

- [Print This](#)
- [Email This](#)

'Greatest coach of all time' puts a reporter at ease

- **August 12th, 2009**
- (0) comments

**By Paul Emerson of the Tribune
Up Front/Commentary**

The Sporting News named John Wooden the greatest coach of all time the other day. I don't know if I'm qualified to agree or disagree that Wooden is the best to ever coach any sport, but the wire story I read reminded me of my brush with a legend.

It was 1975 and I was the Tribune's sports editor, covering the Washington State University basketball beat. It was late February and the Cougars were, as usual, losing. They were at home to play the UCLA Bruins, who were headed for another NCAA championship.

Something rare happened that night at Friel Court in Pullman - Coach George Raveling's Cougars almost knocked off Wooden's Bruins.

Raveling, one of the most charismatic characters I've known, was still building his program in 1975. At that point the Cougs were 0-10 in conference and the Bruins were the nation's second-ranked team.

It looked like another blowout in the first half when the Bruins went ahead by 14 points, but then Raveling switched to a zone defense and slowed the tempo. The Cougs crawled back into the game and were down by only two points.

There was not a shot clock in those days, and Wooden countered the zone with a four-corner, stall offense, and ran it for the last eight minutes of the game. UCLA broke away to win 69-61, but those of us on press row and many in the stands were surprised the lowly Cougars stayed that close for that long.

Remember, this was a Wooden-coached club and the man at that point had nine national championship trophies on his shelf. He had put together four perfect seasons and his teams at one point won 88 consecutive games.

During the game I got a glimpse of the kind of weight that success carries.

One of the Bruins was called for a lane violation on a WSU free throw. As the officials approached the scorer's table, a livid Wooden demanded the official explain the call. When he did so, Wooden pointed a finger in his face and yelled, "You're a damned liar!"

No technical foul. No ejection. Not even a second look. A lesser figure would have been headed for the locker room.

After the game Raveling and Wooden went to separate rooms for media interviews. The rest of the press corps headed to talk with Raveling. There were a couple of reasons for that - he always had a terrific quote and everyone wanted to hear what he had to say about the Bruins having to stall to win.

I, instead, went to interview Wooden.

I walked into the room and there he was, all by himself, sitting in a folding chair. No other reporters. Nobody from the UCLA sports information office. Just the most famous college coach in the world. And me.

It scared the crap out of me. I was 25 years old and from the Lewiston Morning Tribune, not the L.A. Times or Sports Illustrated. I was way out of my comfort zone.

After a short pause I introduced myself and shook his hand.

"Sit down, Paul," he said. "What can I do for you?"

I sat on the folding chair next to him, he put his arm around the back of my chair, and we chatted for 10 minutes or so.

I asked him about going into the stall and why he felt he had to do so. I don't remember the specifics of the discussion, but I do remember he put me at ease and answered all of my questions. It would have been easy for him to brush off the kid from the small newspaper in Idaho, but he didn't.

As it turned out, that was my last chance to interview him. That team went on to win a national championship and he retired after the season.

More than 34 years later, I remember that short visit and Wooden's kindness and patience. At age 98, he's back in the news, and I'm pleased I have a chance to share this story without having to wait until after we print his obituary.

Emerson is managing editor for the Tribune. He may be contacted at pemerson@lmtribune.com or (208) 848-2269.