

Mary Wise: On Developing Relationships And Players As People

Welcome to PCA's One on One Positive Coaching Alliance's podcast series where we talk with leading experts about how to develop Better Athletes, Better People through sports. And now here's your host: Tina Syer, PCA Chief Impact Officer.

00:15 – TINA: Mary Wise has been the head coach of the University of Florida's volleyball team for 25 years. Since her hire there in 1991, she is the winningest coach in the nation with an eye-popping 767 victories. This two-time American Volleyball Coaches Association National Coach of the Year was awarded the title *All Time Great Coach* by USA Volleyball in 2006. Perhaps more impressive than her incredible scoreboard success is the Mary Wise Coaching Tree: more than a dozen of her former players and assistant coaches have gone on to be head coaches at the college level. Coach Wise thanks so much for joining me today.

00:54 – MARY: It's a pleasure.

00:56 – TINA: Thank you. I'm hoping we could hear a little bit about your experience growing up in Evanston, Illinois as one of six siblings. I'm really curious about what that was like and what your youth sports experience was like.

01:10 – MARY: Well, I can tell you that it was very different than youth sports today. One, just that era and, two, being a female. There were a few things that helped me along the way. One: four brothers. Two: in a neighborhood with a ton of kids so there were constant games being played and one of their favorite games that was played at a close-by park was baseball. It wasn't just team against team; it was trying to hit baseballs up on the L-tracks because that would be the homerun. I was the all-time pitcher; I never got to hit, but sure did help my arm swing! So: brothers, a lot of kids in the neighborhood; I grew up learning how to swim at the YMCA. I as a camp counselor – still one of the best jobs I ever had, being a camp counselor. And, in the Catholics Girls Chicagoland area, they had a girls' basketball league before there were basketball leagues in college almost. There was a really good girls' basketball league in the Chicago area and I got to do that in Junior High and loved that. I went on to play three sports in high school and the rest is history.

02:39 – TINA: And, one of those three sports in high school was volleyball?

02:43 – MARY: It was volleyball and even though I came to volleyball later than the other two sports – being basketball and softball – volleyball...I didn't start playing until, actually, 10th grade which would be crazy late for an athlete this day and age. But it was almost as a filler, as something to do in the fall before basketball, but it didn't take long to realize that this is the sport I love the most and thought I had the greatest potential because I certainly hadn't peaked that early-a-day. So, three years of playing high school and, then, very fortunate to be at the right place at the right time to be recruited to Purdue.

03:24 – TINA: What is that story of how the Purdue program saw you and how you ended up at Purdue?

03:29 – MARY: Well, Carol Dewey, who I believe may still be the all-time winningest coach in Purdue history, was recruiting a player from our league- a great player who went to our arch rival school. And, only because another recruit said no, that recruit, an all American went on to USC, [only because] that recruit said no did Carol Dewey have an open scholarship and she said at the time that she really was trying to find a personality. Of course, my teammates made fun of what that personality was, but I got it. She was trying to create a culture of winning and, not that I had had a ton of success, I just – you grow up with four brothers, you have to learn to be competitive just to get to the dessert. I was very fortunate. She was recruiting that great player in the area, which led her to be introduced to me. That was back in the day when you tried out and I bet my tryout was awful! I know she didn't recruit me for my skills. But, right place at the right time, moved, went to Purdue on a scholarship right when scholarships were first being offered. It wasn't true across the Big 10 but Purdue was one of the first schools. Moved from an outside hitter to a setter – you don't do that this day and age either. Setter, much like a point guard, you get to kind of run the show – I loved that. Maybe [that] made the transition into coaching easier because of it.

05:06-TINA: Yeah. I'm glad you were soft of going there: about sports specialization and specialization in positions because I was going to ask you when you specialized in volleyball and when you became a setter, so sounds like it wasn't until college that you specialized or that you even changed position when you got to the college level. I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about that for players who might be listening and their parents about when do you feel is the right time to specialize and it's a different day and age now, but keeping open-minded about your position and what you learned from your experience going to Purdue.

05:44 – MARY: Definitely, at the time I played was a different era and there wasn't the club volleyball, the year-round access to the same sport – private lessons and all that is offered right now. But, I do say this: if you go through the history of the University of Florida volleyball program, all of the players that were multiple All-Americans – not just one year, but more than one year – they came from different parts of the country, different parts of the world. They played in different eras and they played in different positions. There was one thing they had in common and that was they played more than just volleyball growing up. And, most of them played another sport beside volleyball into high school. I realize that is very difficult to do now – the strain that it causes families just to play one sport. But, especially for females, I would encourage not to specialize too soon. The best athletes that have come through Florida, the best athletes that have come through our women's national team program – they all play more than just volleyball growing up.

06:58 – TINA: Now, why do you think that is? Why do you think that is that they all have in common and what has helped them be so successful at that next level?

07:06 – MARY: I think it's just the motor learning of becoming a better athlete. I think boys are socialized, in terms of pick-up games and on the playground at a young age that they are always playing different games. Girls – it's just part of the playground culture – and, so, they are not trying...girls just don't go from one sport to another naturally the way young boys do. And so, if they are only playing volleyball, those are the only motor skills they learn and I think it does limit them in the long run.

07:45 – TINA: Yup. After your time at Purdue, and I think you're being pretty humble about your playing ability and getting recruited for your competitive personality, but surely after your days of being an undergrad playing you became the Iowa State head coach – I think at age 21, I believe that was the record setting young age for a head coach at the college level. I'm curious: were there specific lessons from Coach Dewey, Carol Dewey your Purdue coach, that you felt brought into that job? There are a few things now, all these years later, where you look back at that year – those few years – there are things you know now that you really wish you'd known then – maybe a few of those nuggets that you could pull out for some of our coaches who are listening. Things you wish you had known then.

08:35 – MARY: I can tell you, for the record, I did turn 22 before our first match. So at least I was older than the seniors. I was offered the job in May – right after I graduated from college – and I didn't even know what I did know. But this much I can tell you: I couldn't have asked for a better mentor than Carol Dewey and the time that she spent with me my senior year when I knew I wanted to coach in college – helping me to expand my volleyball IQ. But, at the end of the day, the most valuable lesson I learned from Carol is it's not about the X's and O's, it's about the people and the relationships. As long as I kept that as my number one focus – I haven't waived from that. Did I make coaching mistakes during my first year at Iowa State? Absolutely! Heck, I got a speeding ticket on the way to our first match when we drove vans. I made a ton of mistakes. But I always look back – at least I didn't get anybody hurt. And I still keep in touch with that group of players. Two years ago, when Florida played in the regionals, at Iowa State a group of them came to the matches that we played and it was so...I hadn't seen them in all these many years, but to see the successful women that they've become and know that they look back and they value their time at Iowa State. The Iowa State program did a wonderful job of welcoming them back that weekend. It was really one of the highlights over the past few years. For a young coach, I think we can get caught up in what you *don't* know, but as long as your motivation and your culture and your philosophy is one of integrity and honesty, and put the person to understand that the person is always more important than the player then I think you can survive the mistakes.

10:46 – TINA: I love this: “the person is more important than the player.” You were saying that Carol taught you to always put the people and the relationships first; what did you do specifically to do that? Are there certain things that a new coach could mimic in the way that you would put the people and the relationships first?

11:07 – MARY: The challenge I had at the time, when I was hired at 21, I wanted – I felt it was so important – I had to separate myself from the players. I was almost kidding myself that I was this seasoned experienced coach. I tried to be honest, I didn't know anything and I didn't try to pretend I did, but to understand that if you show that you care – you know, one of the great quotes I love is “they don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.” I think Carol taught me that. That the team just wanted...they were so motivated to at least be competitive and they worked tirelessly. They never questioned my background or my motivation. I put in wrong lineups, I – there are so many things I would've done different, but they knew I wanted badly to win. We were going to compete as hard, but, more important that – again, that I learned from Carol: “care about the person first, the wins will follow.” I think sometimes we can lose track of that, and, especially, as athletics grow and the amount of money into it. But I don't think, at any level, will it hurt you if you put the person above the player. So much so that when I was coaching I had the players call me Mary. Now, why not “coach?” I thought it would be false; it would be a false pretense if I asked them to call me “Coach” when I was their age—the seniors' age and then just turned a year older, in time. And, so, referring to me as every player as done since – not the freshmen, because they barely know what to say in front of me – but, ever since, they call me Mary because I want them to know we're on the same page. I'm not going to put myself so far up on a pedestal. There's no need. We're in this together.

13:18 – TINA: Well, I wanted to ask you about the University of Florida and taking over a program that before you joined didn't have any regular season SCC titles. I believe now you guys have won 21, and, somewhere in there, there was an 18-year streak of SCC titles – just incredible! I was curious: how do you go create that culture, and, I think, you've given me some of the keys to that culture. But, specifically, what does it feel like to play for you in that culture? One of the things now is that I'm going to call you “Mary” not “Coach,” but what is it like to be an athlete on your team both on the court and then, also, off the court?

14:01 – MARY: I would like to think that the players, after they've come to the program, can step back and say that they grew as a person; that we used the sport as just the avenue to become a better person; that they would leave– the women that come through this program would feel the strength and the confidence that they could go accomplish whatever they wanted to and that the only limits that are there are ones that weren't put on themselves. We were going to compete in and we'll compete hard, very hard. But, our culture is one of respecting one another, loving the game, and building relationships that will last a lifetime. One of my favorite things about this job is the relationships I can have with the players after they've graduated, when I'm no longer trying to push them out of their comfort zone. And, I did have a players tell me that. She said that I always thought she was capable of doing more than she thought she was capable of doing. I think empowering your athletes is the best gift we can give them. Getting them to believe in themselves.

15:22 – TINA: I think I may have heard you – you were about to say “empowering the young women” and of course all athletes through sports. One question we get at

Positive Coaching Alliance a lot is “What’s the difference between coaching boys and girls or between coaching men and women?” I’m curious; I bet you get that question as well. Do you think there’s a difference? Are there certain coaching techniques or things that you feel work with women that don’t work as well with men? Do you differentiate at all when you think about coaching boys versus girls?

15:53 – MARY: I will answer this question and tell you although I have not coached boys or men I did raise two boys and two boys that played sports so I was around it a lot. Now, I’m going to give credit: where I learned this from is Kathy DeBoer who is the Executive Director of the American Volleyball Coaches Association. When I worked for her many years ago, she—an avid reader who was working on her master’s and was learning about the sociology between men and women. It was right when there was a book called “Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus” and it was a pop culture book about the difference between men and women. Kathy really studied this and has since written a book on gender and competition. Understanding, again, men and women are socialized differently and men see the world in terms of – and I’m drawing very...trying to narrow this down to the right Reader’s Digest version of it – is that men see the world in terms of a ladder and hierarchy and where they are on that ladder. Women see the world in terms of relationships. We value – women – connectedness. We fear separation. Do I see a difference? Absolutely. Do I coach knowing that? 100% that if I can get the player to feel connected, even the last player who’s not on the bench, who isn’t participating and contributing in a significant playing role – for her to still feel connected, part of the family, part of the team – that is what’s most important. Even the best female, the most talented female player on your team, if she doesn’t feel connected to the group she’s not going to perform up to her capabilities. She’s not going to excel.

17:51 – TINA: How do you do that? That last player on the bench, how do you keep her involved and connected?

17:56 – MARY: She too has a role. She has to see her worth. Every human being makes a contribution. And, as a coach, it’s our job to help them identify what that contribution is. Then, help them develop the *next* way they can help contribute, but every player has to feel – I think, to be successful – that they have to feel that they’re part of a family and that they are valued. My job is to help them see it individually, and then help the collective group recognize each other’s worth.

18:39 – TINA: Excellent. Excellent. Earlier, you were talking about how you – I want to get this exactly right – you said you push players sometimes to a place that they don’t even know they can go and that you’re helping them get to a place that they didn’t even think they could get to. I’m curious, how do you—it sounds like, from all I’ve heard, you’re a really positive coach and when people talk about you they talk about how positive you are and, at the same time, you’re very demanding. So how do those two things coexist? There may be some people who think a positive coach – I think there’s a misconception that that’s soft or easy and, just, you say “good job” – but, how do you balance or how do those two things coexist? Being positive and demanding.

19:23 – MARY: I think they can coexist. I think you start with building that culture of getting a player to be comfortable being uncomfortable. But also...players tend -- it's so true in high school, college, younger, it's so hard to see the big picture; to see down the road. All they can see is themselves today, right now. How they performed in that match. Not to put a value on -- as a person, we should not be judged on our athletic performance. We are the people we are, we are not the player we are. To try and help an individual understand the long term...I can remember my first years here, I had very little background with the players, and I told one of the players in an early practice -- that might've been the first week I was at Florida --what a great passer I thought she is, and how I see her being a central part of our team serve-receive. She never thought of herself as a great passer; actually, she didn't think she was a very good passer at all. I saw the technique, but she had somehow gotten that label or put the label on herself. She was a rising junior and she had two great years as an integral part of our serve-receive. I think you can -- just changing the narrative for a player, helping them see down the road of the player they can be and then providing the path. I think that's what we do in coaching: you help them see their talents, and I often say, "Make your strength your strength." While you're growing your game, whatever it is you do well, be great at that. Hang your hat on that. Then we'll grow the rest of your game because when you have something you do well, that's when you're confident. There's no substitute for self-confidence.

21:39 – TINA: Absolutely. Absolutely. Not all players are confident and self-confident. I think often they fear making mistakes or they make a mistake and they can't get beyond it; it really impacts their performance moving forward. Do you have any tools that you use with your athletes to help them past mistakes? Are mistakes something you guys openly talk about as a team?

22:03 – MARY: We do talk about it. One of the lines we use often is "Fail often." The only way to get better is by failing and risking failure. I think that's a great thing about athletics: it allows you to risk failure. Most of us -- none of us are perfect and every time she goes back to serve, there's a chance she's going to miss. And, that's okay. You learn from those failures. The player who tries to be safe will never get the most out of his or her potential. And, as a coach, that's why we schedule as difficult a competition as we can. Is there a chance of losing? Absolutely, but that's how we learn. ...I rather they make an aggressive mistake than play conservatively. The best players that have come through this program were willing to look bad along the way, make plenty of mistakes, but that's how they grew their game.

23:09 – TINA: Yeah. So, I'm curious in the recruiting progress how much do you look for that mentality? You know, being willing to be pushed out of your comfort zone and play hard and with intensity and not play more passively -- where you want to play perfectly. Are you able to assess that in your recruiting and is that mentality something you're able to look at -- not just the physical volleyball skills of what you're seeing on the court?

23:38 – MARY: it's certainly something we love to find while we're recruiting: the player that has not only the athletic talent and the volleyball skills, but that persona, that positive energy competitive – the player who wants the ball at match-point and is willing to risk being the goat. It's going to happen. Again, I think the more games they play – no matter what kinds of games they are – the more you learn how to lose. It's not about the loss, it's about learning from the loss.

24:22 – TINA: What advice would you give athletes? You know, it's always such a stressful situation for kids when they're playing in tournaments and they know there are a lot of college coaches watching. What are some of the things you're looking for and other coaches are looking for that aren't, again, the physical skills on the court? What advice would you give kids about how they carry themselves at tournaments and when they're being watched by coaches?

24:46 – TINA: I think to play for your teammates and play for the love of the game without having one eye on who's watching. As coaches, we do – we watch at timeouts. What's the eye contact with the coach? Where does the player go immediately following the match? Into the stands? With her parents? Does she immediately put headphones on and separate herself? Or is she –some of the players I have enjoyed coaching the most are players that you can just see they – they do have big personalities – but people are drawn to them. She's maybe the one leading the dance during warmups and has that kind of enthusiasm for what she's doing. We talk about, in camp, one of the messages we send is that you're either a Giver or a Taker. A Giver, that's the player who goes out of her way, no matter what her game looks like at that moment, trying to help her teammates - inspiring her teammates; slapping hands; making eye contact; bringing energy between plays. The Taker, is the player – and we give them roles when we demonstrate this at camp. I'm an eye-roller [who] feels full of herself. We have all these different roles and the players are great about acting them out and really exaggerating it. We talk about certain things you cannot control as an athlete: how tall you are; how long or short your arms might be, how big or small your hands might be. But you can always control your attitude. If we were recruiting, no matter how talented she might be, if she was so caught up in her own self, it would be really hard to look past that. I think the great players make everyone else around them better not just with their skills, but with their drive, their work ethic, their attention to detail and, really, how much fun they are to play with.

17:09 – TINA: Mary, you're getting me so fired up I think I might have to become a libero and make a re-entry into the college scene to come play for you.

27:19 – MARY: Bring it on! I'll take you in a heartbeat.

27:21 – TINA: Awesome! It's awesome! So another one of the big changes that's come along during your time coaching is social media. It's such a hot topic for a lot of high school students and even the middle school students that we talk to. I think it's naïve to think kids aren't going to use social media, but do you have some best practices or

advice you give kids at your camps or your college students about their own use of social media especially where it intersects with their sports?

27:49 – MARY: We do have conversations especially with our players about the impact social media can have. We have folks - professionals – who'll come in and talk to them about how one bad post could affect someone's life. That's really, really scary. How conscientious they have to be. But what isn't different is the message that players were receiving 25 years ago and that is "24/7 they represent our program, our family; and the decisions they make off the court are a reflection on the players before them and their teammates at this time and to never forget that." Social media could be used in such empowering positive ways, if every post you had was an opportunity to encourage someone else or applaud someone's efforts or recognize someone else, I think we could take less selfies and give more props – would be good for social media.

29:05 – TINA: I love it. I love it. Take less selfies. That's great. Give more props. That's awesome. I think another big thing I think has changed a lot even at the college level is the involvement of parents. 25, 30 years ago we didn't have parents calling college coaches trying to give their input on the program. But I think the way sports have gone, parents feel that is their role, occasionally. I'm curious, in your program, what do you do to set the foundation for parents about how they're involved in your program? How do you feel that experience of interacting with parents has changed over your 30 years coaching at the college level?

29:50 – MARY: The rule that we put into place early on has helped us. That was, I would happily talk to any parent, but the player has to be present for that conversation. I know that's a rule that a lot of high school coaches use as well. I think, as long as it's an open dialogue and I try to present "your daughter playing well and succeeding is exactly what I want, too. Now, how we get there – we may see different paths about how we get there – but the sooner we're on the same page.... "Once that culture is in place, and the older players explain it to the younger players. You know, every freshman that goes to college at our level they never sat on the bench; they never *not* started. They're going to go through an adjustment period. I tell the parents and I tell the player "She cannot call home only after, in her eyes, was a bad practice she must call home after the good practices. Because what's a parent supposed to do? If they only hear from her after she, in her eyes, saw it as a bad practice – I don't think players have too many bad practices myself; I think you put in good effort, you might not have gotten much better that day and we can talk about what might have gotten in the way – but, as a parent, I understand. If you only hear the bad, you're going to be skewed. I try to see the parents as a great asset to our program and they raised them. I will tell you this: players that have been raised really the best, the less raising I have to do during their career. That player who had high values and the understanding of respecting one another and all of those wonderful values that they learned from their parents, I don't have to—that's not whole lot more teaching I have to do. But, I also understand, for reasons that were not the players' fault, not everyone has that in their background just in terms of some players who had really tough growing up experiences then that's my job. I bought into that and ... I would say this to any high school coach, college coach:

once they're on your team, the more energy you spend on their strengths, and less about what they're not, the happier you'll be and the better the athlete will be. It's really easy to get caught up in what they aren't, but I think that's making a mistake. Spend your energy on what they are, who they are, and the positive they bring to your program.

32:51 – TINA: Wonderful. Wonderful. One of the things I mentioned in my intro is just the incredible coaching tree that you've grown of players, former players of yours, former assistant coaches, who've gone on to be head coaches at the college level, I know, also, the high school level and I'm curious what do you think it is that's causing so many of your former players and assistant coaches and even both of your sons to end up wanting to go into coaching as a profession?

33:21 – MARY: Well, in the case of my sons, I promise it wasn't because I pushed them that way. I used to joke all the time "there has to be an easier way to make a living than to be a college coach." But, to the players, I like to think that their experience here was so positive and that they saw it as a way to help change lives, better lives. I think being a college athlete is one of the greatest experiences. You would know that! If the trickle-down theory can happen in terms of if she has a great experience and can bring that to somebody else, then I think at the end of the day – I would like to think that's how we're viewed. It's not about – no one will ever, ever remember the winning record and that doesn't matter. What matters is: did you make it a positive experience? And, when someone left your program -whether they left your little league team, your high school JV team, they left our university - if they left a better person with wonderful long-lasting relationships, then we did our job.

34:37 – TINA: Well, Mary, I think that that's the perfect note to conclude our interview. I appreciate so much for you to spend this time today on this Positive Coaching Alliance One-On-One Podcast and I know many coaches and parents and athletes will benefit. Really with you and the Gators all the best in the future. Thank you so deeply for being such a wonderful role model for the rest of us. I think you really shared some tangible things others can learn from and emulate. Thank you so much.

35:07 – MARY: It was a pleasure. Thank you for letting me be part of it.