



Coach Knight celebrates  
another tough play.

# The Real Bobby Knight

By Michael Ledeen

**O**n September 9, 2000, just as the students were returning to campus, Bob Knight, the legendary coach of Indiana University's basketball team for 29 hectic years, was fired by IU President Myles Brand. Knight was summarily convicted of a "pattern of unacceptable behavior" that violated a "zero tolerance" policy. The axe fell following a widely publicized incident when Knight lectured a freshman on the proper way to address his elders, after the student—who happened to be the stepson of one of Knight's most outspoken critics—provoked him with a "What's up, Knight?" Brand's list of Knight's offenses included the coach's insufficient deference to the athletic director, rudeness to an IU lawyer, and speaking ill of university administrators. Like General George Patton, who, after slapping a soldier, was put on ice in England while lesser mortals conducted the D-Day invasion, Bob Knight spent a year wondering if he would ever again be able to bring his unique genius to bear on the thing he does best and loves most.

He needn't have worried. Though subjected to a "Börking" as harsh and unfair as that experienced by any political figure in America over the past decade, Knight's long record of success and a lifetime of loyalty to his friends enabled him to relocate to Lubbock, Texas, where he now coaches the Red Raiders of Texas Tech. And, just as he had at IU, Knight took a wounded basketball program and revitalized it dramatically, producing a winning season with a team that had finished at the bottom of the Big 12 Conference the year before, while filling arenas all over the country and earning an invitation to the NCAA tournament at the end of the season.

That Bobby Knight had to doubt whether he even had a future speaks volumes about the state of the culture. The youngest coach ever to win 600 games, Knight led Indiana to

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*Michael Ledeen is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. He hasn't thrown any chairs, so far.*

three NCAA championships, two NIT championships, and 11 Big 10 titles. He coached the U.S. National Team to an Olympic gold medal and victory in a stormy Pan-Am championship. He's just five good years away from becoming the coach with the most wins in American collegiate basketball history. A panel of more than 100 top basketball coaches voted him the man who, more than any other, changed the nature of his game in the last 20 years. Tony Kornheiser, the *Washington Post's* popular sports columnist, says unhesitatingly, "If I had to play one basketball game for my life, I'd want Bobby Knight to coach the team."

Yet Knight's removal was hailed by the media and academia. He was caricatured as a man hopelessly out of touch with modern sports ethics, a bully bordering on psychotic, a curious anachronism so mean to his players he was an embarrassment to basketball, perhaps to the entire country. As the 2001-2002 basketball season began, ESPN ran an hour-long special that magnified his temper, foul language, and outbursts against his players and game officials. And yet, if you talk to Knight's players, you will find scores of successful men who swear by him, who credit him with a large part of their success. You will even find some who feel he saved their lives—who see Knight as the man who taught them not only the value of hard work and discipline, but also the virtues of friendship and scholarship.

The debate over Bob Knight involves much more than the man himself; it revolves around fundamental questions on the nature of men, of the male sex, and what is required for men to sublimate their own passions and egos in order to become part of a successful team. The comparison that most readily comes to mind is with the great World War II General George S. Patton. Sports are a more civilized form of warfare, and successful athletic teams are very much like successful fighting forces.

Like Patton, Knight is a big personality, with oversized faults and virtues. Like Patton, he is an accomplished athlete. He is a big man, as befits an alum of the great Ohio State national championship team of the '60s that also included John Havlicek, Jerry Lucas, and Larry Siegfried. As Patton did with his soldiers, Knight inspires intense loyalty from his players, and, like Patton, Knight has an explosive and destructive temper that has often overshadowed his accomplishments and left even his greatest admirers shaking their heads and wondering what devil makes him do it. Patton was the greatest Allied general, the most sophisticated thinker in Eisenhower's armies; but he will forever be remembered as the fellow who slapped a shell-shocked G.I.

Knight is unusually cultured for a man in his profession, devoted to higher learning—to the point of digging into his own pockets for hundreds of thousands of dollars for academic programs, and raising millions for endowed chairs in history and law—and capable of serious conversation with friends like George Will and Clarence Thomas. When I interviewed him shortly after his firing we spent considerable time discussing military history, a subject he clearly has mastered. Alas, thanks to the caricatures of him in the popular media, he is likelier to be

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remembered for flinging a chair across the court, stuffing an obstreperous fan into a garbage pail, and grabbing a player during a practice session.

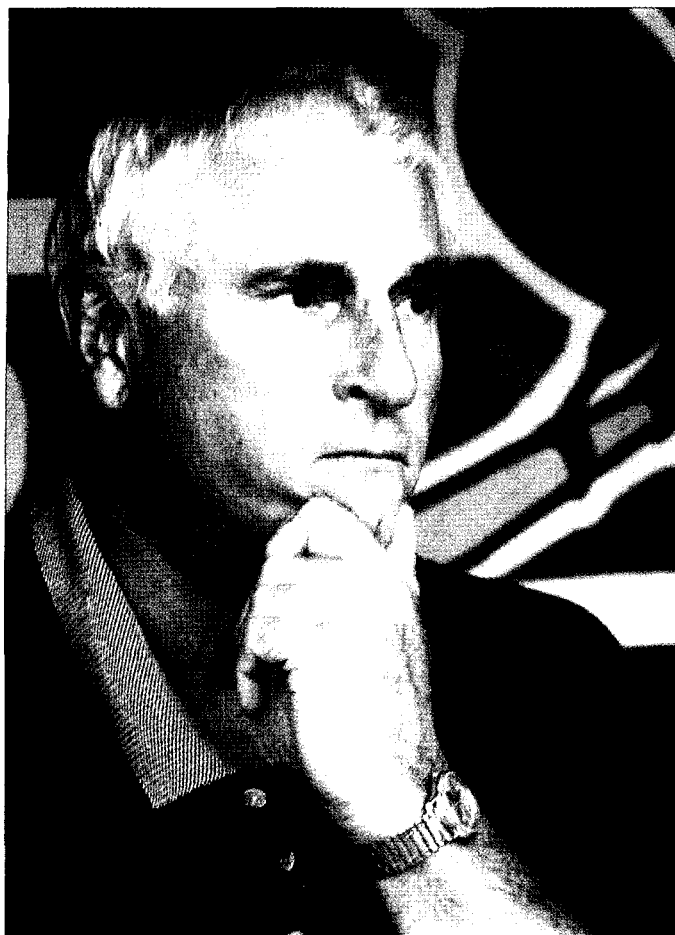
It's hard to imagine a big-time coach more devoted to the basic mission of the university. Until the 1990s, Knight's teams had an astonishing graduation record of over 90 percent, and although the percentage dropped a bit in recent years—largely because of transfers—it has remained one of the highest in sports history. Unlike most of the celebrated college coaches of the modern era, Knight insists that his athletes' primary obligation is to become educated citizens. One of the stars on his very first Indiana team, Steve Downing, told me that Knight's insistence on education had turned his whole life around. Like most players on that squad, Downing was a street kid, and the pre-Knight team was a pretty wild group, preferring drugs and booze to homework and term papers. When he arrived in Bloomington from West Point in the summer of 1971, Knight called in the veteran players and talked to them one-on-one. Downing walked into the coach's office and started the usual pleasant chit-chat, but Knight would have none of it. "Never mind all that crap," he said, "I've been looking at your transcript. You're not studying. Now get this straight," Knight growled, "you damn well better get your grade point average up, or you're not playing on my team. If you want to transfer, that's fine with me, but the rules here are: You don't go to class, you don't play basketball." Downing straightened up, got his degree, and today is assistant athletic director at Texas Tech.

I first met Knight at an academic conference on "Culture and the Cold War" in Bloomington a couple of years ago. The keynote speaker was David Halberstam, a friend of Knight's who had sought a tutorial on the subtleties of basketball when he wrote a biography of Michael Jordan. Knight presented Halberstam to the conference, speaking off-the-cuff, and dazzled the audience with his understanding of Halberstam's work. He spoke in complete paragraphs, ably summarized Halberstam's contributions to American historical scholarship, and congratulated the organizers for their appreciation of Halberstam's wisdom.

At his first head coach position at West Point, Knight once declined an invitation to the NCAA tournament because he felt it would take too much time away from classes and exams; Army played instead in the less prestigious NIT championship. He also voted against the creation of a Big 10 Tournament because it conflicted with exams in Bloomington. Instead of finding ways for his players to get the usual favors from their professors, Knight worked to create one of the country's best academic counseling programs, which was then extended to players in all sports.

Nor is his concern about classwork limited to his players. He visited an organic chemistry class to remind the students there that before they could do what they wanted to do, it was neces-





sary to do what they had to do, a theme he sounded continually in annual meetings with the student body. It is simply not possible to find another athletic coach at a major American university who spends so much time, energy, and money to support the academic quality of his school.

You would think, then, that whatever one's overall judgment of Bob Knight, the last criticism a knowledgeable person could aim at him is a lack of commitment to educational standards. But that's precisely what IU did in the days following Knight's purge on September 9. "No athletic program is more important than the academic mission of the university," President Brand wrote in the local *Herald-Times*. The presidents of all the other Big 10 universities signed a full-page ad, which was sponsored by the American Council on Education, and supported by the Association of American Universities and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. The September 22 ad in the *Chicago Tribune* reiterated the disinformation: "When a university's essential mission or reputation is obscured by excessive powers concentrated in a coach or ill-considered actions by any member of the university community, the exercise of presidential leadership to counter such situations is crucial. Even popular and successful coaches must observe institutional chain of command and be bound by values and policies of the institutions they serve." Significantly, the presidents of the sponsoring organizations were all former Big 10 presidents. But their advertisement raises more questions about

their universities than about the coach they derided.

The event was so extraordinary that the *Tribune* ran a news story the same day, noting that the ad had cost nearly \$66,000. Neither the *Tribune's* "higher education writer" nor the dozens of journalists who had covered Knight's real and imagined excesses bothered to point out that Big 10 basketball programs (with the notable exception of Indiana) had been famously soiled by ethical violations of NCAA rules in recent years, that the University of Minnesota was in court to recover a huge payoff it had given to a coach fired for falsifying academic records, or that the University of Wisconsin had just been forced to apologize for altering a photograph in one of its brochures, having inserted a black face into a clip of student fans in order to present a more "diverse" picture. None of these egregious actions had provoked a response from the college presidents, or from the three sponsoring university trade associations in Washington which singled out Knight as a major threat to academic values.

Of course Knight's serious side never attracted a fraction of the media interest generated by his controversies. When a former player, Neil Reed, claimed that Knight had once choked him during practice, Brand and the trustees opened an investigation. Knight was so positive no such thing had happened that he dug out the videotape of the practice session and delivered it to Brand. Somebody passed the tape to CNN, and it was broadcast and re-broadcast ad infinitum, along with commentary on "the choking incident." Along with that clip—which did not match Reed's description—other lowlights of Knight's career were shown, featuring his celebrated launch of a chair across the court during a game with Purdue during the 1994-95 season, a kick that was supposedly launched against his son, Pat, during a game with Kentucky, and temper tantrums directed against players and officials. His enemies piled on, adding tales of threats to colleagues, and one colorful story which had him hurling a flower pot at a secretary in the athletic department.

The stories wouldn't pass muster in a serious editorial office. Most of the sources are badly tainted, and the facts are invariably less dreadful than advertised. Reed claimed that Knight had to be dragged off him, but the tape showed that had not, in fact, happened. The "choking" was so brief that it isn't clear it even happened. Reed himself was voted off the team by his fellow players—none of whom verified his story—and his basketball career, after high expectations, was undistinguished. The celebrated chair was flung, but nobody was hurt, Knight was reprimanded, and he apologized. Knight insists, and others present agree, that he threw no flower pot. (The secretary who proclaimed the botanic assault had hated him for years.) As for the kicking, Knight punted a chair, not his son (ask Bob Costas, the careful NBC sports broadcaster who went over the tape with Knight). And notice a real man-bites-dog factoid: Under Knight, Indiana had the fewest technical fouls of any Big 10 team.

Knight is the second to admit that he has trouble controlling his temper (the first is his wife Karen), and that it has driven him

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to do things he wished he hadn't. But the same can be said about many big-time coaches. His friend John Cheney, the Temple basketball coach who is greatly admired by the media and who calls himself the "black Knight," says that he had done far worse than Knight (he actually K.O.'ed one of his players), and no one ever suggested he was a menace. During a University of Maryland football game, the Terrapins' immensely popular coach, Ralph Friedgen, enraged by his players' poor first-half performance, hurled a chair across the locker room at halftime. When he didn't get a sufficient reaction from his players he threw another one. That evidently got their attention, they went on to win the game and a major bowl invitation, and the chair incident was written up with evident approval.

If, instead of watching games on television, you go to any arena, you will see and hear lots of the sins alleged to be unique to Bobby Knight. At the Final Four NCAA basketball championship in Indianapolis a couple years ago I sat in one of the most distant seats, yet I heard every four-letter word Wisconsin coach Dick Bennett shrieked at one of his players after grabbing him by the uniform and dragging him to the bench. Bennett's temper is accepted, as is Gene Keady's of Purdue or Jim Calhoun's of Connecticut, as was Vince Lombardi's and Bill Parcell's.

Why are these latter men considered lovable curmudgeons, while Knight is portrayed as a deranged menace? One reason is that Knight, as Patton before him, provoked much media antipathy. Although he is capable of extraordinary charm and could have sports writers hanging on his analyses after ball games, Knight has often insulted journalists, suggested they should be out on the streets working for a living, and cursed them for asking stupid questions. They have been happy to take their revenge.

But there is more to this story than wounded journalistic egos. Knight's real crime is that he is blatantly, hugely in violation of today's new rules of political correctness. He refuses to play the celebrity game, which require a slickened public image for our top men. As writers like Christina Hoff Sommers have demonstrated, there is nothing so intolerable today as a boy being a boy. Men are now expected to be gentle creatures; even military officers are required to attend sensitivity sessions.

The ugly stereotype of Bob Knight is far more than an attack on an admittedly prickly and cantankerous individual; it reflects a change in our thinking about men, and therefore about our understanding of what it takes to make men work together under pressure. Team sports like basketball are violent, yet many Americans, especially those who have not played the games themselves, are convinced that the hard edges of sports can be eliminated if coaches will just soften themselves and act more kindly toward their players.

Ideally, there should be a happy medium. It isn't easy to discipline young athletes, bursting with hormones and the energy built up in endless hours on the practice field and in the weight room. One must lead such young men with, in Machiavelli's language, a mixture of love and fear. In real life, Machiavelli knew, it

is very hard to find that magical balance point, and the philosopher insisted that, of the two emotions, fear is more reliable than love, because love is fickle.

When fighting for survival, whether on a sports field or a battlefield, whether in politics or business, people need to know that their teammates will fight alongside them, and will not break discipline. That is why many leaders are harsh and demanding disciplinarians. We kid ourselves—and, far worse, we put ourselves in jeopardy—if we pretend that leadership, especially of men engaged in violent undertakings, can be accomplished by nice words and high-minded sermons. Just as soldiers come to recognize that their vicious drill sergeant is trying to save their lives, male athletes know their coach is preparing them for tough times ahead.

Bobby Knight's biggest mistake is simply an excess of candor. He does in public what most of his peers have learned to do only in private. In many more ways than his critics will ever admit, Knight is the norm, not the aberration, in successful drillers of young men. Because hardness is what works. Real men understand and appreciate that.

The campaign against Bob Knight bespeaks a modern intolerance and ideological shortsightedness that should worry us. America is a big country, and we have always prided ourselves on the enormous variety of personalities that make up our citizenry. The Hoosiers cherished Bob Knight as a true American Original. They were willing to tolerate his faults—which they recognized, sometimes deplored, and often perversely enjoyed—because they took such joy in his virtues.

It's worth a lot to watch a true genius reshape his profession. It's worth even more to have a man who insists on student athletes being both—not athletes occasionally pretending to be real students. It's rare to find an athletic leader who is deeply involved in the life of the mind, one who shows his players through his own behavior that a man cannot be whole unless he develops both body and spirit. And it's priceless to have a man who does it all without ever cheating, who is compulsively ethical, whose inability to dissimulate is one of his endearing vulnerabilities, and whose total dedication to his school, his family, his players, and his sport define the meaning of loyalty.

If Americans have become intolerant of such hard men, they are surely diminished by it. Our young need such leaders, especially the fighting men in all sectors of our society. But our country's young men will never learn such lessons in an atmosphere of enforced sweetness. We must let boys be boys—so they can become men.



By Blake Hurst

Two Klamath pioneers observe an early irrigation ditch.

Lawson Kardia

# Calamity in Klamath

Meet some American patriots  
who are being sacrificed for suckers

**P**aul Christy flew fighter planes in World War II, enlisting within hours of the attack on Pearl Harbor. He earned a Silver Star and a Purple Heart, and is extremely proud to have served his country. But today, when he talks about how he and his neighbors have been treated, tears come to his eyes. "Sixty years ago, I was behind Rommel's lines in North Africa. Today, I'm still fighting, although this time, it's against my own government."

Christy is a retired farmer in the Klamath basin of Northern California and Southern Oregon. In the spring of 2001, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation announced abruptly that no water would be available for irrigation in his valley during the 2001 growing season. None whatever. Instead, bureaucrats with the Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service decided that the water that had been used for agriculture for the last half-century should be retained in Upper Klamath Lake. Without water, the 1,200 local farmers were unable to raise their crops, an economic death sentence for the entire district.

The officials closing off the taps cited the Endangered Species

Act, opining that the usual withdrawal of irrigation water from Upper Klamath Lake would harm the shortnose sucker, the Lost River sucker, and the coho salmon. "The decision was announced the day before President Clinton left office," notes basin farmer John Crawford—just another parting shot from a President who was extremely busy doing favors for his pet interests in the last weeks of his tenure.

The irrigation cutoff destroyed well over \$100 million in immediate economic activity. As farmers and laborers attempted to deal with the loss of jobs, a year's income, and in some cases the land itself, referrals for mental health counseling increased dramatically. Sharon Molder, the principal of the local high school, reports that the district lost around 50 students after farm families sold their land and moved on. Students were under stress, understandably confused as to why three species of fish were more important than their lifelong homes. In perhaps the saddest story,

*Blake Hurst is a TAE contributing writer, and a third-generation Missouri farmer.*