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## The success of coach Kelly Sopak and the Miramonte girls basketball team

By Jon Kingdon



Kelly Sopak Photo Gint Federas

Geno Auriemma, the head coach of the University of Connecticut women's basketball team, has an 88.3 winning percentage during his tenure at Connecticut. Kelly Sopak, the head coach of the Miramonte girls basketball team has an 87.5 winning percentage during his nine seasons at Miramonte. The great UCLA head coach John Wooden had an 80.0 winning percentage. Sopak is in very good company.

Sopak, who grew up in the Seattle area, played football, baseball and wrestled. Ironically, with all of his successes coaching basketball, Sopak never played the game in high school or college: "I only played basketball recreationally."

Still, Sopak found an outlet in coaching basketball that fulfilled an inner drive that kept him involved in athletics: "I think the competitive side of me believes that coaching can make a difference and have an impact on the game in any sport. I love how in basketball, if you keep coaching your kids and developing them, inch by

inch and day by day, you see a huge improvement in the players over the course of the season, particularly when the playoffs begin in March."

Wooden was a great fan of women's basketball, appreciating the "purity" of the women's game. Sopak has his own observations about coaching girls basketball: "I just think that the girls are mentally tougher and smarter than the boys. You can't use the bench to motivate girls. You have to motivate the girls by being inclusive. They have to feel they're a part of a team and what you're all about. That's why I play so many of the players each game - the more they play, the more cohesion we have on our team."

Sopak credits Mark Buckleau, the longtime coach at Northgate, for getting him into coaching: "Mark was my first mentor. He taught me how to run a program and was able to illustrate the difference between coaching boys and girls."

Despite his overwhelming record, Sopak is not one to stand on his past achievements: "I am always trying to learn more and more about the game. Recently I spent two days with Geno Auriemma who has become a friend and is someone that I can call and ask questions. Geno's practices are not all that different from anyone else's practices but the message that he hands down to his players is accountability. I believe you hold people accountable which has to come from within, not from the coach yelling at you. You set your own standard and get the players to buy into it and then hold them to it. People want to be held to that standard and once they get a taste of that, you owe it to them to push them to be great."

Auriemma is just one of many coaches that Sopak studies, such as Kelly Graves (Oregon), Mike Neighbors (Arkansas), Lindsay Gottlieb (California) and Tara VanDerveer (Stanford). Says Sopak: "I have been humbled and flattered by these coaches as they have at times contacted me to ask questions as well. I love to share things with them as well as with any number of other high school coaches."

If you had to sum up Sopak's philosophy of the game in one word, it would be "pressure," which applies to his team's offense and defense. It's a demanding task for the players to play pressure defense all over the court the entire game while attacking constantly on offense. Being in shape to be able to play this way requires long and hard practices which the players have accepted, says Sopak: "Even with the number of transfers into our program, I take a lot of pride in that we have never had anyone transfer out. It speaks volumes about our school, our community and our players. I preach to our players all the time that the best part of all of this is the struggle and learning how to handle it, learning lessons that they will use in their adult life. This is just the first struggle they will go through, their first bit of adversity and it's on a basketball court. This is the fun part, learning from your losses, building on that, though the kids may not agree with that right now. We practice very hard and our practices are open for their parents to come watch. Our kids take pride in being the hardest working team and they thrive in that environment."

While Sopak's attitude and coaching scheme has been consistent through the years, he will still make some minor changes to fit the personnel: "We will adjust to our talent but our whole mantra is putting pressure on teams both offensively and defensively and being able to play under pressure. We don't deviate from applying pressure."

What has been a new experience for Sopak the last two years is coaching his daughter, Leah, which has been a positive for him: "It's fun, though I will catch myself watching her more as a dad than as a coach. Since I've been a coach long before she came along, it's probably harder on her, which is something I am trying to work on. She's just a great kid so I can remove my coach's hat. She is very coachable and a tough, hard worker who is stepping up as a leader as well as being a pleasant kid to coach, which may be what I am most proud of."

With such a successful record, one would think that the colleges would be calling for his services. In fact, Sopak has been offered the opportunity to coach on that level but chose to remain at Miramonte: "I did give it a lot of thought but it just wasn't to be. That would have been a job. Coaching at the high school level is more of a hobby for me and I just enjoy it so much."

As if coaching Miramonte wasn't enough, Sopak founded the Cal Stars Club team in 2006 and is now the Stars Club director and Nike Elite head coach. What started out as a simple, local club team, has grown to 16 teams and a national power and another opportunity for Sopak to put his imprimatur on girls basketball: "If I knew then what I know now, I probably wouldn't have started the program. My intention was just to provide the opportunity for some local kids to be able to play basketball. It was simple as that. Right from the start, we had more people try out than we thought we would have and it has grown and grown and grown where it is now a Nike sponsored program. I have gotten the opportunity to coach the elite players. Now there are club teams almost everywhere. Still the core value of the club team remains to give locals a chance to play. It was just dumb luck that as we started the club team, the colleges began to come to our tournaments and scout our players and then we were on our way."

Besides all of his coaching, since 1994, Sopak has run his own business as a State Farm Insurance agent in Albany. As with all of the students who have to balance practice and playing sports with school work, Sopak has found a way to handle his job and coaching the club teams and Miramonte: "Time management is crucial and I have great people at Cal Stars, as we have expanded, running the day-to-day stuff."

Sopak has been witness to many changes in the game and had the foresight to see where the game was going: "The game has changed and fortunately we were ahead of the curve when I began at Northgate. We went to the pressure defense and 3-point shooting offense and people thought that strategy was crazy and we carried that over to Miramonte playing 'small ball' but that was the evolution of the game. We did not have the big kids and we needed to play a different style."

Yet as the game has changed, Sopak feels it's not the kids who have changed, it's the parental influence that is the difference: "The thing that we hear all the time is that kids have changed but that is not the case. It's the parents who have changed. The players are the same. Any change in them comes from the parents, both positive and negative. Big picture wise, it goes back to the no pain-no gain philosophy that has changed. We don't treat people that way anymore, though that's not always a bad thing either. Too often as coaches, we view that as negative."

Though the winning percentage numbers have to be satisfying to Sopak, he is stepping up to a new challenge at Miramonte this season. After winning their division so many times, Miramonte is now playing an independent schedule: "We have 26 non-league games and there isn't an easy game on the schedule which will be tough for us as a team. I love the competition. We may lose more games this season but it's okay to lose sometimes as it reveals your character."

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