

ALL GUTS
AND
NO GLORY

*An Alabama Coach's
Memoir of Desegregating
College Athletics*

BILL ELDER

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They Called Me Coach

“I get to coach. I know I’ve been blessed.”

—JIM VALVANO

Longtime basketball coach, North Carolina State University

With my physical education program well under way, I was able to turn my attention to recruiting players who, during the following season, would become the first basketball team at Northeast State. I knew that north Alabama was a hotbed of basketball, similar to many rural areas in the Midwest. With this in mind, I decided to recruit mostly local players. I had heard that Sylvania High School, located about five miles from the campus, had a six-foot, three-inch forward who was considered one of the better players on Sand Mountain. After watching David Pack play, I decided that I wanted to make him my first signee. I met with David and his coach at the high school and he seemed delighted with the idea of playing at Northeast State. I told him that I would meet him at his home the following Saturday to make it official.

Even though it was only a short distance to his home from the college, I decided to check out a state car to make the signing more official. In those days, each state junior college had a small fleet of state cars for business use by its employees. All of

the state cars were the same. Each one was a green Chevrolet with the Seal of Alabama on the front doors. I got the keys to the car on Friday afternoon and picked it up from the parking lot at 1:00 P.M. on Saturday. Although I had directions to David's house, I wanted to give myself plenty of time to get there by 2:00 P.M. when we had scheduled a signing ceremony with David and his parents. My decision to get an early start was a good one because after driving around the Sylvania community area for about a half hour, I was hopelessly lost. I finally stopped at one of the many general stores that I had seen to try to get better directions.

These stores were pretty much alike. They were wooden structures with two gas pumps in the front, groceries and soft drinks inside, and living quarters in back for the owner. On the front porch there were usually several men in bib overalls playing dominoes or just sitting around shooting the breeze. I parked my car at the front of such a store and asked one of the men on the porch if he knew where David Pack lived. He squinted his eyes and thought long and hard. "I don't think I've ever heard of a family around here by the name of Pack," he said, shaking his head. "You must be in the wrong county," he added helpfully. After stopping at several more stores and getting about the same answer, I was pretty discouraged. Finally, a local teenager tapped me on the shoulder as I was getting into the car. "You know what your problem is, don't you?" he asked in a low voice. I assured him that I had no idea what my problem was. "David Pack is a basketball star. You would think that most people would have heard of him and at least somebody would know where he lives," I said in exasperation. "You're not from around here, are you?" he asked with a knowing smile on his face. "No, I'm not," I answered. "I just moved

here from Birmingham and I'm the new basketball coach at Northeast State Junior College. I was supposed to sign David to a basketball scholarship about five minutes ago."

I could tell from his expression that he had figured out the problem. He told me that I was in a dry county, and many of the local farmers operated stills to supplement their incomes and that people who showed up in state cars, wearing suits, and asking a lot of questions, were usually from the Alabama Department of Revenue (in local parlance, "revenuers"). He explained that the people I had talked to obviously thought I was looking for the Packs so I could arrest them for making moonshine whiskey. Fortunately, however, he had seen my picture in the *Sand Mountain Reporter* and knew who I was. He gave me directions and I arrived shortly at the Pack's house, only about ten minutes late.

The house had weathered wood siding that was probably white at one time but had not likely seen a fresh coat of paint in at least twenty-five years. The front steps were made of cinder blocks. The yard was bare ground and appeared to have been recently swept with a brush broom. Two mixed-breed dogs dozed on the front porch. They opened their eyes briefly to check me out when I knocked on the door but were apparently not impressed because they both went back to sleep.

David's mother met me at the door. She was probably in her forties and was attractive, wearing a plain dress that was clean and well pressed, very much the image of a farm wife in a Norman Rockwell painting. I introduced myself and she went to get David who was out in the field working with his father. I had a seat on the living room sofa, which was covered by a blanket. The other furniture in the room looked worn, but the house appeared to be well-kept. It appeared that the

Packs were like most farm families of that day who did not have a large income but would not be considered poor because they raised most of their own food and managed well on their limited resources.

After the mother left to get David, a young boy and girl came into the living room and stood in front of the sofa and stared at me. The boy appeared to be about three years old and the girl, a year or so younger. "Hello, my name is Bill," I said, "and what are your names?" Neither of them said a word, just stood there staring until David and his mother came through the front door. David was barefooted and was not wearing a shirt.

His mother suggested that we go into the kitchen and sit at the table. She served iced tea and I talked to them about how we planned to have a basketball team the following year in the Northern Division of the newly formed Alabama Junior College Conference. I told her that the scholarship would cover David's tuition, books, and fees and that he would have to live at home since we did not have any dormitories. I told her that the junior college was accredited and his credits would transfer to any four-year college that he wanted to attend. I assured her that we would put academics first, that David would be expected to take a full load of sixteen credit hours, and that we would do our best to ensure that he graduated with the AA degree at the end of his two years so that he could transfer to a four-year school as a junior.

Mrs. Pack listened very carefully. "David is the first person in our family to go to college," she said. "We have brought him up right and you should have no problems with him. If you do, all you have to do is call me and we will straighten him out immediately. All we ask of you is to treat him fairly.

I am mainly interested in what he does in the classroom. The basketball will take care of itself. I just want him to have the opportunity to have a better life than my husband and I have had," she continued, looking David straight in the eye. "Now where do we sign?" she asked, indicating that our meeting was over. "David needs to get back to work." I got the contract out of the folder that I was carrying, and we all signed in the designated areas, and without any fanfare David became the first signee in the history of the Northeast State Junior College basketball program.

Scottsboro and Pisgah high schools, the latter located nearby on Sand Mountain, also had excellent basketball programs. Although I lived in Scottsboro, there were several reasons I decided to focus my recruiting efforts on Pisgah, at least for the first year. They were the current state champions in their division and many players from that school had gone on to play in college, including Bill McGriff and Wallace Tinker, who had played on an SEC championship team at Auburn University. Another reason was that their coach, Paul Cooley, had the kind of flexible, team-oriented approach that I planned to use. Coach Cooley reminded me of Jim Valvano. He wore a coat and tie and always looked impeccable although he was usually in a frenzied state during games, jumping up and down and yelling instructions, corrections, and encouragements from the sideline. His teams responded by making adjustments during the game and switching styles of play according to what the situation dictated.

Also, Pisgah was a country school and I felt that boys who grew up in rural areas would have been raised like David Pack, with good morals, a strong work ethic, respect for authority, and other attributes I wanted in my players. A final reason I

decided to pass on Scottsboro was that even though they were in a higher classification, Pisgah was one of their bitter rivals. It was going to be difficult enough that first year without dealing with the possible distraction of players having lingering hard feelings against each other.

I knew that I could not get the best players from Pisgah to come to a first-year program and a new junior college. I decided, therefore, to go after their fourth- and fifth-best starters, Ken Wilson and James Edwards, and their top substitute, Bruce Pickett. Ken and James, like David Pack, were from families with limited means. Ken's dad was disabled from an automobile accident and James's family ran a tiny general store in Rosalie, a small community close to Pisgah. His cousin Bruce, whose father was a rural mail carrier, would be the only player on my team whose family was remotely close to being considered middle class. I signed these three players one afternoon in Coach Cooley's office at Pisgah High School.

Several days later I signed Larry Lingerfelt from Valley Head High School. Valley Head was a small community in the valley between Sand Mountain and Lookout Mountain. Larry had played on a mediocre team but was a great leaper and rebounder. Finally, I signed Phil Garrett, a center from Albertville High School. At six feet, six inches, he was the only player on the squad who stood above six feet, three inches. He was not very mobile but had a reasonably good shooting touch. We needed a big man under the basket and he would prove valuable as the season progressed.

I had recruited a squad of thirteen players, and none were black. Although by that time all public institutions in Alabama were required to comply with the Civil Rights Act and the U.S. Justice Department had recently blocked the attempt by

Governor Wallace to prevent black students from enrolling at the University of Alabama, segregation in most parts of Alabama was still very much a fact of life. This was especially true in northeast Alabama. Blacks were not only excluded from “white” schools, restaurants, theaters, and other public accommodations, they were not even permitted to live on Sand Mountain.

As I pointed out earlier, this was an unwritten rule, but there were towns in the area where the message was not quite as subtle. For example in the recent past, Cullman, which was less than fifty miles away, had posted a sign at the city limits warning black people to be out by sundown. While all this chafed against my sense of right and wrong, it was clear to me that any action on my part to recruit black players under these circumstances would be an exercise in futility. I felt that my chances of bringing about change would be greatly improved after I had established myself as a coach and built a winning program, so I decided to face that issue at a later time.

There were still many things to be done before I could even begin my coaching duties. I ordered home and road game uniforms, game warm-ups, practice uniforms, basketballs, towels, and other necessities, but I still did not have a place to practice and play. I worked out a deal with the principal at Section High School, located in a small town about four miles west of our new campus. Although Section was only a country crossroads, a local booster had donated the money to build a well-equipped gym with an excellent floor and 3,000 permanent bleacher seats, better at that time than many major colleges’ facilities, including the Sports Arena at Auburn and Foster Auditorium at Alabama. It seemed to be an ideal arrangement. But again, things are not always what they seem.

One of the stipulations made by the administration was that we could not ask anyone to leave the gym while we were practicing. We were also told that we could not ask anyone to be quiet, no matter how loud they became. As anyone who has ever coached would know, this was a big problem. Most coaches want their players to be quiet and pay close attention when they are talking. But, as the saying goes, “beggars can’t be choosers.” I explained the situation to our players and told them that it could work out for the best for us in the long run. I told them that every practice would be like a game on the road where the fans would be making a lot of noise to distract them, and they could gain valuable experience facing the hostile atmosphere of enemy territory.

It got to the point at practice that it was almost like nobody else was even there. One day two high school students who were in the gym while they were waiting for their school bus got into a fight. Our players did not even stop to look, just went on with their work. At some point the principal came in and broke up the fight, but it had no effect on our practice. It was like there was an invisible wall from the front edge of the bleachers on both sides of the floor to the roof. As I had hoped, the team went on to play as well or better on the road than we did at home.

We started practice for the inaugural basketball season on the first of October. Given the fact that I was head coach of a college team at the age of twenty-three (twenty-four by the start of my second year) and had no prior coaching experience, I went into the season expecting to have my authority as a coach challenged by some of my players. I was not ready, however, for this challenge to occur as soon as it did. After practice on Friday of our first week, I met with the team in the

dressing room to review practice and make some announcements. I concluded my talk by saying that I would see them at 10:00 A.M. on Saturday. Since I did not have an office at the Section High School gym, I usually went back out to the gym and sat in the bleachers to be available to any of the players who wanted to talk with me.

After sitting there for about five minutes, one of my players who had become a late addition to our squad when I signed him to a scholarship a few days prior to the opening of the 1966–67 academic year came up and sat down next to me. This young man had been a big star at one of the local high schools and was one of the most talented players on the squad. His “me first” attitude, however, had become quickly obvious and had carried over to our practice sessions. I could see that it was going to have an effect on the morale of the team. His teammates developed a slogan about him: he never saw a shot that he didn’t think he could make. I had already had a few run-ins with him related to his shot selection. As he walked toward me that afternoon, I thought perhaps he wanted to discuss this with me. “Coach, I won’t be at practice on Saturday,” he announced, matter-of-factly. I asked him to explain why he needed to miss practice, thinking that if there was a good reason, I would excuse him. From his expression I could tell that he was becoming annoyed. The idea that informing me was not enough, that he was actually supposed to ask permission to miss practice, clearly did not sit well with him. “I have other plans,” he said. “I’m not coming to practice.”

I could not believe what I was hearing. I would never have talked to one of my coaches like that. It was beyond my comprehension that a player who had practiced for only a few days would be so disrespectful. I thought maybe I could make

him understand that this was not the way things worked, at least not with me. "Let's start over again," I said. "It is unacceptable to tell me you will not be at practice without giving me a reason." He merely repeated what he had said before. At this point, my patience was starting to wear thin. Choosing my words carefully, I gave him an ultimatum: "Let me make this clear; you have two choices: you can show up for practice on Saturday and remain on the team or you can miss practice and be dismissed," I said.

"I won't be there," he replied, "so I guess the ball is in your court." With this parting shot, he walked down the bleachers and left.

It came as not surprise to me that the cocky young player was absent on Saturday, and then showed up for our next practice on Monday. This was what I had expected, and I was waiting for him at the dressing room door. As he came down the hallway to the dressing room, I stopped him and said, "As you will remember, I gave you two choices on Friday. You made the choice to miss practice without permission. Turn in your practice equipment to the manager because you are no longer a member of the team." He looked stunned for a moment, and then without saying a word, he walked into the dressing room, turned in his equipment, and left.

After my confrontation with this could-have-been star player, I went out to wait on the bleachers as the team got ready to work out. Our manager, Tony Townsen, came out of the dressing room and climbed up to where I was sitting. "Did you kick someone off the team?" he asked incredulously. "One of the guys just gave me his equipment and stormed out of the dressing room, slamming the door behind him. He was really mad." I explained that I had given the now-former Mus-

tang two choices and that it was more a matter of his kicking himself off the team. Tony worried that some of his friends on the team might also quit in protest of my actions. It occurred to me that there could be other consequences as well. I knew that Sand Mountain was a tight-knit community and that the principal at Section High School might take exception to what I had done. It was not out of the question that he might tell us to find another place to practice and play games in, especially if a significant number of local players quit the squad. I remember taking a deep breath as I thought through what my next steps should be.

After everyone was dressed and getting in the gym ready to practice, I sent them back to the dressing room so that we could have a team meeting in private. I knew that this was only the first of many hard decisions that I would have to explain if I was going to be a career coach. I felt it was my responsibility as the head coach to teach my players “life skills” through the everyday situations that came up. I also thought it was important to explain to them that the basis for my decisions was not just my opinion, but what the Scriptures taught regarding respect for authority and putting the welfare of others ahead of satisfying personal desires.

When I walked into the dressing room, the team members had already taken their seats in front of their lockers. I could tell by the looks on their faces that word had spread about their teammate’s dismissal from the team. I began by saying, “I want you to know up front that I am the type of person who deals with things directly. As you get to know me, you will learn that I will be truthful with you. You will also learn that I am not one to let problems linger. As most of you know, I dismissed one of your teammates from the squad.” I then

told them the basis for my decision: that in all life situations, someone is in charge and that authority has to be respected, that accomplishing the objective is the first priority, and that people working together as a group could accomplish much more than could individuals pursuing their own selfish interests. I concluded the meeting by saying, "This will be the last time I address this issue in one of our meetings, but I will be glad to talk about it with any of you individually. Now, let's hit the floor and get to work."

It was my first major decision as a coach, and despite the fact that I did not know how things were going to turn out, I felt at peace with it. I felt that dismissing this player would be the best thing in the long run for our team and also for player himself. The biggest reason for my sense of peace was that, in my opinion, I had made my decision based on sound Christian principles. The following morning several of the key players on the team came by my office and told me that they supported my decision. And to my considerable relief, there were no repercussions from anyone at Section High School. In retrospect, I believe that both the principal and the coach at the high school, being very familiar with the players in the community, realized that the failure of the player to adjust to the virtues of discipline and teamwork had cost him the opportunity to play college basketball. To my knowledge, no blame was ever leveled at me.

Our first game during that inaugural season was at home with Calhoun State Junior College. I had played college basketball at two institutions and had been exposed to the philosophies and styles of four different coaches. I never went through a practice session or played in a game without learning something. My graduate studies had prepared me

to deal with both the physical and psychological aspects of athletics. All that and (in those days) a dime would get you a cup of coffee. The real question was, could I take a group of country boys from Sand Mountain who were, for the most part, average players and substitutes on their high school squads, and make them into a winning college basketball team? I was about to find out.

Calhoun State started the game in a straight man-to-man defense and we got out to a lead. Then their veteran coach, Bob Shuttlesworth, changed to a 1-2-2 zone defense. I had seen this defense before and we had practiced against it so I knew what we needed to do. The problem was, he had only disguised his defense to make it appear they were playing a 1-2-2 zone so that I would adjust our offense to attack it. So I called time-out and did exactly what he hoped I would do. When it didn't work, I tried several more offensive sets and they didn't work either. Calhoun State was using what was known as a "drop zone" but by the time I figured that out, it was too late. They had built a double digit lead and went on to win the game by a score of 70-57. After the game Coach Shuttlesworth shook my hand and complimented our team on their good effort. I could tell by his expression that what he was thinking was, "I just gave this rookie a lesson in coaching." And his sentiments were accurate. Our team of average high school players and substitutes did exactly what I asked of them. The fact that they lost the game was totally my fault.

I was honest with our players after the game, telling them that I had not prepared them for the drop zone. I told them that I took complete responsibility for the loss. I also told them that I would not ever let this happen again. It was another in a long line of blessings in disguise for me. First of all, it taught

me that I did not know as much basketball as I thought I did. It also taught me that if I was going to be successful in this profession, I had to be prepared for the unexpected.

We struggled at first and twelve games into the season, our record was 6-6. Things started to fall into place at this point, and we finished the regular season by winning seven games in a row and placing second in our division, which qualified us for a berth in the Alabama Junior College State Tournament. As luck would have it, the tournament was held at Howard College in the same arena that I had played in several years earlier.

We beat George C. Wallace of Dothan 92-70 in the first round of the tournament and advanced to the championship game, along with Calhoun State, who defeated Enterprise Junior College 86-68. We were definitely looking forward to playing Calhoun again to get revenge for the beating we had taken from them in our first game of the season. To say that we were prepared for their drop zone would have been an understatement. We won by 56-38 to take the state championship and cap off the first basketball season in the history of Northeast State Junior College with a storybook ending. When I met Coach Shuttlesworth after the game, I tried to be as gracious to him as he had been to me after beating us at our opening game and then choosing not to gloat over teaching me a lesson. The fact that we went from losing by 13 to winning by 18 was never mentioned. He understood that the numbers meant I had learned my lesson well.

By the end of my third year, my teams had a cumulative record of 53 wins against 22 losses. The Mustangs had won one state championship and been runners-up another year as well as being named the number one defensive team in the

state three years running. I felt I had established myself as a coach. On the other hand, I still had not recruited a single black player.

I remembered three years previously when I had reflected on my first all-white recruiting class. My thought then was to bring in black players “when I had established myself and built a winning program.” It is human nature to put off doing the right thing until a more opportune time, and then when that time arrives, to put it off again when things will be even better. Maybe it’s like cleaning out a closet, quitting smoking, writing a thank-you note, studying for an exam, or even making spiritual decisions in our lives. I was reminded of a passage in Luke in which Christ expressed His displeasure when a disciple wanted to put off following Him until he could bury his father.

I would like to think I was prepared to do the right thing on my own, but I’ll never know. It was during my fourth year at Northeast State that Dr. Knox called me into his office to discuss an important matter. He invited me to sit down, looked me in the eye, and got straight to the point: “Coach Elder, I need you to help us desegregate the student body and athletic teams. As you know, we have a minimal amount of black students on campus but we need to become more integrated. I want you immediately to begin recruiting black basketball players. You will have my full support.” I was surprised at the unequivocal language of Dr. Knox’s commitment to fully integrate the school and his directive to me to move forward expeditiously in carrying out his intentions. It made me wonder if his directive was related to “doing the right thing” or if it was for another reason.

IN MANY CITIES AND TOWNS in Alabama, there is a statue of a Confederate soldier honoring the bravery of Southern men who were willing to follow the orders of their officers to march into battle to fight, and if necessary, die for “The Cause.” This tradition is often invoked when one is given a difficult assignment, and the scene that comes to my mind now about my time in Dr. Knox’s office that day is Pickett’s famous charge on the third day of the Battle of Gettysburg. It was there that a division left the cover of a forest and advanced across an open field in an attempt to capture Cemetery Ridge. The troops were decimated by rifle and cannon fire from heavily fortified Union positions and forced to retreat. History records Pickett’s charge as one of the finest examples of the courage of soldiers under fire. History also records that many of the senior officers stayed back in the forest. They knew that the charge had little chance of succeeding and that most of the men would be killed or wounded. Fighting and dying for The Cause was fine as long as it was done by somebody else. I would soon come to understand that in the cause of equal opportunity at Northeast State Junior College, that somebody else was me.