

# Winning Every Day

Pat Summitt's Strategy Centers on Goal-Setting



by Don Yaeger

**Eight times Pat Summitt's University of Tennessee women's basketball team has ended the season by lifting high the national championship trophy. Not once was that her team's goal.**

Before each of the 34 seasons that Summitt has been a head coach of some of the most accomplished teams of all time, she and her captains have committed a set of goals to writing.

The numbers suggest Summitt's strategy is solid. Seven times she has been named the national coach of the year. Her 983 wins are the most ever for a coach—more victories than Adolph Rupp, Dean Smith and Bob Knight, three titans of basketball. Summitt knows how to win—every day, and in every way.

Those wins haven't been racked up against inferior foes—nearly half of the games her team has played have been against nationally ranked opponents, and her teams have won 73 percent of those games. But 100 percent—players who have earned a diploma after completing eligibility in Knoxville—is the statistic of which Summitt is most proud.

The key to her on- and off-court success, Summitt is famous for saying, is remembering that “winners aren't born, they are self-made.”

“And the only way to ensure you become a winner is to set goals every day, and hold yourself and your teammates accountable for reaching those goals,” she says. “Setting up a system that rewards you for meeting your goals and has penalties for failing to hit your target is just as important as putting your goals down on paper.”

As an example, Summitt says that if her team were to set a daily goal—reducing turnovers during scrimmages is an often-set objective—that she would let her players

know that reaching the objective would result in a more relaxed shooting drill to end their practice. But failing to meet the goal meant the entire team had to run sprints.

“They get to choose,” Summitt says about her players, “whether they run or whether they shoot. It makes the goal so much easier to keep in sight. Reward or consequence. Their choice.”

Much as goal-setting should be done with care, so should rule-making. Summitt says she has long known that the fewer rules a leader sets down, the fewer rules will be broken.

“I don't have many rules for my players,” she says. “But the rules I have are important, both to me and to the good of our program. We don't just set rules on top of rules, and we're always clear that the breaking of a rule will produce a certain result.”



**'V' for Victory**  
Summitt looks to secure her 1,000<sup>th</sup> win in the 2009 season.

“We always make sure,” Summitt says, “that our plans for the season can be achieved. Setting goals is incredibly important to success. But if you set a goal that seems impossible to achieve—if you go into a year saying your goal is to win the national championship—then you risk losing morale, self-discipline and chemistry if you falter early.

“Set a goal that stretches you, requires exceptional effort, but one that you can reach,” says Summitt, the bearer of more championship jewelry than any coach in women's basketball history. “We might set a goal that we win 20 or so games, that we win a conference championship, that we make the NCAA tournament. If we do those things, the truth is we have a chance of winning the national championship. But I would never want that to be the only goal.”

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**Points Leader**

With an impressive win-loss record of 983-182, Summitt is the winningest coach in NCAA history.

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Summitt says the next challenge for most leaders is to remain firm in the application of those consequences if goals are not met or rules are not followed. “If you are unwavering once the rules are set, you won’t have to enforce them as often,” she says. “Be strong and uncompromising and you will find that you have few repeat offenders.”

Her leadership style has worked for more than three decades because she understands more than just the fundamentals of basketball—she understands people. Legendary UCLA Head Coach John Wooden, winner of a record 10 championships as a men’s coach, has often praised this quality in her leadership style. In an interview with *Business Tennessee* after the Lady Vols won their sixth NCAA title, Wooden said: “The national championships Pat has won don’t really tell the whole story about her. Yes, she knows the game. But most of all she studies people. And much of the time that attribute is overlooked. True leaders understand



**Cap and Gown**  
Summitt is proudest of a 100 percent graduation rate among her players.

people, they’re able to analyze each one individually and then give each one the treatment they deserve.”

Though her control of the Lady Vol program is unquestioned, Summitt’s ability to involve her players in decision-making has been a hallmark of her career. Before practice begins for every season, during a team meeting, Summitt asks her players what style of play they would prefer. Most often, each player wants to run and press—play hard, play fast, play smart. Then, when practice

starts and her players are panting and sucking wind, Summitt is careful to remind them that this was the style they chose.

“It is important to hear those you’re leading,” she says. “And it is just as important for them to understand that what sounds good isn’t always as good as it sounds. I enjoy including my players, the captains of the teams particularly, in setting some direction. If they are involved in setting the goals, establishing the rules and regulations, they’ll always be more cooperative. If they’re more cooperative, there are fewer violations and discipline is required less often. This is one big cycle, and you have to see the whole of the cycle—and remain consistent throughout—to enjoy true success.”

Summitt says the best way to motivate individuals to achieve team goals is to bring individual goals in line. She hasn’t achieved her goals by herself. Her players have achieved them, and she’ll be the first to tell you it was their hard work that led to all of her program’s accomplishments.

“I haven’t hit a shot in any one of those wins you mentioned,” she says. “I haven’t taken a charge or made a steal. The things I’m credited with are the result of a great number of others coming together to achieve goals they set together. That’s the beauty of this discussion. These fundamentals are the same today as they were in the mid-1970s.”

The game of women’s basketball has changed dramatically during her lifetime—when she played, Summitt and her teammates were considered incapable of running full court, so teams stationed three players at each end for offensive and defensive purposes. But the principles of leadership remain unchanged. By staying true to those principles, staying power has become among the greatest of Pat Summitt’s qualities.

“Pat Summitt’s coaching career underlines the statement that everything rises and falls on leadership,” leadership guru and author John C. Maxwell has said. “Most people have leadership moments. Pat has given the University of Tennessee a lifetime of leadership.”

And she has done it by setting and achieving goals each and every day. **S**

## MAKING DREAMS BECOME REALITY

### Pat Summitt on Goal-Setting

- **Set realistic goals** that make your team stretch. If the goal is too big and unattainable, morale can suffer. Hitting the smaller goals will get you closer to that pie-in-the-sky goal anyway.
- **Small goals** you set and achieve every day work best. Be personally accountable for those and help your teammates do the same.
- **Instill the idea** of rewards for reaching goals, and consequences if you don’t.
- **Be sure** to involve everyone in goal-setting. This provides a sense of empowerment—and accountability.
- **Realize** that others help you achieve your goal; no matter who makes the coaching decisions, nothing will get done without a strong team.
- **Commit** your goals to writing.

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