LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT

Players First: Coaching from the Inside Out

by John Calipari and Michael Sokolove

Kentucky's coach wins with players who stay one year - serve them first, tell them the truth.

BEST POINTS FROM THE BOOK

01 **Players first: coach for the names on the backs of the jerseys, not just the front.**

Calipari's credo drives everything: the staff exists to serve the players. During the season it is all about the team; after the season, all about each individual.

02 **Make commitments, not promises - especially in recruiting.**

He never promises minutes, shots, or a starting spot. The one commitment he makes, and always keeps, is the one from his first Kentucky press conference: this program will be about the players first.

03 **Tell the truth from the first living-room visit.**

Players can trust him to say what they need to hear, not what they want to hear. Asked, 'Can you do with me what you did with Derrick Rose?' he answers: 'Are you that good? If you are, yeah. If not, no.'

04 **Learn each player's 'why' - then coach him through it.**

Most of his players say they play to take care of their families. When one coasts in practice, Calipari throws it back at him: you said you love your mom and grandma - so not working must mean you love them less today.

05 **Warn them up front: this will be the hardest thing you have ever done.**

Stars arrive having dominated while playing at three-quarters speed, often without knowing it. He tells recruits not to come for a pat on the back - then challenges them every single day.

06 **Teach stars to play for each other, not just themselves.**

Personal goals are reached by striving together toward collective goals. To slumping Alex Poythress, in front of the team: 'Everybody likes you. You're a great guy. They just don't like playing with you like this.'

07 **Judge yourself by your players' success rate.**

His standard: every player leaves Kentucky with an NBA opportunity, a college degree, or both. All ten players who exhausted their eligibility under him graduated, and his teams posted GPAs above 3.0.

08 **At decision time, serve the player - never your own roster.**

He tells each player honestly how the NBA views him, advises some to leave and others to stay, and never talks a player into returning for the program's sake. Whatever they decide, he supports it fully.

09 **Rebuild the team from zero every single year.**

After the 2012 championship, his first six players were all first-round NBA draft picks - including one who couldn't even start. He calls it 'the turnover rate of a fast-food restaurant' and designs the whole program around starting over.

10 **Fight for your players off the court, too.**

In the chapter 'At War? Common Sense Versus the NCAA,' he likens the NCAA to the Soviet Union in its last years and offers a 13-point reform plan: player stipends, insurance, loans against future earnings, and transfer freedom when a coach leaves.

11 **Build servant leaders, not just players.**

His players deliver coats and presents to families at Christmas and visit sick kids in hospitals; star center Nerlens Noel made hospital visits on his own, telling no one. The goal is young men who give back.

12 **Fail fast.**

The closing chapter's charge, and the deal he makes with every recruit: try, learn quickly, adjust, and stay ahead of the curve instead of playing it safe. Playing for him is a crash course in failing fast.

THE BOOK, IN SHORT

In April 2009, John Calipari took over Kentucky, college basketball's most storied and most watched program, just as the one-and-done era took hold: the best eighteen-year-olds now had to spend a year in college before entering the NBA draft. Written with New York Times Magazine writer Michael Sokolove, Players First is his account of his first four seasons in Lexington - two Final Four runs, the 2012 national championship, and then the humbling 2012-13 season that ended in the NIT. Later editions add the Wildcats' run to the 2014 championship game.

The book's argument is its title - and it is plural. Players First means Calipari coaches for 'the names on the backs of the jerseys,' not the front: the staff exists to serve the players, not the program, the

fans, or his own win total. During the season everything is about the team; once the season ends, everything is about each individual's future.

In practice, it runs on honesty. He makes commitments, not promises - no recruit is guaranteed minutes, shots, or a starting spot - and tells players what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear. He demands more effort than his stars have ever given, teaches them to play for each other, and keeps score with a 'success rate': every player should leave with an NBA opportunity, a college degree, or both. When draft decision time comes, he gives each player the league's honest assessment and supports the choice, even when persuading a player to stay would help Kentucky.

Calipari is just as blunt about the system. He dislikes one-and-done, yet he has mastered it: after the 2012 title, his first six players were all first-round draft picks, and he rebuilt from scratch the next season. In 'At War? Common Sense Versus the NCAA' he calls the NCAA a crumbling power and lays out a 13-point plan to put players first - stipends, insurance, loans against future earnings, and the right to transfer if a coach leaves.

Woven through are his Moon Township roots - the goals he wrote down at twenty-six, including 'Care about the kids' and 'Enjoy, it's only a game!' - gratitude to the mentors and staff he insists he did nothing without ('I don't do this alone'), and a closing charge to fail fast. Part memoir, part coaching manual, part manifesto, it is a rare look at leading talented people who will only be with you a short time.

DO THIS WEEK

This week, pick one person you lead, coach, or parent. Ask them what their real goal is - their 'why' - and just listen. Then make them one commitment: small, specific, in service of their goal rather than yours. And keep it.

Players First: Coaching from the Inside Out by John Calipari with Michael Sokolove, first published by Penguin Press in 2014; later editions add a chapter on Kentucky's 2014 Final Four run. For coaches - and any leader of talented people whose stay is short.