Phil Jackson and Scotty Bowman in The Coaching Elite

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu
This past week both Phil Jackson and Scotty Bowman won a record ninth championship in their given sports. These two coaches now join the elite in the coaching fraternity and just in their own sports. Bowman and Jackson have become two of the great coaches in the history of professional sport in North America. When the names of the great coaches like Lombardi, Auerbach, McCarthy and Blake are cited, the names of Scotty Bowman and Phil Jackson must now be listed with them.

In the NBA only Red Auerbach of the Boston Celtics has as many as nine championships. In hockey Scotty Bowman has moved ahead of Toe Blake of the Montreal Canadians who had eight championships. Bowman announced within minutes of the end of the final game on Thursday that he was retiring from hockey. In the case of Jackson he will no doubt stay on with the Lakers and win several more championships before he retires. Red Auerbach's derogatory comments about Jackson's achievement may be an additional spur for Jackson to seek to put a good deal of distance between himself and the former Celtic coach.

Many will say that the championships by Jackson and Bowman were simply the result of having great players. To belittle these achievements in that fashion is both a disservice and foolish. Both of these coaches have won their championships with different teams, and Bowman's championships have come in very different eras.

To me the greatness of Jackson is his ability to take the enormous egos of his teams, sell them on a team system which does not always allow the individual star to shine as brightly as they might want, and then add the role players to create just the proper mix. This sounds fairly simple but we know that many coaches have failed to do one or more of these things with great players.

The modern players, many of whom have more income from outside the team than from within it, who make much more than their coaches, and who have seldom subsumed their egos to a larger purpose, are the major challenge. Part of Phil Jackson's genius is that he has been able to sell his players on his system. The system itself is the product of
the genius of Tex Winter who Jackson has known enough to hire as an assistant coach both in Chicago and Los Angeles.

Perhaps Phil Jackson's background as a flower child of the Sixties and his adaptation of Zen to his task are the key to his success. Perhaps he is simply one of those people who would be a great leader no matter the field of endeavor. Whatever it is his success is unquestionable.

As for Scotty Bowman his achievement is even more remarkable than Jackson's is because it took place over several different eras. For thirty seasons over a thirty-four year period Scotty Bowman has been the head coach of a NHL team. The great Toe Blake trained him in Montreal before he joined the St. Louis Blues as head coach in 1967. In his first three years there he took the expansion Blues to the Stanley Cup finals where they lost. In 1971 he was tapped to go back to Montreal as head coach.

There Bowman's teams won five Stanley Cups, including the impressive four in a row from 1976 to '79. The Canadians were a combined 60-15 in the playoffs, and two of those teams won over 80% of their regular season games. Another Cup was added to the coaching resume in Pittsburgh, where Bowman also picked up a Stanley Cup as GM.

Along the way Bowman was developing a well-deserved reputation as master tactician and psychologist within the personality of Simon Legree, if he were even conceded to have a personality. He could be brutal to his players in print and in front of one another. He could also be distant and non-communicative. Through it all his teams won, and his players played with intensity and focus every minute they were on the ice. If they did not, they did not go back on the ice. In addition no one knows more about the game, prepares his players any better, or is better prepared himself than Bowman.

Like all great coaches Scotty Bowman is a driven personality. Many coaches say they demand total commitment from their players and from themselves, but not all that many really do. Bowman both got it and gave it. The results can be seen in the nine Stanley Cups that his teams have won.

This last championship is one of the most interesting in that it the Red Wings are one of the oldest teams to ever win a Stanley Cup. This team was loaded with superstar
players with an estimated eight or nine future Hall of Fame players. These are players from several different countries all of whom Scotty Bowman has molded into one powerful unit.

When Scotty Bowman laced up his skates on Thursday night and took the Stanley Cup for a spin around the ice he was the first to have the cup passed to him by Red Wing team captain Steve Yzerman. It could not have been a more fitting end to Bowman's career.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

Copyright 2002 by Richard C. Crepeau