

corner office

# How to Win More Games Than Anyone

*At 70, Tara VanDerveer will soon be the most successful college basketball coach of all time. She believes in experimentation, asking for help, and the art of the controlled meltdown.*

By Glenn Kramon

Jan. 14, 2024

Sometime in the next few weeks, when she wins her 1,203rd game, Tara VanDerveer at Stanford will pass Mike Krzyzewski at Duke as the college basketball coach — man or woman — with the most wins of all time.

It took Krzyzewski, who is known as Coach K, 47 seasons to reach that milestone. T Dawg, as VanDerveer is affectionately called on campus, will get there in 45, with 38 of them at Stanford. She will also do it with a higher winning percentage — about 82 percent of her games versus Krzyzewski's 77 percent. She has won three N.C.A.A. championships, even though many of the nation's best women's basketball athletes can't play for her because they don't meet Stanford's academic standards.

Most chief executives are lucky to have a decade of ascendancy at a job. How can a leader be so successful for almost half a century, with a winning record at Stanford for every season after her inaugural one in 1985?

Then there's the fact that N.C.A.A. sports have changed fast in recent years. Now, collectives of big donors at competing schools are paying large sums to attract and keep athletes not just in football but also in other sports, including women's basketball. (VanDerveer's own players have declined substantial offers.) And soon, universities may have permission to pay athletes directly. But Stanford donors, affluent as they are, have so far not stepped up as much as those of other schools.

At 70, VanDerveer is a decade or two older than many of her most successful competitors. She's old enough to be a grandmother to her players. But through generations of cultural change and a transformation of college athletics, she has found ways to adapt. There are lessons in her success,



perhaps, for other Boomers who find themselves in a workplace full of younger colleagues.

*This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.*

**When you took this coaching job four decades ago, your dad said you were crazy because you couldn't win in basketball at Stanford. Were you crazy?**

In 1985, I had a great job coaching at Ohio State (28-3 the previous season, while Stanford was 9-19). We had just beaten Stanford by 32 points. But one player we recruited, Emily Wagner, chose Stanford over Ohio State, because if she got hurt or things didn't work out on the court, Stanford was where she'd be happy. Emily was probably the reason I got hired, because she told the athletic director she wanted to play for me.

I said no the first time, then came back and met with Stanford's track coach, Brooks Johnson. Brooks, who is Black, said Stanford's team was almost all

white and he could help me recruit a great diverse team. He was brilliant.

As for my dad, I told him, “We just have to get three or four of the best players from around the country.” And we did.

### **Your own rules for leading a winning team?**

Hire right. As my dad said, “You can’t win the Kentucky Derby on a donkey.” And not just players but staff. Be sure they complement you more than compliment you.

Have a vision for your players, and give them the tools. Maximize people’s strengths and minimize their weaknesses.

Don’t be the center of attention. Don’t micromanage, and seek input.

Outwork the players on your team. Take care of yourself — eat and sleep right, and exercise — so you can take care of one another. If you can’t swim, you can’t rescue the other swimmer, and you’ll both go down.

You can’t have 15 personalities, one for each player. But you can recognize everyone’s different, and get to know them and understand where they’re at.

Every behavior is communication — not just words but also eye contact and body language.

Know that if your senior leaders are unhappy, your whole team will be.

### **The controlled meltdown. Can you elaborate on that one?**

I try to be even-keeled — not get too high or too low. I am intense, but I am not a screamer who gets technical fouls. I want to set a good example for my players by demonstrating self-control. Only once did I go totally crazy — about 35 years ago. We were about to play the No. 1 team, Purdue. We had lost a couple games, and I had implemented a routine during our warm-up, with more ball handling. They weren’t doing it with any enthusiasm. I went ballistic. Before the game in the locker room, every player got a piece of my mind. Yes, we beat them. It was the only game Purdue lost in a 34-1 national-championship season. But I didn’t feel good about it. These were college women, and I wanted to treat them as adults. It wasn’t who I wanted to be.



VanDerveer has won three national championships.  
Credit...Ian C. Bates for The New York Times

### **Are there any other secrets to your success as a leader?**

I love what I do. And I have great people around me — assistant coaches who complement me with different strengths. My associate head coach, Kate Paye, is incredibly organized. I’m more pie in the sky. My assistants are better at technical things, like editing game video. They’re thorough scouts. And sometimes players need to talk to someone beside the head coach — and they’re attentive listeners.

I am also not afraid to take risks and experiment. We ran one kind of offense for at least 12 years very successfully. When our team personnel changed, I studied the “Princeton offense” and thought it fit our team better. We won the N.C.A.A. in 2021 running that offense.

Also, I am a lifelong learner — from professors, assistants, players. I watch other Stanford teams practice and ask coaches about their training methods. And I watch so much basketball. I’m a copier who gets ideas from other basketball coaches.

My parents in upstate New York were the people from whom I learned the most about leadership. They were teachers and we didn’t have much money, but we did incredible things.

They emphasized the common good. We were five kids. They supported us all differently. I was sent to private school. My sister was given a car. They didn't keep score. They just understood what each child needed. I am that way, trying to understand what each player needs, and the needs are different.

**You've mentioned your piano teacher as an inspiration. Why?**

She took me where I couldn't get to by myself. That's what a great coach does.

Twenty-five years ago, at Christmas, when I was in my mid-40s, I decided to learn piano. My sister Heidi (the head women's coach at UC San Diego) bought me a keyboard. After two weeks, I thought, I can't do this, so I found a teacher, Jodi Gandolfi. So now I'm suddenly a student. I wasn't used to being a student. You make yourself vulnerable. You gotta play at a recital, and I would bomb, like the kid missing the free throw at the end of the game. So it helped me relate to our players better.

Within a year, I was much better and when people were surprised, I kept saying, "It's not me, it's Jodi!" It wasn't just that she was so good technically, it was that you wanted to please her. When I didn't have time to practice, she'd say, "Don't worry, we can play duets this time." She really understood me.

And I learned that if you want to be better, don't be afraid to ask for help.

**What would you advise your fellow Boomers as they struggle to remain relevant in a younger workplace?**

Most important, we can show our younger colleagues that, like my piano teacher, we can take them to a place they can't reach by themselves.

Be yourself, but do not fight change. Young people are the only ones who have grown up with technology — they live on their phones — and with a pandemic. Understand where they're coming from.

**How is your work different now that your competitors' fans are forming collectives to pay their players hundreds of thousands of dollars a year for use of their "name, image and likeness (N.I.L.)," and wooing stars like your all-American, Cameron Brink. And what will it mean if universities start paying athletes directly?**

Now I have to work harder to convince families that the return on investment of a Stanford education will outweigh N.I.L. or collective money. But the new Stanford collective is very important to our team's success. And if universities can pay athletes directly, that will help assure the women do as well as the men, because of Title IX. We've worked so hard for equity. I've fought for that all my life.

**We draw inspiration from those who play (and work) for us. Tell us about some players who inspired you.**

Angela Taylor was on the national title-winning team with two all-American guards so she almost never got to play. I asked her about her role. She said, "to spread sunshine."

Jennifer Azzi was on my national team boarding the bus at 3:30 a.m. on a frigid night in Ukraine when we passed a group of struggling women in thin coats. She went outside the bus and opened her wallet and suitcase for them. Her teammates followed her.

Jayne Appel played her final game at Stanford on a broken foot and after the game didn't want to take her uniform off — she so loved playing.

Jamila Wideman told her teammates to pick their heads up after we were upset by Old Dominion in the semifinals, and they were lying on the floor crying. I couldn't get their attention but Jamila got them to rise with: "I'd rather lose with you than win with anyone else."