

PUBLICATION

Leadership, Lawyers, and Basketball – Oh My!

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I've been pondering the relationship among these three things – leadership, lawyers, and basketball – since watching this year's Women's NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament earlier this year, there seems to be a lot we can learn from these 18- to 23-year-olds. Leadership lessons in life, basketball, and yes, even law, intertwine in the NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament, and it has become more than just a sporting event. The Tournament transcends the bounds of an athletic competition, and when we watch the teams compete on the court, we see invaluable lessons demonstrated during every minute of the game.

The Tournament showcases leadership, resilience, and what happens when we empower young women. Lessons in teamwork, resilience, and collaboration are ever-present, available, and applicable to anyone, whether male or female, old or young, on the court or in court.

The Tournament showed record millions that there is no one definition or kind of leader within the sport, the coaching staff, or the team. As a current lawyer and former basketball player, I would argue that the same is true of leaders in the law and within law firms and that there are many parallels between the various kinds of leadership we saw watching this year's (finally) nationally televised women's basketball games and our own day-to-day experiences as lawyers or those who work with lawyers.

If you think this comparison – law and basketball – is crazy, let me continue.

In basketball, you have stars like Caitlin Clark, Angel Reese, Kamilla Cardoso, and Cameron Brink. These are your rainmakers. They get a lot of well-deserved attention and are the best of the best, but they need the supporting players and coaches around them to succeed at this high level.

You have young players like JuJu Watkins, MiLaysia Fulwiley, and Hannah Hidalgo. These are your rock star associates. They have great potential and skills, but they need time and mentorship to grow.

You have role players like Kate Martin and Te-Hina Paopao. These are your ever-steady employees – whether shareholders, associates, paralegals, or any other role that keeps the organization running. They may not get the most publicity or praise, but without them, things fall apart.

And then you have the coaching staff led by women like Dawn Staley, Lisa Bluder, and Tara VanDerveer. These are your CEOs, CFOs, and practice group chairs. Their jobs are complex, and they have to operate and make decisions by thinking about what is best, not for themselves but for the team.

On the court, we witness a microcosm of effective leadership. No player, regardless of skill, can single-handedly secure victory. The cohesive teamwork, orchestrated by coaches and supported by various team members, drives success. This mirrors the legal world, where winning is delivered by effective leadership through collaboration and communication and where a united effort is the cornerstone of success.

Every player and coach in the Tournament is a leader in their own right and is leading at a high level. But not all in the same way or even at the same time. As the hundreds of leadership books on Amazon could prove, a leader is not just one thing, one role, or one description. In law and life, the key is knowing your strengths, your team, and perhaps most importantly, your role at that moment while also understanding that your role as a leader is fluid; not just that it can change, but that it will change. As you learn, as you grow, as you gain experience, and as your life changes.

Throughout the Tournament, we witnessed teams facing various challenges, from injuries to setbacks on the court. However, what sets great teams apart is their ability to bounce back from adversity. The same is true for us in our day-to-day lives as lawyers and as members of our practice groups and teams. Cases are won and lost, deals are closed and occasionally fall apart, and clients are happy and sometimes not so happy. And while bouncing back from adversity in basketball may show up after halftime or an appropriately called timeout, for us, as lawyers, it may show up with the next case or deal. We can all take inspiration from these young women and these teams and cultivate resilience within our own teams. By instilling a growth mindset and emphasizing the importance not of perfection but of perseverance and growth, leaders can empower their team members to overcome obstacles and achieve success, even in the face of adversity.

In the Tournament, we saw players leading by example through actions on the court. Whether diving for loose balls, sacrificing their bodies for the team, or displaying sportsmanship in victory and defeat, these players inspired their teammates and fans. We can learn from these young women by showing up and leading by example in our lives and organizations. By demonstrating integrity, resilience, and dedication, leaders can set the tone for their teams and inspire others to follow their lead.

You cannot write a piece on basketball and leadership in 2024 without looking at Caitlin Clark, the all-American point guard for the University of Iowa. This season, she broke virtually every Women's NCAA Basketball record available at her position while being under a constant microscope and with constant media attention – both from supporters and from those waiting for her to make one wrong move. She scored record points while dishing out record assists night in and night out and then still spent a couple of hours after every game on the court signing autographs for young fans. But as a lifelong Hawkeye fan who has watched Caitlin play many times before this record-setting season, getting to this point – to this Caitlin Clark – took grit, resilience, and a lot of practice. I recall watching Iowa play Duke during Caitlin's sophomore year, and she was having an off night. Instead of focusing on her passing, getting her teammates more involved, and working to get easier shots than her signature logo threes, she got angry, and things went from bad to worse for her and her team – and the game ended in a pretty bad loss for the Hawkeyes. This younger version of Caitlin is a far cry from the Caitlin that millions of fans have come to know and love this season. This year's Caitlin had taken those off nights, bad games, and losses and learned from them by making herself stronger – mentally and physically – and showing everyone who was paying attention, what true resilience is. After all, in a span of four years, those of us who have been watching have seen the growth of a good, yet somewhat chaotic, basketball player from West Des Moines, Iowa, (not exactly a hot-bed of basketball talent), become one of the greatest basketball players of all time and sign a \$28M deal with Nike (among many, many other deals – after all, if you go grocery shopping in Iowa, you will see her on a cereal box). While incredibly talented, Caitlin became THE Caitlin Clark, not because she was the tallest, the fastest, or the biggest, but because she took lessons of leadership – of resilience, teamwork, and accountability – and used them to her full advantage (of course, NIL didn't hurt either).

Another example of leadership from the Tournament is Dawn Staley, head coach at the University of South Carolina and the Hawkeyes opponent in the finals. Dawn was an amazing point guard in her own right at the University of Virginia. She became my role model in 1996 as the short, scrappy point guard for Team USA in the Olympics. Dawn was a great athlete, competitor, and basketball player, though unfortunately, too far ahead of the game. And while she did play professionally for ten years, she did so before the rest of the world was

ready to watch. Despite the lack of opportunities as a player, Dawn persevered within the game, becoming the head women's basketball coach at Temple University in 2000 and in 2008, becoming the head women's basketball coach at the University of South Carolina. Anyone following women's basketball throughout the 1990s and early 2000s can tell you that South Carolina was neither a powerhouse nor the school little girls grew up dreaming of playing for. That honor was held by the University of Tennessee, the University of Connecticut, and, if you lived on the West Coast, Stanford University. But Dawn was not deterred. She took the reins in 2008 and began the arduous process of building a powerhouse. She built it, winning her first SEC championship in 2014, six 30-win seasons, and three National Championships, including beating my beloved Hawkeyes this year. Without question, little girls now grow up dreaming of playing for the University of South Carolina.

Dawn Staley's trajectory from player to coach reflects the perseverance and visionary characteristics of great leaders, and she is someone whose strategic acumen mirrors that of CEOs and practice group chairs.

Leaders don't have to break records or build programs. Sometimes, leaders are those of us who know and excel in our role. And there is no better example of this type of leader than Kate Martin, a fifth-year shooting guard for the Iowa Hawkeyes. Of course, Kate is a great basketball player; nobody gets a Division I scholarship without being outstanding. But the spotlight has almost always been on her teammate, Caitlin Clark. Taking a backseat to Caitlin couldn't have been easy, but Kate embraced her role and made the most of it. She earned nicknames like "Money Martin" for making clutch shots and "The Glue" for always keeping her team together. She was the team's voted captain and leader – without being the star. And when it came time to support her friend Caitlin Clark at this year's WNBA Draft, she unexpectedly found herself being drafted in the second round, and as of the writing of this article, is on the cusp of making the WNBA's Las Vegas Aces.

Kate's story underscores the importance of knowing one's role and excelling within it. Despite playing in the shadow of a star teammate, her selfless dedication to her team exemplifies leadership in its purest form.

While basketball and law may not be obviously connected to most people, anyone who knows me, knows that my time as a basketball player – and the lessons learned during those years – is perhaps the most significant driving force behind any success I've had as a lawyer. I remember being a lowly freshman playing with teammates several years older and more experienced than I was; and learning to navigate that role while still finding my own version of success was no different than when I was a first-year associate, trying to figure out not only what it meant to be a lawyer but more importantly, where I fit within my team and my firm. I also remember my growth as a player after my freshman year, when the game got easier, the accolades started coming, and success was easier to find – and the corresponding triumphs and challenges of those years are really no different than becoming a senior associate and then a partner or shareholder and learning once again how to navigate a new role and chart a new course. And while my basketball career never did grow to superstardom, I can imagine that the rise of those like Caitlin Clark and Angel Reese would have many parallels to our colleagues who are the rainmakers and brightest stars within the Firm.

Lisa Bluder, Iowa's head coach, perhaps said it best when asked about her team's success and leadership within the women's game: "Why not us?" And Lisa is right, why not us? Why not me? And why not you?

And, if anyone is left unconvinced that there is no comparison between women's basketball and the practice of law, I leave you with a trendy t-shirt quote from the 2023 Women's Basketball Season – created by some fans of the Iowa Hawkeyes – nicknaming the partnership between Caitlin Clark and Monica Czinano as "The Law Firm of Czinano & Clark."