiana of a national championship that would have been a real hallmark championship by a great team.

Q: How about the feeling of facing failure? Does that ever come up to you?

BK: I think it's more important that you know how to win, and you understand what it takes to win. And if I expound on that a little bit, one of the first things I would say is this: to win and to understand how to win, you've got to know how to prevent losing. And what's going to cause us to lose are these things: poor ball-handling, bad block-out, shot selection, quickness of execution, or effectiveness of execution. So, we take those things that are going to cause us to lose and we try and eliminate those things. There's a difference in preventing losing and playing not to lose. Do you follow me? And so I think I try to eliminate those reasons why you lose, and I don't care what the hell it is you're in. When I go talk somewhere, I always talk about losing. I think there should be more books written about losing than winning because if you eliminate the reasons why you lose, then you've only got one thing left to do. And that's win.

Q: How do you create respect for yourself as a coach, in the eyes of your players?

BK: I think that if you're an honest person who works hard and deals fairly with players, then the coach will gain the

respect of those players. A kids knows that he's going to get a chance when he earns it. And a kid knows also, that if another guy doesn't earn his way, then he's now going to get a chance.

That's the kind of thing that I think is important. And I've always thought that. I was a player that was always looking for a chance to play, almost game-by-game. I'm not sure that back then I could even figure it out. I'm not sure that I ever started as a college player four games in a row. I can think of three I started, but I'm not sure of the fourth. I may have done that once. And so I know how important it is to a kid to get a chance to play. And that's why I want the kid to have a chance to play when he earns it and deserves it. Like the other night when we played Kentucky, (Rich) Mandeville played good minutes for us. When we played Evansville, it was just a [bad] game for big guys because they spread the court and played a bunch of 6'5" guys, and Mandeville did not get to play the number of minutes that he had earned in the Kentucky game. He didn't play but six or eight minutes but made a couple of good plays. I told him, "I owe you time to play because you earned it, but this just wasn't the game to use big guys." And he was really good. And now, he was the first guy I looked to play the next night in a game with Green Bay, simply based on the fact that he didn't get to play as much as he should have earlier.

Q: Do you set goals before the season starts? And if you set goals, are they along the lines of how many games you think your team can win?

BK: Yes. I always do that. I try to make them realistic, and try to tell my players I'll be frank with them. If I think we can win the national championship, I tell them that. But then I think if our goal is to get into the NCAA Tournament, I say what we've got to do is play well enough to get there,

and then let's see what the hell we can do when we get there.

The last few years we have not played as well in the NCAA Tournament. I know the number of wins, but I'm not exactly sure of the number of losses. We, at one time, had won like 40 games in the NCAA and I think had lost like 16, which was pretty high. But now we've lost the last 3 games that we've played so we've lost maybe 19 now. And so, we have not played as well there in recent years. Once we've gotten there, I don't think we've played as well as we used to.

Q: Bob, is a coach born with leadership qualities or can they be developed?

BK: Boy, I don't know. I think the really good coaches that I have known always felt that they knew a little bit more about it than the guys around them. I think they feel that, "Damn it, this is the way we ought to do it!" And probably, a lot of pretty good coaches were the guys who picked the sides in a sandlot baseball game, or they were the guys who drew up the plays on the ground in the huddle of a touch football game. Or they were guys in a basketball game who were, at least at some point, the leading scorer or the guy who said the most about how the game was going to be played. They were the playground bosses when they were kids.

Q: There are two players on your squad. They're basically even in terms of which one is going to get to play. One has maybe superior intelligence; the other guy, superior physical skills. What guy gets to play?

BK: The smarter kid.

Q: (Laughing.) That's what I figured. Can you create a competitor or does he have to have it inside?

BK: Well, I'll tell you, Mike Krzyzewski was kind of a wussy when he came to West Point. He's the best example that I have. He'd been the leading scorer in the Chicago Catholic League in high school. And I'm not sure, I think his high school team won a lot of games, but as I recall, they pressed a lot and he drove a lot and had a lot of crazy shots going to the bucket and got fouled. The Catholic League was pretty good, and he was the leading scorer for two years in the Catholic League.

Now, he was not a very good shooter, and he wasn't real tough. He played on the freshman team at West Point back when freshmen weren't allowed to play on the varsity. And we worked out against the freshman team a lot when he played. When he started playing on the varsity, he had to make a big adjustment, from being a big scorer to being a smart, tough player who didn't score so much. He came to understand that if he played hard and smart, and played that way defensively and offensively, he didn't have to score a lot of points. I mean, I don't think he ever averaged over six or seven points a game. But he developed toughness and competitiveness and wound up being pretty much a three-year starter for us.

I don't think that it was any thing that I did. I just think that he was able to say. "Well, I really want to play and this is how I'm going to play." And then he really did a great job of that.

Sometimes you try to guide a kid toward toughening up, and he discovers he really doesn't want to play. Sometimes you can make a kid more competitive, but that's not always the case.

Q: What's the most important thing—pregame preparation or in-game adjustments?

BK: I think preparation. I think in-game adjustments are the most overrated thing in coaching. The team that's willing

to prepare to win is going to be the team that wins. Most everybody plays to win, but it's preparing to win that I think is the most important thing in successful play.

Q: Does a championship team play as it practices?

BK: You know, there's an old saying that, boy, he scores 30 when you win by 3, and 3 when you win by 30, meaning players do what they have to to get by. I think that's bullshit. I think if the guy scores 30 when you win by 3, he ought to get 50 when you win by 30. I think you've got to play at the level at which you can play just as much as is humanly possible to be really good.

Q: So those champions that you've had, they practiced as they played?

BK: I think some of the best basketball that I've ever seen our teams play, with our best teams, has been played in practice. I talked to Ralph Beard, the former Kentucky great, the other day. And he went with us to Hawaii, and he said without any reservation, the best basketball that Kentucky played with those great teams was in practice.

Q: Did you have to have a mentor or mentors as you're coming along as a coach? Are they important?

BK: They were to me. I don't know how other guys feel, but probably the most enjoyable part about my time in coaching was people I could talk to and call and visit with and ask questions. I talked to Red Auerbach this morning. I think it's important to have people that you know you can talk to. I've had about five of them. Clair Bee and Joe Lapchick were first. And Red Auerbach then became somebody I could talk to because he coached John Havlicek, my college teammate at Ohio State. I got to know Red when I was a JV coach in high school. And he was always really good to me. And then,

after that, early, the guy that I talked to far and away the most was Clair Bee. And then there's the relationship I've had with Pete Newell, whom I respect very much. It's has been the same thing with Fred Taylor, my coach at Ohio State. So I've had people I can really call and talk to and ask about things during the time that I've been in coaching that I've really enjoyed. And Henry Iba was the other one.

Q: What's the best advice ever given you by any of those fellows, or for that matter, anybody?

BK: Their gift to me was just talking about what was important in the game as far as coaching. Things like understanding how to play defensively. We'd talk about the best ways of playing defensively. And we'd talk about how your defense has to be part of your offense. If your defense is going to be part of your offense, then you've got to develop a game in getting the ball to the offensive end. So you've got three stages to develop. You're going to have a fast break, a secondary break, and you're going to have an offense. We'd talk basics, just the guts of how to play basketball, that's really the thing I've taken from these people. I've gotten so much from them, and I continue to learn from their ideas and creativity.

Q: In the establishment of discipline on a ball club, must there be rules?

BK: Well, from a coaching standpoint, I think there have to be rules. I think defense is all rules. I don't think you can play defense without rules being established to determine positioning, and to determine movement relative to where the ball goes.

I don't know whether I'd use the word "rules" for offensive play, but there have to be principles of offensive play, which is probably almost synonymous. I think that

on offense, the principles are spacing, shot selection, handling the ball. I think you have to have principles there. What is discipline? To a lot of people, discipline is a very negative word. In knowing that some people felt discipline was negative, I've always felt it was a positive word, and I defined it in that vein a long time ago in this way. I said discipline is doing what has to be done when it has to be done. You do it as well as you can do it, and you do it that way all the time. That's what a disciplined person does, and that's how a disciplined person plays. And I think a disciplined team, that means to me that that team plays the way it's got to play, and it plays that way all the time, not just once in a while. It plays well all the time. That's what I think a disciplined team is.

Q: To be successful, do you have to have a philosophy, and how do you develop one?

BK: Well, I'm not sure that we're all capable of developing a philosophy of life or a philosophy of leadership or coaching or anything else. I think that whatever our game is, I think we have to understand how the game can best be played. And to me, that goes one step further. How it can best be played by whatever the rules of the game are? What would be a classic example of an athlete who understood how to play a game?

Jack Nicklaus is a prime example. Every golfer will tell you that Nicklaus just managed the game better, longer than anybody ever did. Bill Russell, absolutely, is also a great choice. And I've always said that the most valuable player ever to play the game of basketball was Bill Russell. And now, I really believe he's been challenged by Jordan in that regard.

Q: Bob, as a follow-up in regard to the philosophy, looking back when you started out in high school, then at

West Point, and then looking at Bob Knight today, how much different is your approach to the game today than when you were a young coach?

BK: You know, Pete Carril made a great statement. He said the older he got, the less tolerant he was. And that made a lot of sense to me. And I've tried to really, really be careful of that because I sense and feel myself being that way sometimes. I don't think that the basic ingredients of what has to be done in the game that I coached have to be changed that much. I think the game has changed. I think the three-point shot has had an incredible effect on the game of basketball. I really think it's taken a lot out of the science of coaching.