

Date of Birth

Feb 28, 1931



Date of Passing

Feb 07, 2015

Dean Smith

"You can have peace without the world if you opt for death. Or the world without peace if you decide for doing and having and achieving. Only in play can you have both. In play you realize simultaneously the supreme importance and utter insignificance of what you are doing." -- George Sheehan, author and philosopher of sport Few sportsmen found the George Sheehan sweet spot better than Dean Smith. The former North Carolina basketball coach, who found peace without the world on Saturday night at 83, understood what Sheehan goes on to call "the paradox of pursuing what at once is essential and inconsequential." Smith kept the two in almost perfect balance. It's the inconsequential part of sport that so many of us, heads turned by beckoning glory, find hard to accept with grace. Smith had it nailed. He didn't need to put any game face on; he

wore the same face, game or no game. Almost alone among coaches I've known, Smith actually preferred to speak to the press in the hours before tip-off. And if that game turned out to be a loss, he got over it quickly -- in part because for every loss he could point to roughly three-and-a-half victories (879 all told), but also because he truly understood that a billion people in China didn't give a damn. During the back half of Smith's career men's college basketball spawned a generation of coaches who regarded the university -- with its classes and standards, with its women's teams clamoring for resources and practice time -- as irritations, barriers to their entrepreneurial striving. So they tried to set their programs apart and reserve for themselves the spoils of shoe and camp and TV deals. Smith believed that every dime his team delivered to Chapel Hill belonged to the athletic department. He didn't begrudge the women's soccer program spending Tar Heels basketball booty; he gloried in it. Indeed, Smith despised attitudes of entitlement in any guise. Freshmen carried the video equipment on road trips, and reporters had to wait to speak to them until after their first game, only by which time, Smith believed, a young Tar Heel might actually offer something worth listening to. Offended by premature ballyhoo over the five recruits he welcomed in the fall of 1990, Smith arranged for them to scrimmage the rest of the team for 20 minutes. What many called the greatest recruiting class of all time lost by 46 points -- 92, the coach delighted in pointing out, over a full game. Smith recognized the absurdity of the NCAA underwriting antidrug crusades funded by March Madness ads for beer -- the undergraduate's drug of choice, which was implicated in campus problems from vandalism to date rape -- and he said so. This ability to pull back and see the big picture extended to issue after issue percolating around college sports. Other coaches, knowing that the best players weren't likely to stay more than a year or two, wanted to use them ASAP; Smith lobbied for a return to freshman ineligibility, because he knew a year of acclimation to college life would be good for the whole young man. As other schools tried to find ways to keep prize recruits longer, Smith nudged his own to turn pro if the money and security were there, because neither the university nor (goodness knows) Smith himself was entitled to their servitude. Yet almost every player who did leave early came back to Chapel Hill to get a degree. The graduation rate of Smith's players, 97 percent, is both the result of and an

explanation for their abiding loyalty. "We're his flock," one of them, Bobby Jones, said in 1997, after Smith broke Adolph Rupp's alltime victory record. "He takes great pains to shepherd us." The son of Baptist schoolteachers, raised in the railroading town of Emporia, Kans., Smith played positions -- quarterback, point guard, catcher -- in high school that foreshadowed the career he would choose. In much the same way his major at Kansas, mathematics, prefigured the analytical approach he brought to North Carolina, which named him at 30 to succeed his boss, Frank McGuire. After a loss at Wake Forest in 1965 the team bus famously returned to campus to find Smith hung in effigy. A book soon sent to him by his sister, Joan -- *Beyond Our Selves* by Catherine Marshall -- helped Smith both compose himself in that incident's aftermath and loam the soil in which his collectivist beliefs took root. Marshall holds that freedom comes from acknowledging the limit to what an individual can accomplish alone. By realizing that teammates are helpmates, a basketball program can gait itself for the long run: Smith reached a Final Four in four different decades and won NCAA titles 13 years apart. As a college basketball writer during the 1980s and '90s, shuttling the eight miles between Chapel Hill and Durham, I couldn't help but compare Smith and his program to Duke's as it flourished under Mike Krzyzewski. The Blue Devils emerged during the age of Reagan and Bush the Elder, and their conservative coach made a point of unfettering his players, as if he were implementing a position paper of the American Enterprise Institute. Under its liberal Democrat coach, North Carolina basketball by contrast felt as if it were in the care of a descendant of FDR or LBJ. "Put a plant in a jar, and it will grow to take the shape of the jar," Krzyzewski liked to say, "but let a plant grow free, and who knows what it might become" -- which to an ACC ear could sound like a variation on the old joke that Dean Smith is the only man in the world who could hold Michael Jordan to 12 points a game. Ah, but let Smith and his staff take their sweet time with a Tar Heel, holding at bay the bugbears of entitlement, and that player too would be gaited for the long run. Neither Jordan nor such star professionals as Larry Brown, Vince Carter, Billy Cunningham, Brad Daugherty, Walter Davis, Phil Ford, Rick Fox, Antawn Jamison, Bobby Jones, Mitch Kupchak, Bob McAdoo, Sam Perkins, Charlie Scott, Kenny Smith, Jerry Stackhouse, Rasheed Wallace and James Worthy could ever be described as having suffered for time spent in

ever be described as having suffered for time spent in the Carolina hothouse. Smith spoke guardedly of those players. He realized that he had to engage the press in order to highlight his Tar Heels, yet he tried to keep the spotlight from shining too glaringly. I began to recognize a pattern in our sessions together. I'd ask a question; he'd dispute the premise. Sometimes I'd rephrase the question, but more often I'd defend my original premise, at which point we were going one-on-one over some set of facts of which Smith usually had superior command. Soon enough, my time up, I'd leave his office and, leafing through my notebook, find that he had gone into a rhetorical Four Corners and run out the clock. (For example, after I'd asked about the North Carolina system: "I don't like the word system. To me it connotes that we're rigid, that we don't change with our personnel, and that's just not true. Now, if you say philosophy ...") But he genuinely loved the sparring and scoring of points, just as he loved a challenge on the golf course as much as the basketball court. He certainly didn't want the attention. When a new, 21,444-seat arena (now 21,750) opened on campus in 1986, he permitted his name to grace the Dean Smith Center only because university officials and past lettermen insisted that he alone could stand for Carolina basketball since the dawn of the '60s. When he broke that alltime wins record, he made sure to recognize the players and assistant coaches who sat beside him on the bench over the years, for "they all share in this moment," he said, before adding, in a nod to Sheehanian duality, "if indeed it is a moment." That comment underscores how Smith was his sport's philosopher king. Practices, games and the rankings of teams and recruits might ebb toward insignificance in the mind of a man who lent his name and voice to grand crusades, like civil rights and a nuclear freeze, and kept the works of Kierkegaard on his nightstand. Yet remember, per Sheehan: The game is essential as well as inconsequential. "There's very little that feels as good as a conference win on the road," Smith once said -- confessed, really. He obsessed over tactics and grappled with officials, engaging in gamesmanship with the grubbiest of his rivals. Yet he never lost sight of the cross purposes at the heart of sport, and he once mused to me, "I suppose my first goal was to keep my job. Then I wanted to win. Then I got more mature and said, 'Oh, we want to play well.' Then I'd ask myself, Why do I feel good when we

don't play well and win?" Such are the baser angels of our competitive nature. "I think we're most happy and free when there's a creator or spirit in charge of our lives," he once said. "And that's where I struggle. Because I want to take over constantly." So it was, addressing a college commencement audience at Eastern College in Pennsylvania, that he riffed on Churchill, "Always, always, always, always, always, always quit." Imagine how baffling that would look generations from now if read out of context. For an epitaph, better that we reprise something SI employed to describe Smith in 1997. It's our citation upon naming him Sportsman of the Year: "He never forgot that the arena is but an outbuilding of the academy." CREDIT: SPORTS ILLUSTRATED