

## THE BIG IDEAS

**Become A Little Better**  
Every day.

**Giving Thanks**  
For our blessings.

**Perfection**  
Guiding stars and distant shores.

**The Realistic Optimist**  
Let's become one!

**The Fundamentals**  
Of success.

**Wooden on Success**  
It's all about full-effort.

**Improving the Team**  
By improving ourselves.

*"Did I win? Did I lose?  
Those are the wrong  
questions. The correct  
question is: Did I make my  
best effort? That's what  
matters. The rest of it just  
gets in the way."*

~ John Wooden

# Wooden

A Lifetime of Observations and Reflections On and Off the Court

BY COACH JOHN WOODEN W/STEVE JAMISON · MCGRAW HILL © 1997 · 201 PAGES

"Happiness is in many things. It's in love. It's in sharing. But most of all, it's in being at peace with yourself knowing that you are making the effort, the full effort, to do what is right."

~ John Wooden from *Wooden*

John Wooden's awesome.

According to ESPN, he's the greatest coach of the 20th century and some would say he's the greatest coach \*ever.\* A super humble, inspired man, Wooden led his UCLA basketball team (Go Bruins!! :) to 10 NCAA championships in 12 years, including an 88-game winning streak.

As a coach, he was all about the \*process\* of becoming a better and better player (and human being) rather than an obsessive focus on the \*outcome\* of winning. As an author he shares this grounded, super practical old-school wisdom in a wonderful way.

This book is a great collection of his Big Ideas. I underlined nearly all of it and I'm excited to share some of my favorite gems!

## BECOMING A LITTLE BETTER EVERY DAY

"When I was teaching basketball, I urged my players to try their hardest to improve on that very day, to make that practice a masterpiece.

Too often we get distracted by what is outside our control. You can't do anything about yesterday. The door to the past has been shut and the key thrown away. You can do nothing about tomorrow. It is yet to come. However, tomorrow is in large part determined by what you do today. So make today a masterpiece. You have control over that.

This rule is even more important in life than basketball. You have to apply yourself each day to become a little better. By applying yourself to the task of becoming a little better each and every day over a period of time, you will become a *lot* better. Only then will you will be able to approach being the best you can be. It begins by trying to make each day count and knowing you can never make up for a lost day."

So much goodness here. First, I'm reminded of Daniel Pink's wisdom from a video overview of his great book *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* where he talks about the fact that excellence/greatness essentially comes down to two things:

1. Getting clear on what drives us (he shares an incredibly cool story about how great people's missions can be defined by a single sentence (from Lincoln's "He preserved the Union and freed the slaves." to Roosevelt's "He lifted us out of a great depression and helped us win a world war.") and he challenges us to define \*our\* sentence); and
2. Getting a little better every day.

That's pretty much a recipe for Awesomeness: A clear focus on what we're here to do + a commitment to get a little better every day.

*"In classic times, the courageous struggle for a noble cause was considered success in itself. Sadly, that ideal has been forgotten. But it is well worth remembering."*

~ John Wooden

So many great teachers echo this idea—from the Buddha talking about filling a water pot to George Leonard's path of mastery to Marci Shimoff's description of kaizen:

The Buddha from *The Dhammapada* ([see Notes](#)) says: "Little by little a person becomes evil, as a water pot is filled by drops of water... Little by little a person becomes good, as a water pot is filled by drops of water."

George Leonard from *Mastery* ([see Notes](#)) tells us: "We fail to realize that mastery is not about perfection. It's about a process, a journey. The master is the one who stays on the path day after day, year after year. The master is the one who is willing to try, and fail, and try again, for as long as he or she lives."

While Marci Shimoff from *Happy for No Reason* advises: "To make the quickest progress, you don't have to take huge leaps. You just have to take baby steps—and keep on taking them. In Japan, they call this approach kaizen, which literally translates as "continual improvement." Using kaizen, great and lasting success is achieved through small, consistent steps. It turns out that slow and steady is the best way to overcome your resistance to change."

Here' to making today a masterpiece!!!

(And here's a little more Wooden mojo on the subject: "When you improve a little each day, eventually big things occur. When you improve conditioning a little each day, eventually you have a big improvement in conditioning. Not tomorrow, not the next day, but eventually a big gain is made. Don't look for the big, quick improvement. Seek the small improvement one day at a time. That's the only way it happens—and when it happens, it lasts.")

## GIVING THANKS FOR OUR BLESSINGS

"So often we fail to acknowledge what we have because we're so concerned about what we want. We fail to give real thanks for the many blessings for which we did nothing: our life itself, the flowers, the trees, our family and friends. This moment. All of our blessings we take for granted so much of the time.

A wise person once observed, "How much more pleasant this world would be if we magnified our blessings the way we magnify our disappointments."

Gratitude. It's a hallmark of self-actualizing people and one of the easiest, most scientifically effective ways to boost our happiness.

[Abraham Maslow](#), the great 20th century psychologist, identified 19 characteristics of what he called the "self-actualizing" individual ([see Notes](#) on his *Motivation and Personality* for more goodness). One of the key attributes of the healthiest among us, he said, was "fresh appreciation." He tells us that "Self-actualizing people have the wonderful capacity to appreciate again and again, freshly and naively, the basic goods of life, with awe, pleasure, wonder and even ecstasy, however stale these experiences may have become to others."

And modern day positive psychologists are scientifically proving the fact that gratitude is one of the key hallmarks to happiness. In her awesome book *The How of Happiness* ([see Notes](#)), Sonja Lyubomirsky tells us: "People who are consistently grateful have been found to be relatively happier, more energetic, and more hopeful and to report experiencing more frequent positive emotions. They also tend to be more helpful and empathic, more spiritual and religious, more forgiving, and less materialistic than others who are less predisposed to gratefulness. Furthermore, the more a person is inclined to gratitude, the less likely he or she is to be depressed, anxious, lonely, envious, or neurotic."

It's so easy to get caught up in all the stuff we \*want\* in our lives and miss the extraordinary gifts we already have.

*"Adversity often produces the unexpected opportunity. Look for it. Appreciate and utilize it. This is difficult to do if you're feeling sorry for yourself because you're faced with adversity."*

~ John Wooden

What are some of the things and who are some of the people you're most grateful for today?!

## THE GUIDING STAR OF PERFECTION

*"The goal I believe is important is the goal of making the most of your abilities. That goal is within your reach."*

~ John Wooden

"Perfection is what you are striving for, but perfection is an impossibility. However, *striving* for perfection is not an impossibility. Do the best you can under the conditions that exist. That is what counts."

Love that. Perfection is an impossibility but \*striving\* for it—with the knowledge you'll never get it—is where it's at.

Tal Ben-Shahar describes this idea BRILLIANTLY in his \*awesome\* book, [The Pursuit of Perfect](#)—which I highly recommend if you're a recovering perfectionist like me.

He says this: "... *psychologists today differentiate between positive perfectionism, which is adaptive and healthy, and negative perfectionism, which is maladaptive and neurotic. I regard these two types of perfectionism as so dramatically different in both their underlying nature and their ramifications that I prefer to use entirely different terms to refer to them. Throughout this book, I will refer to negative perfectionism simply as perfectionism and to positive perfectionism as optimalism.*"

And, he also says this: "*Perfectionism and optimalism are not distinct ways of being, an either-or choice, but rather they coexist in each person. And while we can move from perfectionism toward optimalism, we never fully leave perfectionism behind and never fully reach optimalism ahead. The optimalism ideal is not a distant shore to be reached but a distant star that guides us and can never be reached. As Carl Rogers pointed out, 'The good life is a process, not a state of being. It is a direction, not a destination.'*"

In Ben-Shahar's words, we want to become optimalists, remembering that our ideals are GUIDING STARS not a distant shore we'll ever reach!!

## THE REALISTIC OPTIMIST

*"Mix idealism with realism and add hard work. This will often bring much more than you could ever hope for."*

~ John Wooden

"I believe one of my strengths is my ability to keep negative thoughts out. I am an optimist. I believe this results from the fact that I set realistic goals—ones that are difficult to achieve, but within reach. You might say I'm a realistic optimist."

Goals should be difficult to achieve because those achieved with little effort are seldom appreciated, give little personal satisfaction, and are often not very worthwhile.

However, if you set goals that are so idealistic there's no possibility of reaching them, you will eventually become discouraged and quit. They become counter-productive. Be a realistic optimist."

I love this idea of being a "realistic optimist" and finding a healthy tension between our current reality and realistic goals.

A couple of my favorite positive psychologists talk about this: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (you pronounce it: "Cheeks-sent-me-high"! ) and Tal Ben-Shahar.

In his classic book, *Flow* ([see Notes](#)), Csikszentmihalyi tells us that: "*In all the activities people in our study reported engaging in, enjoyment comes at a very specific point: whenever the opportunities for action perceived by the individual are equal to his or her capabilities. Playing tennis, for instance, is not enjoyable if the two opponents are mismatched. The less skilled player will feel anxious, and the better player will feel bored. The same is true for every other activity... Enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person's capacity to act.*"

In other words: When the challenge is greater than our current abilities, we're anxious/stressed.

*"Be quick but don't hurry."*

~ John Wooden

*"You always win when you make the full effort to do the best of which you're capable."*

~ John Wooden

When our current abilities are far greater than the challenge, we're bored. To get into flow, we've gotta find that place where the challenge meets our abilities!

In his great book, *Happier* ([see Notes](#)), Tal Ben-Shahar also puts it beautifully. He says we need to set "stretch goals"—as we find that place between our comfort zone and our panic zone.

I like to imagine the dynamic tension of a rubber band stretched between two fingers. We want to create a certain amount of tension by setting goals that challenge us, but we don't want to pull SO hard that we snap the rubber band.

How about *you*: Where are you at? You hanging out in your comfort zone? Or are you in your panic/snap zone? Or maybe just right in that stretch zone of challenging but realistic goals?!

Here's to being realistic optimists!!

And here's a little more Wooden mojo on it: "Youngsters are told, "Think big. Anything is possible." I would never go that strong. I want them to think *positively*, but when you think big you often start thinking too big, and I believe that can be very dangerous. Wanting an unattainable goal will eventually produce a feeling of "What's the use?" That feeling can carry over into other areas. That is bad... We should keep our dreams within the realm of possibility—difficult but possible—and make every effort to achieve them."

## THE FUNDAMENTALS OF SUCCESS

*"When you see a successful individual, a champion, a "winner," you can be very sure that you are looking at an individual who pays great attention to the perfection of minor details."*

~ John Wooden

"I believe in the basics: attention to, and perfection of, tiny details that might be commonly overlooked. They may seem trivial, perhaps even laughable to those who don't understand, but they aren't. They are fundamental to your progress in basketball, business, and life. They are the difference between champions and near champions.

For example, at the first squad meeting each season, held two weeks before our first actual practice, I personally demonstrated how I wanted players to put on their socks each and every time: Carefully roll the socks down over the toes, ball of the foot, arch and around the heel, then pull the sock up snug so there will be no wrinkles of any kind."

I. LOVE. THAT.

Imagine the greatest collegiate basketball players in the world coming to UCLA and the first thing they're taught—before they even get on the court—is how to put on their socks!

Why was that so important?

Because if they didn't get this simple task just right, they might get a blister. If they got a blister, they might miss some practice time. Miss some practice time and their game-time performance would suffer.

In short, blister = no championship.

Amazing.

*"I challenge you to show me one single solitary individual who achieved his or her own personal greatness without lots of hard work."*

~ John Wooden

Begs the question: What are YOUR fundamentals? What are the little things you need to do to make sure your "socks are on right" so you don't get blisters and have your performance suffer when you need to be at your best (whether that's a presentation at work or a challenging conversation at home)?

Mine? I meditate every day. I eat well. I exercise basically every day. I appreciate Alexandra every day. You couldn't pay me enough money to \*not\* meditate or exercise or eat well. I KNOW what I'm like when I eat poorly, never exercise, and don't meditate. And it's not pretty. I also know who I've become over the last 5+ years and who I'm committed to becoming over the next 5-50+. So, I honor my commitment to my fundamentals.

Back to you: What are *your* fundamentals? Let's take a moment to make it official.

*" Industriousness is the most conscientious, assiduous, and inspired type of work. A willingness to, an appetite for, hard work must be present for success. Without it you have nothing to build on."*

~ John Wooden

*" Mr. Vince Lombardi is supposed to have said, "Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing." Well, if he said that, I disagree. I believe making total effort is everything."*

~ John Wooden

*" The individual who is mistake-free is also probably sitting around doing nothing. And that's a very big mistake."*

~ John Wooden

*" In great attempts it is glorious even to fail."*

~ Wilfred A. Peterson

These are my fundamentals:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Now a good time to rock them?

As you get on that, remember: "If you spend too much time learning the tricks of the trade, you may not learn the trade. If you're working on finding a short cut, the easy way, you're not working hard enough on the fundamentals. You may get away with it for a spell, but there is no substitute for the basics. And the first basic is good, old-fashioned hard work."

## WOODEN'S DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

"I finally coined my definition [of success] in 1934:

Success is peace of mind that is the direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming.

Furthermore, only one person can ultimately judge the level of your success—you. Think about that for a moment.

I believe that is what true success is. Anything stemming from *that* success is simply a by-product, whether it be the score, the trophy, a national championship, fame, or fortune. They are all by-products of success rather than success itself, indicators that you perhaps succeeded in the more important contest.

The real contest, of course, is striving to reach *your* personal best, and that is totally under your control. When you achieve that, you have achieved success. Period! You are a winner and only you fully know if you won."

OMG that's amazing.

As we've talked about a number of times, guys like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle said that if we want happiness we've gotta live with what they called *areté*—which means excellence or virtue.

Essentially, they were saying that happiness (or true success or whatever you want to call it) is the result of a commitment to living your highest ideals—doing and being your best. NOT accumulating fame/power/fortune. Those things need to be viewed as mere by-products of *areté*.

And, modern day psychologists are proving this. We now know that way more of our happiness is tied to the virtue of our thoughts and behaviors than it is to external circumstances.

Yet, tragically, we seem to have it completely backward. D'oh.

So, let's have the confidence and wisdom to remember that the courageous struggle to live a noble life is the path to ultimate success!

## IMPROVING THE TEAM BY IMPROVING OURSELVES

"The best way to improve the team is to improve ourselves."

I'm the first to admit we live in a wacky world. I often scratch my head at what passes for "normal" and I'm often pained by the enormous amount of suffering in our communities and in the world.

But, we've gotta remember that if we want to make a difference in the world, we've gotta start with ourselves!!!

Too often, an overconcern for a suffering world is a sign that WE are in a great deal of pain. And, there's no way we're going to make our true, full contribution to the world unless we're working

*"Try not to become a man of success but rather become a man of value."*

~ Albert Einstein

hard on improving ourselves.

So, if you find yourself constantly bemoaning all the atrocities of the world, check in and see if you're playing the role of the Victim while avoiding your own personal responsibility to shape your life such that you can make a difference.

As Mother Teresa said: *"If each of us would only sweep our own doorstep, the whole world would be clean."*

While Michael Beckwith ([see Notes on Spiritual Liberation](#)) says: *"An enlightened society can only be created by awakened beings."*

And, finally, in his GREAT book [Conquest of Mind](#), Eknath Easwaran tells us: *"To fail to live up to this challenge, my spiritual teacher used to say, is simply being irresponsible. This is not asking for perfection but merely expecting us to do our best to grow. If we do not do this much, we are depriving life of a contribution that only we can make. Spiritual living is responsible living. I am responsible not only for myself but for all of you, just as all of you are responsible for each other and for me."*

Here's to improving our "team" by improving ourselves!!

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Heroic Philosopher CEO*

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## About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at [heroic.us](http://heroic.us).