

You Are Only a Failure When...

by [Craig Impelman](#) | Apr 8, 2020



The man who is not afraid of failure seldom has to face it.

This is a version of one of Coach Wooden's favorite quotes: "The man who is afraid to risk failure seldom has to face success." It was a reflection of the way he lived, coached, and the way his teams played: fearless.

Success is the opposite of failure. Coach Wooden's lack of fear of failure started with how he defined success: *Success is peace of mind attained only through self-satisfaction in knowing you made the **effort** to do the best of which you are **capable**.*

For Coach, you were only a failure if you did not make the effort to do the best of which you're capable, or you didn't act when action was needed. Coach did not believe success or failure was based on the final score. He summed it up this way: *If you truly do your best, and only you will really know, then you are successful, and the*



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actual score is immaterial whether it was favorable or unfavorable. However, when you fail to do your best, you have failed even though the score might've been to your liking. I want to be able to feel, and want my players sincerely to feel, that doing the best that you're capable of doing is victory in itself, and less than that is defeat.

To keep his players fearless, Coach never mentioned winning. He summed up his logic this way: *I don't think you could find any player to tell you that I mentioned winning. I wanted winning to be the byproduct of the preparation, and failure to prepare is preparing to fail. I always wanted them to have that satisfaction within themselves, that peace of mind within themselves, that they made the effort to execute near their own particular level of competency, not trying to be better than someone else, but be the best that you could be.*

With three different groups of players over an eight-year period, Coach Wooden's teams won 38 consecutive single eliminations in the NCAA tournament games. They were focused on their effort, not fearful of the final score.

It has been said, fear of the unknown is the greatest fear of all. At the beginning of a contest, the final score is unknown. By redirecting his players' focus to their effort (a self-controllable and known quantity), not the final score, he minimized the fear of failure factor.

The pregame talk Coach gave before a National Championship Game was the same as any other game: *I've done my job, now it's time for you to do yours. I don't want to know by the expression on your face after the game which team scored more points. Now let's go.* And go they did. **Fearless!**

As Coach Wooden's grandson-in-law, Craig Impelman had the opportunity to learn Coach's teachings firsthand and wrote about those lessons for his site, www.woodenswisdom.com. He is a motivational speaker and the author of *Wooden's Wisdom*, a weekly "e-coaching module" that is distributed to companies nationally.