

## A Life of Teaching and Coaching

### An Interview with Mike “Coach K” Krzyzewski

**EDITORS’ NOTE** *In 42 seasons at Duke, Mike Krzyzewski – a Naismith Hall of Fame coach, five-time national champion and NCAA record 13-time Final Four participant – built a dynasty that few programs in the history of the game can match. No coach in Division I men’s basketball history won more games than Coach K’s 1,202. Announcing his retirement in June 2021 ahead of his 42nd season at Duke, and 47th overall as a head coach at both Duke and West Point, Krzyzewski finished his career with a 1,202-368 record as a head coach, including a 1,129-309 mark at Duke.*



Mike Krzyzewski

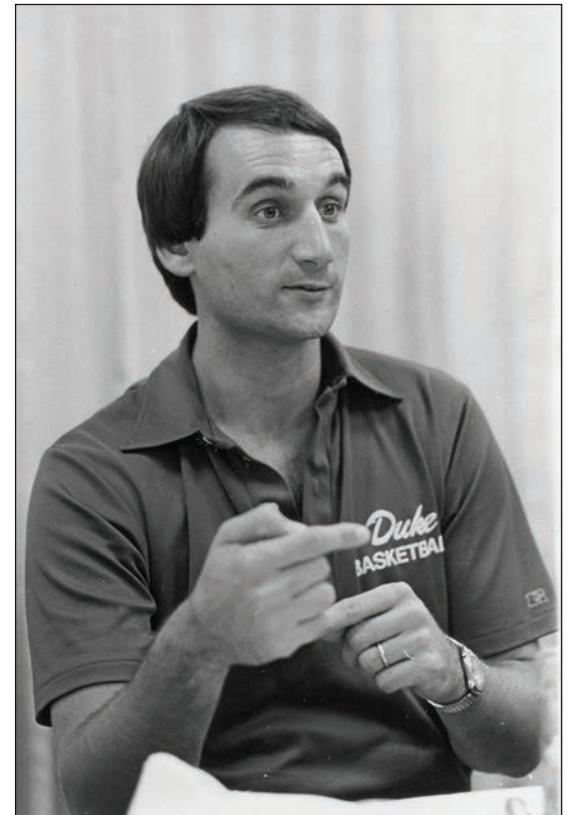
around anybody that had that level of belief in me. I also had a priest in my life who became a faith mentor for me. I went to a Catholic boys high school, and he explained faith to me where it made sense. The impact that these people had on me was remarkable and it made me want to be a teacher and a coach because I felt that there couldn’t be anything better than to have an impact on people in the way they had an impact on me. Then, when I went to West Point, that feeling was accelerated even more and my time at West Point created so many of the opportunities that I have had in my life.

**You mentioned wanting to be a teacher and a coach. Do you see these two roles as connected?**

Coaching is teaching, and it is also leadership. I had a lesson plan for every practice, which is over 5,000 practices during my career, and I still have all of them. It is about how to get your point across and how to best teach. You are not just teaching the pick and roll; you are teaching how to be a better teammate and how

**When did you know that you wanted to be a basketball coach?**

It happened in high school. My high school basketball coach during my junior and senior years was young and was only about five or six years older than me. While I believed in myself and felt that I was the best player, he thought I was even better. I had never been



to combine the talents of the group. Coaching is really about teaching a course on teamwork and leadership every day. For me, even though I have retired from coaching, I have not retired from the study of leadership and teamwork. I am a professor at Duke’s Fuqua School of Business, and I speak regularly around the country working with the Washington Speakers Bureau. I am constantly learning and have always been curious and interested in the concept of leadership.

**When you talk about teamwork, how important was it when recruiting athletes to not only look for the best talent, but also to focus on the cultural fit within the program?**

We look at three things when recruiting and they are all equal: obviously talent at the highest level; the fit into the environment, whether that was during my time at West Point or at Duke; and character – we studied the character of each of the young men we recruited, looking at how they treated their teammates, how they responded to their coach, teacher evaluations, etc. Almost half of the men we recruited did not have fathers in their lives for a number of



Coach K at the 2022 Final Four (above) and as a young coach at Duke (upper right)



*Coach K during a Duke victory at Furman in 2014*

reasons, but all of them had mothers. I always looked at the relationship the young man had with his mom.

I would say that we recruited talent with character, not talented characters. I have been around great young men throughout my career. People say that I developed these men, but they had a good foundation before they came, and our program had a positive impact in building on that foundation.

**How did your time at West Point impact your views on leadership?**

West Point is the best leadership school in the world, and you learn it while you are a cadet because the cadets lead each other. You find out by being in different roles as a freshman and then, as a sophomore and junior, you find out what it feels like to be in those roles, whether it be as a squad leader or company commander or another role. It is a special place with a special process, and it gave me a great foundation and understanding of leadership.

**You speak about the importance of resilience in life. Is resilience a skill that can be taught?**

You can definitely teach resilience. At West Point, you get knocked down a lot because you are constantly learning new things and being challenged. A phrase that I used often during my time at West Point was, “failure is never your destination.” This means that when you get knocked down, you are supposed to get up. That does not mean that you get up alone. Resilience opens the door to working in teams, realizing that while you may not be able to do something alone, if you build a team someone else may be there not to let you fall down.

**How important was it over your nearly five decades of coaching to continue to adapt and evolve year after year?**

You have to adapt to change, and things are always changing. It is called Duke basketball, but the team changes each year and with the rapidity of players leaving over the last decade, it really became a different team each year. Even the players who stay all four years are changing each year, growing and getting wiser and becoming a bigger part of the culture. I think that a huge thing to adapt to is communication – how you get your message across to the men you have in order to lead at the moment. I found the changes in the way to communicate interesting and it keeps you young because

communication is not just about talking, it is about listening. In business, I often see that the older, established people do not listen to the young people in the organization. I believe that it is essential to listen since I have learned so much from my players. I teach them and they teach me, especially if you have guys with talent and character. It also keeps you young. I am 75 years old, and I can still coach, but I was tired of all the things that are required to be a good coach – being on the road recruiting, scouting, and so on. Having said that, I never get tired of teaching and coaching young men.

**You have remained close to many of your players after they leave Duke and have built a strong alumni network for the program. What has made this so important for you?**

I saw this with my high school coach, and I think one of the beauties of coaching and teaching is that you can have a lifelong relationship when a player wants one. Life gets busy and it is about being there for these men when they need you and this does not stop when they finish playing. We have something that we call “The Brotherhood” which is all the guys who played here, and our managers who have worked with the team actually have this as well. I love that we have been able to keep this connection.

**What are your views on the state of the NCAA and the need for the NCAA to evolve and adapt?**

The NCAA has not adapted in its entire existence. Some of that consistency is good, but it has not adapted to the changes that have taken place and they need to have rules that fit for different sports and different situations. The NCAA is like the store where one size fits all, and that does not work since one size does not fit all. There needs to be an evaluation of what



*Coach K celebrating a victory over Arkansas to move into the Final Four in 2022*



*Coach K at a Duke game against Georgia Southern in 2008 with then player and now head coach of Duke Jon Scheyer (above) and with wife Mickie (right)*

works for each sport and while the NCAA has a role as the umbrella organization with rules and regulations, it cannot expect to handle all sports the same. If the NCAA was a road, it would have no exits and no turns – just a straight road. I am not saying that the values and the people involved in the NCAA are not good, because they are, but the structure has been outdated for decades and they are trying to fit a square into a circle.

**Is it harder to maintain a team culture when players are only staying for a year or two, and with the transfer portal increasing the way players move from school to school?**

It is extremely hard today, so much harder than when you had Johnny Dawkins or Tommy Amaker for four years, or JJ Redick or Shane Battier for four years. Those older players would teach the younger players, and it was not just talking about culture, but actually seeing the culture in action. Our team managers play a big role in this regard. We have anywhere from 12 to 15 managers, and they are here for four years and play an integral part in our program. They have the same status as a player but have different duties. The reality is that it is not the same as when we had the four-year players, but you need to continue to try to get there.

**What interested you in renewing your SiriusXM show, “Basketball and Beyond with Coach K,” and what is your mission for the show?**

This is a people show to have conversations with interesting people and we touch on a variety of subjects. I personally learn a lot from the conversations and the show has been very well received over its 18 years.

**With all of the success that you have had on the court, it has not always been a smooth journey and you have been open about some of the challenges you have faced in your life. What made you want to address these issues in public?**

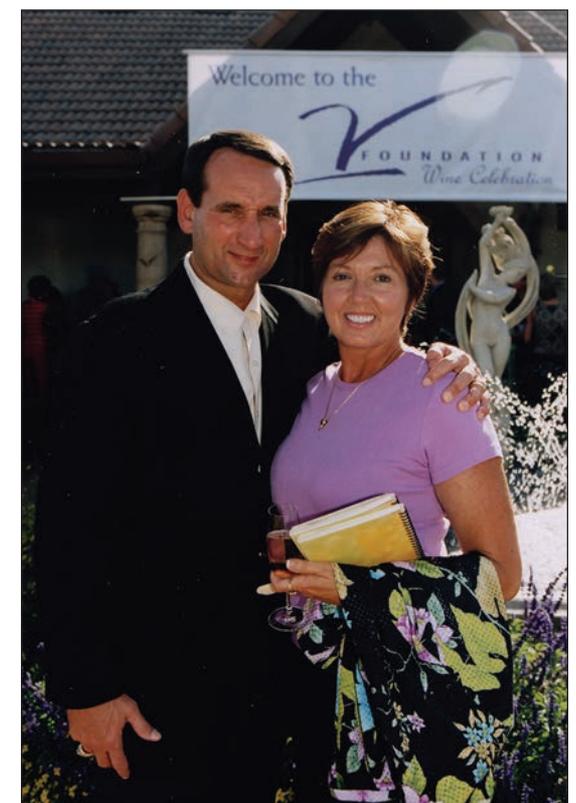
No one wins all the time, and there is the human aspect that happens with people, whether it is physical health, mental health, something with a family member. Once that time period and issue is addressed, you need to get back to the level that you deserve to be at with the talent and commitment that you have.

**How much will you miss coaching and is there a possibility that you may return to the sidelines one day?**

I am over coaching – if I wasn’t over it, I would not have retired. I also know that I do not want to do games on television because that requires study and time commitment so if I was going to put in that time, I would have stayed coaching. I am at peace and happy doing the Sirius show, speaking, spending time with my ten grandkids. For all of us, time will eventually run out, and there are other things that are meaningful to me and that is where I am focused now.

**Will you touch on the impact that your family had on your career and the special partnership that you have with your wife, Mickie?**

My wife and I have been great partners. We have been married 53 years and having





*Coach K at a Duke game against Army in 2021 (top) and with his mother, Emily (above)*

three daughters really helps because they have brought out great feelings for me. We have a family group text called “the starting five” and we have always looked at life as a family. I took all the kids and their families to the three Olympics I was involved with, and all of the kids’ families live within ten minutes of us which is unusual. We have a very close family.

**During your career, you spoke about not looking in the rear-view mirror and always looking ahead. Now that you have retired from coaching, are you able to reflect and take moments to appreciate what you accomplished?**

I can. The documentary titled, The Redeem Team, focused on USA Basketball’s 2008 Olympic gold medal win in Beijing, just came out on Netflix and the whole family watched it together. I have also received many letters since I retired from people who I have touched or tried to help over the years. I was not able to always appreciate those moments because I was moving onto other things, but when I read these long, emotional letters, it makes me feel even better about my career because I think we used the platform well. I do not look back on a great win or a tough loss or sit around watching old tapes, but I do think about the impact we have made on people’s lives, and this is something I plan to continue to try to do. ●