



Your Team: How Many Superstars Do You *Really* Need?

None.

That's the short answer. In fact, even one superstar may be too many. On January 30, 1965, a New York high school basketball team led by a future NBA star and Basketball Hall of Famer walked into Cole Field House in Maryland, armed with a 71-game win streak and seemingly unstoppable player. That player, known then as Lew Alcindor (later as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar), was unquestionably the best high school basketball player in the country and perhaps one of the greatest basketball players to ever play the game. College basketball coaches across the country considered their own versions of deals with the devil, if they could only persuade him to play for their college team. His high school team, Power High School, from New York, had been dominating, in effect eradicating its opponents for nearly three seasons, primarily because of Alcindor and his basketball prowess. Alcindor and Power High School were in for a rude awakening that evening. They were about to play a team, a real *team*.

Maybe for the first time in 72 games.

Morgan Wooten, the basketball coach of DeMatha High School, a Maryland parochial school in Hyattsville, Maryland, was eager to put his team to its biggest test since he became the school's basketball coach some nine years previously. Wooten's mantra was *team*. He recognized and appreciated individual ability but its value was secondary to a player's willingness to depend on, work with, commit to, and selflessly sacrifice for the team. For Wooten, it was all about dependence: depending, really, as if your life was in the balance, on each other. Wooten's tactical approach to basketball was simple but all-inclusive: Break the game into its excruciating minutiae, teach it, demand it, and then assemble it into a collection of interrelated and dependent activities, one determining the next, and so on and so forth. Rick Pitino, a basketball coach of some significance himself, called Wooten's philosophy, "the most comprehensive I've ever read." In anticipation of playing Alcindor's

team, Wooten had his players hold tennis rackets above their outstretched arms so his offense could understand what it might be like to shoot over the 7-foot center.

The sportswriters of the time all chose Alcindor's team to beat DeMatha. For them it was a foregone conclusion. No one had stopped them and there was no reason to believe that DeMatha matched up favorably against a team led by such a dominating player. The sportswriters were about to have to rewrite their pre-determined headlines for the morning sports page.

Wooten's strategy was to stop everyone-everyone except Alcindor, and, when it made sense, double-teaming Alcindor. His belief that a team could always beat an individual was going to be tested. DeMatha beat Alcindor's team that night, 46-43, with Alcindor scoring just 16 points.

In case you're wondering if DeMatha's victory was a miracle, never to be replicated, consider this: His career record as coach of DeMatha is 1274-192! In a time when words like amazing and awesome are associated with something akin to waking up in the morning, Wooten's record can only be classified as MIND-BOGGLING.

When reflecting on the victory against Power, Wooten refuses to talk about the individual effort of his players, giving credit to the team. He remains firmly fixed in his belief that a team, a real team, can win over any individual, regardless of how great that individual might be. He talks about the concept of the team in effusive terms, exalting it to a lofty status. If caught in a candid moment, I'm certain Wooten might say something like, "I have little use for superstars. Their focus is wrong, misdirected. Give me a group of average or better players and I can beat any superstar."

What does Wooten's philosophy of basketball mean for leaders? Its implications are clear and far reaching:

- Design team tasks, tasks that require not only everyone to participate (that's not enough), but to *depend* on each other to complete them.
- Plan, plan, and plan more. Understand in excruciating detail what you are asking *the team* to accomplish. Know it like you know how to tie your shoe laces.
- Describe in detail what success/winning/victory looks like. Go a step further and describe how it will feel.
- Communicate it--continuously, even if you feel like you've already said it for the 100th time.
- Demand with encouragement. It's not enough for you to know they can do it. They need to know they know how to do it.
- Never forget, it's all about the TEAM! Forget about gathering the superstars.

Enjoy the victory!

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