



“Let me share a story with you that perhaps highlights the changes that have occurred from the time I started coaching in the sixties until now. This story involved Jody Conratt and myself and this was probably 1975 or 1974, somewhere in that time frame.

It was in the old AIAW (Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women) days and we were playing in a regional qualifying tournament at Southern State in Magnolia, Arkansas. I was at SFA (Stephen F. Austin State University) and Jody was at UT-Arlington and we were the #1 seed in the tournament and we had to play UT-Arlington in the first round. They were probably seeded sixth or seventh – I don’t recall how many teams we had in there.

But anyway, we had beaten UT-A soundly three times that year so we went into the regionals fairly confident. Long story short, they beat us, the #1 seed! After the game, we went into the pressroom. Jody went in first and I went in second and when I came out, Jody was waiting for me and she said, “Sue, I need to talk to you.” I said, “Ok, fine, what?” Now remember none of us had any money or anything in those days. She said, “I did not expect to win this thing. I checked us out of our rooms and I don’t have enough meal money. How much money do you have with you?” I think I had \$300 or \$400 in cash and I gave that to Jody, along with our rooms, and Jody gave me a personal check in exchange for the cash and we went on about our ways.

Now, there’s something very special about that when you really think about it. There have been no greater competitors than the two of us throughout our careers and yet at a time like that, there was no hesitation on her part in asking me for help and there was no hesitation on my part to give it to her. Those are some of the kind of things that perhaps I miss now. The amount of money it takes to take a team on the road now, that \$400 I had wouldn’t buy anything now.

I don’t approach the game any differently in 1998 than I did as a player in 1958 or as a coach in 1968. I love to compete, in every area. The part I enjoy the most is going to practices and going to games. The recruiting and all the administrative things that surround us, all the PR (public relations), all the promotions, all the marketing, I could do without. But, that is a very important part of what we all do in the 1990s and as we approach 2000. So you do what’s required of you and you get the job done.

I’ve said all along the only way I have been able to stay in this profession and be reasonably successful has been the ability to change, to change with the times, to change with the personalities of the players, basically to adapt to the eighteen year olds that I’m coaching now. The times are different but the one constant that remains is that I have spent my entire career working with that eighteen to twenty- two year old athlete and no matter what, their problems may be somewhat different but they’re no more important than the problems were with my kids in the early sixties. It’s the same thing. I mean, a young lady comes into my office and she’s pregnant. That’s a very difficult time, that’s trauma, it was trauma in the sixties, it’s trauma in the nineties for that youngster.

Certainly the competition is the number one thing. I love teaching the game and I love working with young people. But you have to look at the cold hard side; you have to win in order to keep your job. You have to win in order to touch the lives of young people, to help young people. Otherwise, you don't have a job. So that's the eternal challenge, to keep yourself in a position where you can be effective. And winning is a part of what we do.

I think we like to teach our kids how to deal with losing but we never teach them to accept it. And we do want to teach about the winning attitude. Because that's the only way they're going to survive in life, not necessarily winning, but staying ahead. So as far as my challenge is concerned, it's to put a product on the floor that's going to be competitive in the league in which we play, which is the SEC (Southeastern Conference), and we're always looking for that post season play.

When I look at the coaches I admire most, and not all of them are great winners, I look at a Pat Summitt or a Billie Moore, or a Kay Yow, Jody Conradt and Tara (VanDerveer). The one constant thread that goes through everyone is that competitiveness, that wanting to win, that unbelievable competitive person. I know these people were competitors as athletes, and me, I never skipped a beat. As soon as I couldn't play anymore I stepped into coaching and I was just as competitive, and I didn't wish that I could play anymore. I was perfectly ready to coach.

That one common thread is the intensity with which these people compete. You have to be competitive in everything – you have to be competitive with administration, you have to be competitive in recruiting, you have to be competitive in budget meetings, you have to be competitive at conference meetings. I mean, it's a constant and if you can't handle that, you don't need to be a coach, not at this level.

Absolutely, the pressure beats me down, but going to practice makes everything all right. Going to practice, that's the one thing I can control and the reason I do everything else. To be able to walk down that ramp and onto that arena floor and look at those bright eyes of those talented young people and get to work, it makes everything else worthwhile. But the frustrations that are outside of what we do drive a lot wonderful coaches out of the profession. I mean, trying to explain why I need as much money for my trip to Houston as the men's coach needs for his trip to Houston.

I'm talking about equity, I'm talking about things we have been fighting for all along. Trying to convince you AD (athletic director) why you want a vote to go a certain way when he has to vote your vote. Having to go out and raise money to have some of the niceties that your budget doesn't provide for your players, and I'm not talking about expensive fringe benefits, I'm talking about little things. But these are those kinds of frustrations that you really get tired of. And recruiting just gets to be a real pain in the butt. That's why so many of our young coaches are dropping out. We educate and we train people in an ivory tower and they get out into the real world and it's not at all like they thought it would be.

Not too long ago, there was a young man, he was a GA (graduate assistant) and in the course of a conversation, he went on about how the floor hadn't been swept before his team's practice. I looked at him and said, "Do you not know where the brooms are?" And he said, "Ma'am?" And I said, "Why didn't you sweep the floor?" And he said, "What do you mean, why didn't I sweep the floor?" I said, "Let me tell you what. If you can't pick up that mop and mop that floor for your team to work out – you have to wait for a manager or custodian or someone else – you need to reconsider what profession you're going in to. Because at some point in time you're going to have to do it all."

And I think that's the other thing I wouldn't take anything for right now is the way I did start, when I didn't have any assistance. I had to do my own taping, I was the trainer, I was the strength coach, I was everything. There was no one else but me. So consequently, I have a tendency to appreciate things more. The young coaches today just expect it and when they find out it's not there, they find it very difficult to deal with.

This job is 24-7, 365 days a year. Today we were talking about updating our phone system in our offices and a young woman from telecommunications was in here telling us what we needed to do. "For example," she said, "during a down time, during a holiday period, you don't need to be up and running." And we said, "Wait a minute, you don't understand. During holiday periods and late at nights and after hours is why we need this system. It's because we're the only ones working then. Everything else shuts down but we're still in season." These are the kinds of things you just have to be willing to understand. I've chuckled so many times when people say, "What are you going to do when the season's over?" I mean, it's never over; you need to know that when you go into the profession.

Those people that understand, that cream that does rise, i.e., some of the bright young coaches out there, Susan Walvius at South Carolina, there's many, many others. Carolyn Peck, Fortner, those who are willing to go that extra mile, those are the ones who are going to continue to be successful. And then there are some who may know more and may have more potential for doing things, but they'll never make it because they can't give you that sixteen, eighteen-hour day, 365 days. And that's just what it takes to be successful.

Oh, man, the rewards are not the trophies, not the accolades, it's seeing those kids that make it, who have had a successful career, that come back and see you and bring their children. They call you or show up at a game and wave. I had one of my former players from Stephen F. swing by this past year. She was my first Kodak All American and she came by and brought her family with her – she has five daughters! Got her starting five! And she's a coach. Those are the rewards. I look at my kids now and it's not so much those who are playing in the pro leagues. The rewards are not how many wins you have. For me, it's that grin on their faces, or that parent picking up the phone and calling me or getting that card telling me how thankful they are that their daughter had the opportunity to come to LSU.

I just sit there and think to myself, this is why I do what I do. It's not because of the All-Americans or winning the SEC or getting to the Final Four. That's my competitive juices and that is personal – but the rewards are all those hundreds of kids who have gone through our programs the last 30 years. I wouldn't take anything for that. I look back at Pat Summitt, Ann Meyers, Carol Blazejowski. Annie will pick up the phone and say, "What's going on, coach? Just touching base with you." [Note: Gunter coached Meyers and Summitt in the 1976 Olympics and Blazejowski in the 1980 Olympics.] Or I'll get a little note from Blaze, that's what it's all about.

What have I learned from my players? I must have learned something or I would have stopped doing this a long time ago. Patience – they've made a good listener out of me. And they've taught me that it's not so much what I say back to them, it's just about making myself accessible to them and just listening to them. I've had kids come in here, just sit down and talk for an hour and maybe I just continue to ask another question. And they walk out of here feeling like a million dollars and I haven't told them anything but I have simply listened. Let them vent.

I am not a patient person but that is definitely one of the things I've learned. And I've had a very unique experience because all my years have been spent at the college level with that unbelievable eighteen to twenty-two year old age group. I look at my freshmen now and I look at my juniors now, and I remember my juniors when they were freshmen and I thank God that my freshmen will eventually be juniors! Just wait on them and give them time to grow up. Patience and the ability to listen, that's what I've learned.

Our one common goal is to make our players the best they can be. We talked about that this morning in practice. I said, "You've got to make a commitment. Did you get better today? Can you answer that question honestly?" Little things like that. I know when I do those things that there is carryover to it. Of course, there's carryover – that's what's so beautiful about what we do. If they go into the corporate world, God almighty, barracudas, barracudas, you know that. Well, no more than those Tennessee Volunteers we play! Isn't that carryover? That's what they must learn – it's survival, it's absolute survival.

I think the future of our profession is bright but it's scary as well. The pro leagues are here to stay and that's a plus, but the trickle down effect – we're going to get a lot of the problems the men have with agents, kids leaving school early, those kinds of things. The brightest part about it is opportunity, boundless opportunity for young female athletes. The people that are my age, that are still doing this, this is what we hoped for and that's why we started all this. It was for opportunity and choice.

I'm a lot different now than I was twenty years ago when I didn't have a large, unbelievable capable staff. I think of myself in practice as a director. We sit down, go over what we want to do and I'm mostly overseeing unless there's something specific I want done. Then I do it. But in a game on the sideline – it's different. You can never not let your kids know who's in charge. Yes, I'm very animated during games, and

they do feed off that energy, no question about it. I try to stay positive, as much as I may get on them, as much as I may fuss at them, I'm going to find something positive that they do, not only in practice but in games as well. I think when I'm not up and down and boisterous and into it, they either think I've given up or I'm so hacked off at them, they're scared to be around me!

How would I like to be remembered? That I gave it my best shot. I never walked into a situation thinking we were going to lose, but when I walked away, if we did the best we could, hey, I could live with it. I just gave it my best shot, on the floor, off the floor, period, that I never cheated my kids."