There is no greater thing that you can tell someone [than], “I believe in you, you’re good, I’m there for you.”

—Coach K, quoted in Time magazine’s selection of America’s Best 2001

There was shock and disbelief in “K-Ville,” the grassy area just outside Duke University’s Cameron Gymnasium. Late one Friday afternoon in July of 2004, hundreds of students gathered to speculate about the future of their beloved basketball coach, Mike Krzyzewski (pronounced Sha-shef-ski and widely known simply as Coach K). Normally a place of tremendous energy and optimism, Krzyzewskiville had fallen into an ominous quiet.

No one could believe the rumors.

How could Coach K, the 57-year-old heart and soul of college basketball, even consider leaving for the glitz and glamour of the professional game? But the rumors were true. Krzyzewski was taking the weekend to review a five-year, $40 million contract offer to leave Duke and coach the Los Angeles Lakers of the National Basketball Association.

One fan gazed up at Krzyzewski’s fourth-floor office overlooking K-Ville and pondered, “It’s not like he’s a deity. But sometimes when he’s up there”—pointing to the office—”he does look like Saruman gazing down from the tower in Lord of the Rings.”

Since his arrival in 1980, Krzyzewski had grown Duke’s basketball program into one of the most successful college sports dynasties ever. Coach K was “[n]amed ‘America’s Best Coach’ in 2001 by Time magazine and CNN, [and] earned nearly every award imaginable. He was enshrined in the Basketball Hall of Fame in 2001.”

When the father of a current Duke basketball player learned of the Lakers’ offer he said: “[I]f it happens . . . I would be sad for Duke, sad for the Duke players and sad for (our) family because of the relationship we have with Duke.”

After almost 25 years with Coach K at the helm, it was hard to imagine Duke basketball without him.
Learning from Coach Knight at Army

What I learned from him was the incredible passion it took to be successful, the amount of preparation and an understanding of the game to a level that I had not experienced.  

— Mike Krzyzewski about his coach, Bob Knight

Krzyzewski played college basketball for the United States Military Academy at West Point. His freshman year was also the first year for Army’s new head coach, a fiery young disciplinarian named Bob Knight. By the time Cadet Krzyzewski was a senior, he had earned the respect of both his coach and his teammates. At a school known for its leaders, Krzyzewski was named team captain. Together, Knight and Krzyzewski led an undersized Army team to the National Invitation Tournament (NIT) in 1969. (Exhibit 1 provides additional biographical information on Coach K.)


Krzyzewski graduated from West Point in 1969 and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Army. Knight left West Point in 1971 to coach at Indiana University (IU). It was not long before their paths crossed again. In 1974, after serving five years as an Army officer, Krzyzewski was hired by Knight as a graduate assistant at IU. After only a year, Knight recommended Krzyzewski for the head coaching position at Army.

Five years later, when Duke called Indiana looking for a head coach, Knight once again recommended his young protégé. According to Knight, “Tom Butters, the Duke athletic director, genuinely didn’t know Mike (Krzyzewski’s) name when he called me in 1980 to ask if I would have any interest in the Duke job. . . . I told him I wouldn’t have any interest in it, but he should talk to Mike.” Based largely on the strength of Knight’s recommendation, Duke hired the relatively unknown coach with a strange name. (See Exhibits 2 and 3 for a summary of Coach K’s accomplishments.)

Years later, Knight reflected on some of his more enjoyable moments with Coach K:

Mike and I had always had a great relationship. . . . But nothing made me happier for him than the night in September 2001 when he was inducted into the (Basketball) Hall of Fame at Springfield. . . . I was sincerely honored when he asked me to be part of the ceremonies, because no one who has played for me was ever closer to me than Mike, nor have I ever been more pleased by anyone’s success.

After Coach K earned his 700th win, The New York Times reported Krzyzewski’s appreciation for Knight:

He [Krzyzewski] gave a nod to his former coach and mentor Bob Knight, the only one to reach 700 faster than Krzyzewski. Each started his career with a successful tenure at Army, where Krzyzewski played under Knight. “There’s no greater teacher for me than Bob Knight,” said Krzyzewski, whose career record is 700-240. “There must be something about those old Army coaches.”
Coaching Philosophy: “We might be great tonight”

Given their shared experience at the Military Academy, both Knight and Krzyzewski followed a surprisingly simple and unregimented approach to coaching. According to Knight:

I had one training rule: If you do anything in any way, whenever or wherever, that I think is detrimental to the good of this basketball team, to the school, or to you yourself, I’ll handle it as I see fit.8

Following his mentor’s lead almost verbatim, Coach K greeted every new team with the following simple message:

We have only one rule here: Don’t do anything that’s detrimental to yourself. Because if it’s detrimental to you, it’ll be detrimental to our program and to Duke University.9

Krzyzewski went on to explain the logic behind following such an uncluttered approach to coaching: “Too many rules get in the way of leadership. They just put you in a box. People set rules to keep from making decisions.”10 He added, “I don’t want to be a manager or a dictator. I want to be a leader—and leadership is ongoing, adjustable, flexible, and dynamic. As such, leaders have to maintain a certain amount of discretion.”11

Having few rules did not mean being undisciplined. “Discipline is doing what you are supposed to do in the best possible manner at the time you are supposed to do it,” Coach K said.12 He taught discipline by investing heavily in drills and skills with his players, practicing set plays and exhaustively analyzing practices, game films, and strategies. He also spent “a large percentage of . . . time . . . getting inside a player’s head, understanding where (the player is) coming from, helping him get to where we all need to be as a team.”13

The journey from individual player to team was not always an easy one. Coach K recalled one practice when he noticed “a little friction” between two of his top athletes, Shane Battier and Jason Williams.

“Do you guys have a problem with each other?” Coach K asked. “Shane, do you not like Jason?”

“I like him, Coach.”

“Do you not trust Jason?”

“I trust him.”

“Jason, do you like Shane?”

“Yeah, I like him.”

“Do you trust Shane?”

“Yeah, I trust him.”

“Then why won’t you guys pass the ball to each other?”14

Unlike most coaches, Krzyzewski rarely used a whistle in the gym—too much distance. Instead, whenever possible, he communicated up close and personal, eye to eye: “Throughout the season, I look into my players’ eyes to gauge feelings, confidence levels, and to establish instant trust. Most of the time, they won’t quibble with me—and they certainly can’t hide their feelings from what their
eyes reveal. So I ask all members of our team to look each other in the eye when speaking to one another. It’s a principle we live by.”

This principle cut both ways. He could read them, but they could also read him. Depending on the situation, “A leader also has to show the face his team needs to see. Because, before he ever utters a word, they see his face. They also see his eyes, even his walk.” According to Coach K, the impact could be huge:

I’m always aware of how I enter a room. Before a game, I might walk into the locker room quickly, with a spring in my step and a smile on my face. And as I come in, I might say something like, “Hey, we’re going to be great tonight.”

Whatever I say after that will not be as important as how I look to them.

“Did he really mean it?”

“Yeah, look at his face. He really meant it. We might be great tonight.”

Relationships with Players: A Family Affair

People have to be given the freedom to show the heart they possess. I think it’s a leader’s responsibility to provide that type of freedom. And I believe it can be done through relationships and family. Because if a team is a real family, its members want to show their hearts.

— Mike Krzyzewski on family

When The Sporting News named him “Sportsman of the Year—the first time a college coach had ever won the honor—they said, ‘On the court and off, Krzyzewski is a family man first, a teacher second, a basketball coach third, and a winner at all three. He is what’s right about sports.”

Krzyzewski credited much of his coaching success and personal priorities to his upbringing: “Whenever I go back to Chicago, I find myself thinking, ‘Gee, I’m so lucky, it’s amazing.’ Not because my family was poor or that I had humble beginnings—but, rather that I had it so good. And also because of all those values my folks taught me. They were great values—and they proved to be the basis for how I would conduct myself for the rest of my life.”

As his celebrity grew, remaining close to his players took work. He made it a point to fly with them in coach class to away games and have them over for family dinners throughout the season. Bobby Hurley, who helped lead Duke to two NCAA championships and set a record for the most assists in NCAA history, recalled the importance of family: “When I was being recruited, we went out to his house and watched football games. A big part of my decision in coming here was that everyone got along real well. I decided if I was going to go far away from home . . . I’d like to have that family environment.”

After graduating from Duke, Hurley was selected seventh overall in the 1993 NBA Draft. Shortly after the start of his first season, he was seriously injured in a terrible car accident. Broad-sided by another car traveling at night with no lights, Hurley suffered collapsed lungs, a torn trachea, broken bones, and numerous cuts and sprains. Shortly after he came out of eight hours in surgery, Krzyzewski arrived at his bedside. According to Hurley’s father, “(My son) literally sat up . . . and he took the ventilator tube out of his mouth, which he hadn’t done before, to talk to Mike. I think it just meant so much to him that Mike would come all the way across the country just to see him.”
Grant Hill, former Duke player and later a five-time NBA All-Star, described his relationship with Coach K this way: “It’s like a parent . . . even now . . . (it’s) like I’m 18 years old in his office talking to him. He’s still coaching, offering advice . . . I’m just like a sponge trying to soak it all up.”

According to Krzyzewski, “You have to work hard at staying in contact with your friends so that the relationships will continue and live on. . . . Friendships, along with love, make life worth living.” In the macho world of college athletics, Coach K never shied away from words like “heart” and “love” to describe his feelings for his players and the game.

But there was also another side to Coach K. During a game, he was all business. Stern and unyielding, he paced the bench, actively working referees as well as his team nonstop from the opening tip to the final buzzer. Former Duke star Christian Laettner saw it this way: “What you don’t know about him [Krzyzewski] from watching him on TV is that behind closed doors he’s, you know, a little more like Bobby Knight.”

Coach K argued, “There’s a time to get in someone’s face and there’s a time when you just put it on the line without yelling. There’s a time when you pat on the back. And there’s a time when you hug.” When challenged about his paternalistic approach to coaching, he responded: “[T]his isn’t all about ‘I love you,’ and ‘Let’s hold hands and skip.’ . . . Am I tough on the team? Absolutely. If they don’t show respect for the program, for the university, for one another, I’m all over them. I don’t want fear to be my primary motivator. But the team has got to know that if they are screwing up, the hammer is going to come down.”

Whenever Coach K talked about his team or his coaching philosophy, there was a good chance that his story would begin and end with family:

I always knew my mother, my father, and my brother would be there for me. I knew because they loved me. And, as a basketball coach, I have no problem telling a team, “I love you guys.”

When I say that, there is absolutely nothing phony about it.

I try to convey the idea to all members of our team that we are not just playing basketball. I would hope that our kids would see that we love them. I would hope that the players who played in the past would say that they loved playing at Duke; that they loved a teammate; that they loved the situation they were in.

Sharing with one another and caring for one another—that’s what love is. That’s what family is all about.

Outsiders might find all this talk about family and love a bit over the top, hard to imagine in the high-pressured masculine world of men’s college basketball. Former Duke player Jay Bilas had this to say about Coach K’s sincerity: “When he would speak about, you know, winning or what he wanted to accomplish, he would get goose bumps on his arms and legs. I’ve heard a lot of what I’ve considered to be phony speeches in my time playing. You know, you can’t fake goose bumps.”

The Decision

By the summer of 2004, Coach K had become as important to Duke University off the court as he was on it. In addition to leading the basketball program, Krzyzewski also served on the faculty of Duke’s business school. As an executive-in-residence at the Fuqua/Coach K Center of Leadership
and Ethics, Krzyzewski translated his lessons from the locker room to the board room. His annual leadership conference attracted hundreds of executives from around the world.

In addition to coaching and teaching, he was also a special advisor to the university president and often served as a lead spokesman for the school. Duke President Richard Brodhead said: “[Coach K] means more to this place than the record of his victories, impressive though that is. He’s a real teacher. He teaches character as well as basketball.”

For his work at Duke, Coach K was handsomely rewarded. According to The Washington Post, his annual compensation from the university was reported to total at least $875,000 per year over the past several years. In addition, in 1993 he signed a lucrative deal with Nike, reported to include a “$1 million signing bonus: $500,000 a year for, reportedly, seven years . . . [and] . . . $75,000 annually until death does him part.”

But the Lakers were offering him $40 million.

Beyond compensation, there were a number of additional factors to consider. The once invincible world champion Los Angeles Lakers were now a different team. During the previous season, franchise player Kobe Bryant—who was a strong advocate for hiring Coach K—had publicly feuded with superstar teammate Shaquille O’Neal and coach Phil Jackson. As a result, both O’Neal and Jackson were now gone. While it was still one of the NBA’s marquee franchises, picking up the pieces in Los Angeles at this point would be no easy task, even for a seasoned coach like Krzyzewski.

Also, as the new Lakers’ coach, Krzyzewski would have big shoes to fill. Outgoing coach Jackson was thought by many to be the best NBA coach ever. Jackson held the record for the highest winning game percentage in the NBA and brought three championships to Los Angeles during his five-year term with the Lakers. In the City of Angels, Jackson would be a tough act to follow.

In an open letter, one ESPN journalist advised: “Of all the coaches out there, only one is more quintessentially college than you, Mike. That’s your old mentor, Bob Knight, the last man for the pro job.”

However, the “quintessential college game” had changed dramatically since Krzyzewski first played for Knight almost 40 years ago. Many of the best young players now skipped college altogether, going straight to the pros, and many of those who did attend left early. As one writer argued:

The best players don’t want to play college basketball for nothing. They want to play NBA basketball for millions. . . . The college game will never again be filled with remarkable talent for remarkable coaches such as K to mold into a team. He has worked 23 years to craft a dynasty, but Krzyzewski has no chance to get (the best players in the future), because money trumps tradition every time.

From his fourth-floor office, Coach K scanned the crowd now milling anxiously beneath him in K-Ville. He wondered whether it was indeed time to move on.
Postscript

Coach K took some time over the weekend to discuss the offer with his family. For someone who grew up on the streets of Chicago, $40 million was a lot of money. But then again, Duke had been his home for almost 25 years.

Krzyzewski finally announced his decision. He would remain at Duke.

At a press conference flanked by an overjoyed university president and athletic director, Coach K explained his decision this way: “This opportunity came at a time when I was taking inventory. . . . When I looked at this [offer] and at myself, I found that I wanted to lead. . . . And your heart has to be in whatever you lead. . . . Duke has always taken up my whole heart. And no matter how good some other option was, to lead my Duke team with all my heart could only happen at this place.”36
Michael William Krzyzewski (pronounced Sha-shef-ski) was born on February 13, 1947. He grew up in a poor Polish working-class neighborhood of Chicago. His mother was a homemaker by day and cleaned office floors by night. His father worked long hours as an elevator operator in a downtown high rise, often using the disguised last name of “Kross” to hide his ethnic heritage. Nonetheless, Krzyzewski is deeply proud of his roots: “My parents were people who never had anything, but they had everything. There was a lot of love and a lot of pride in our house.”

A standout basketball player at Weber High School, Krzyzewski led his league in scoring for two years, earning all-state honors. His accomplishments on the hardcourt eventually caught the eye of Coach Bob Knight at Army. Knight needed a point guard—a smart playmaker. He offered Krzyzewski an appointment to the United States Military Academy. But West Point was a long way from Chicago.

Initially, Krzyzewski declined. In his opinion, West Point was an elite school with a reputation for the rich and privileged, not the kind of place to welcome a poor Polish boy from Chicago. With no money for college, Krzyzewski’s parents desperately urged their son to reconsider. Not only would he get a solid education, but he would also get it for free. Trusting his parents implicitly, he finally agreed.

After surviving the initial shock of West Point’s regimented lifestyle, Cadet Krzyzewski thrived both in the barracks and on the court. “Much of my foundation as a coach, as a leader, as a person, I learned from West Point. Before I entered the academy, I thought I knew everything. . . . But West Point took me to another level. I feel that I was very lucky to go there and get a dose of honesty, honor, and discipline.”

On the court, the lessons came from his coach: “Bob Knight had a big influence on me. He’s a brilliant man, an outstanding coach. From him, I learned many of the basic strategies of basketball that I apply every day during the season.” As a senior, Cadet Krzyzewski was named captain of the Army team.

In 1969, Krzyzewski graduated from West Point and served five years as an officer in the U.S. Army, eventually attaining the rank of captain. In 1974 he resigned his commission and was hired immediately by his old coach, Bob Knight. After serving only a year as Knight’s graduate assistant at Indiana, Krzyzewski returned to his alma mater as head coach of the Army basketball team. From 1975 to 1980, Krzyzewski led Army to a 73–59 record, including an NIT appearance in 1978.

In the spring of 1980, Duke basketball was “searching for a strong leader and rebirth.” Once again, based largely on the recommendation of his old coach and mentor Bob Knight, Krzyzewski was hired to lead the turnaround. Twenty years later, Krzyzewski earned his 500th career win at Duke. That night, the fabled floor of Cameron Indoor Stadium was dedicated as “Coach K Court.”

Mike Krzyzewski is married to Micki. Together they have three daughters, Debbie, Jamie, and Lyndy. According to Micki, “When the third [daughter] was born and this was another girl, I remember saying to Mike in the delivery room, ‘Are you disappointed?’ And he said ‘No.’ I said, ‘But I thought you wanted a son?’ He said, referring to the players on his team, ‘I have 15 sons.’”


bIbid., p. 47.
cIbid., p. 56.
Exhibit 2  Statistics through the 2003–2004 Season

NCAA CHAMPIONSHIPS
10, John Wooden, UCLA, 1964-75
4, Adolph Rupp, Kentucky, 1948-58
3, Bob Knight, Indiana, 1976-87
2, Denny Crum, Louisville, 1980-86
2, Henry Iba, Oklahoma St., 1945-46
2, Ed Jucker, Cincinnati, 1961-62
2, Branch McCracken, Indiana, 1940-53
2, Dean Smith, North Carolina, 1982-93
2, Phil Woolpert, San Francisco, 1955-56

FINAL FOUR APPEARANCES
12, John Wooden, UCLA, 1962-75
11, Dean Smith, North Carolina, 1967-97
9, Mike Krzyzewski, Duke, 1986-2001
6, Denny Crum, Louisville, 1972-86
6, Adolph Rupp, Kentucky, 1942-66
5, Bob Knight, Indiana, 1973-92
5, Guy Lewis, Houston, 1967-84
5, Lute Olson, Iowa and Arizona, 1980-2001
4, Jack Gardner, Kansas St. and Utah, 1948-66
4, Henry Iba, Oklahoma St., 1945-51
4, Harold Olsen, Ohio St., 1939-46
4, Jerry Tarkanian, UNLV, 1977-91
4, Fred Taylor, Ohio St., 1960-68

CONSECUTIVE FINAL FOUR APPEARANCES
9, John Wooden, UCLA, 1967-75
5, Mike Krzyzewski, Duke, 1988-92
3, Tom Izzo, Michigan St., 1999-2001
3, Ed Jucker, Cincinnati, 1961-63
3, Guy Lewis, Houston, 1982-84
3, Harold Olsen, Ohio St., 1944-46
3, Dean Smith, North Carolina, 1967-69
3, Fred Taylor, Ohio St., 1960-62
3, Phil Woolpert, San Francisco, 1955-57
2, 19 tied

FINAL FOUR WINS
21, John Wooden, UCLA, 1962-75
10, Mike Krzyzewski, Duke, 1988-2001
9, Adolph Rupp, Kentucky, 1942-66
8, Dean Smith, North Carolina, 1967-97
7, Bob Knight, Indiana, 1973-87
5, Denny Crum, Louisville, 1972-86
5, Henry Iba, Oklahoma St., 1945-51
5, Ed Jucker, Cincinnati, 1961-63
5, Fred Taylor, Ohio St., 1960-68

TOURNAMENT APPEARANCES
27, Dean Smith, North Carolina, 1967-97
25, Bob Knight, Indiana and Texas Tech, 1973-2002
23, Denny Crum, Louisville, 1972-2000
22, Lute Olson, Iowa and Arizona, 1979-2002
22, Eddie Sutton, Creighton, Arkansas, Kentucky, and Oklahoma St., 1974-2002
21, Jim Boeheim, Syracuse, 1977-2001
20, John Thompson, Georgetown, 1975-97
20, Adolph Rupp, Kentucky, 1942-72
19, Lou Henson, Illinois and New Mexico St., 1967-99
18, Lou Carnesecca, St. John’s (N.Y.), 1967-92
18, Mike Krzyzewski, Duke, 1984-2002

CONSECUTIVE TOURNAMENT APPEARANCES
23, Dean Smith, North Carolina, 1975-97
18, Lute Olson, Arizona, 1985-2002
15, Bob Knight, Indiana, 1986-2000
14, John Thompson, Georgetown, 1979-92
13, Roy Williams, Kansas, 1990-2002
12, John Chaney, Temple, 1990-2001
12, Eddie Sutton, Arkansas and Kentucky, 1977-88
11, Bob Huggins, Cincinnati, 1992-2002
11, Mike Krzyzewski, Duke, 1984-94

Exhibit 3  Coach K Accomplishments

Coach K’s accomplishments in basketball place him among the coaches with the most outstanding records of all time, including:

- 12 National Coach of the Year honors (eight seasons)
- Seven National Players of the Year
- Five National Defensive Players of the Year (seven honors)
- 20 NCAA Tournament bids
- 18 All-America selections (26 honors)
- Nine Final Four appearances (third all-time)
- Eight ACC championships
- Nine ACC regular season championships
- 292 weeks ranked among the nation’s top 25 teams
- 183 weeks ranked among the nation’s top 10 teams
- 74 weeks ranked number one in the country
- 66 NCAA Tournament victories (first all-time)
- Inducted into the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame in 2001
- Selected Coach of the Decade for the 1990s by the National Association of Basketball Coaches (NABC)
- Honored as "America’s Best Coach" (all sports, all levels) by Time and CNN in 2002
- Coached 12 NBA Lottery picks, 18 first-round selections, and 35 overall NBA draftees

Endnotes


6 Ibid., p. 271.


11 Mike Krzyzewski with Donald T. Phillips, Leading with the Heart, p. 10.


13 Mike Krzyzewski with Donald T. Phillips, Leading with the Heart, p. 46.

14 Ibid., p. 22.

15 Ibid., p. 11.

16 Ibid., p. 157.

17 Ibid., p. 157.


20 Mike Krzyzewski with Donald T. Phillips, Leading with the Heart, pp. 233–234.


26 Mike Krzyzewski with Donald T. Phillips, Leading with the Heart, p. 211.

27 Ibid., p. 46.


