

Wooden got start as a Greendevil

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The new coach, freshly graduated and just married to the girl he met at a carnival when he was 15, took an upstairs apartment in a house on Terrace Avenue in Dayton, Ky., where, at the local public high school, he would teach English in addition to his basketball duties. He had the bearing of a young gentleman.

It was the superintendent's idea to hire John Wooden. Olin Davis had attended Purdue University, and in 1932 became enamored of the Boilermakers' three-time all-America basketball player. Willard Bass, who had coached everything at Dayton, was asked to step aside over the winter so that the hotshot Indianan would have an opportunity to make something out of the Greendevils.



Lonnie Wheeler

It wasn't Wooden's only option. He was offered the chance to play professionally, but sought instead, for himself and Nellie, a more traditional Midwestern life. (While at Dayton, he moon-

lighted for a semi-pro, grocery-store team called the Indianapolis Kautskys, hanging around long enough to make 138 consecutive free throws.)

So challenging was the Dayton job that not even the future Wizard of Westwood — the UCLA legend

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who would guide the Bruins to 10 NCAA championships in 12 years; the namesake of the classic in which the University of Cincinnati will play Purdue today in Indianapolis — was able to make the small school an immediate winner. The Greendevils went 6-11 that first year. Of the 40 seasons in which the great coach dispensed his corn-fed genius, it would be the only one that turned out that way.

"That's my claim to fame," said Bill Smith, Dayton's 6-foot center. "I played on the only losing team he ever coached."

Smith also played on Wooden's first *winning* team; in fact, was captain of it. In 1933-34, the soft-spoken Hoosier's second season, the little Greendevils were district champions, the surprise of Northern Kentucky.

"By especially the second year, by the time he got the system in, we knew we had ourselves a coach," said Smith, who, at 88, has lived in the same house in Erlanger for the past 65 years.

"Really, the thing of it was, he came in and coached Indiana-style, college-style basketball. Even the referees around here had a hard time getting adjusted to it. The way he had us play defense, they would call blocking all the time. We had one heck of a time to keep from fouling out."

Wooden would coach at Dayton for only two years before accepting a job at a larger high school in South Bend, Ind., which led him to Indiana State, which led him, grudgingly, to UCLA (wishing to remain in the Midwest, he was expecting a 6 p.m. call from the University of Minnesota, which was late in coming because a snowstorm had knocked out the lines up north; meanwhile, the Bruins phoned at 6:15). He left Northern Kentucky with his daughter, Nan, who had been born there, and a reputation that far exceeded his years.

"I was always in awe of him," said Ben Stull, who was a sophomore and junior on Wooden's Dayton teams, "and in fact, I still am."

Wooden never raised his voice at a high school or collegiate player. He never cursed, or permitted one of his student-athletes to. He never countenanced a breach in fundamentals.

"You looked up to him so much," said Stull, who hadn't considered a left-handed layup until Wooden demanded it, "that you just did what he said. He would take you by the arm and say, 'Now, Ben, you should do it this way.' It was a different type of discipline. To me, he was just the top basketball man in the country."

Six weeks ago, Stull sent Wooden a card for the old coach's 94th birthday. Wooden replied with an autographed 5x7.

He wouldn't have had one of those at his ready disposal but for a recent rush on his Midwestern wisdom. Wooden's "Pyramid of Success" is increasingly referenced these days in motivational books, and the homespun gentleman who taught Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to shoot a hook shot has become, at 94, an old-school speaker in high demand.

To Smith and Stull, though, Wooden was more coach than sage, more basketball than business.

"Now," said the former, "I can see the wisdom that he had. I can realize that he was like that even when he was here."