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Why Butler Basketball Holds The Key To Organizational Success

Over the better part of the last decade, no team has captivated the attention of sports fans across the country like the [Butler University](#) Bulldogs. A living embodiment of the mythical Hoosiers, the small school in Indianapolis has risen to the echelons of college basketballs elite over the last several years using modest resources and a budget substantially less than those teams it defeats on a regular basis. Time and again the Bulldogs manage to win games they shouldn't with a roster of players who received little recruiting interest from blue-blooded programs like Duke and Kentucky. All the while, behind the curtain stands their mysterious young coach, Brad Stevens, concocting his next delightful magic trick.



Brad Stevens comes from a long line of Butler coaches who have passed down a secret which holds the key to success when leading teams in sports or the business world. (Image credit: Getty Images)

While many have offered their own fleeting opinions as to why Butler has been so successful, the true answer has remained an enigma. To begin to unravel the mystery, one must dive deep into they culture of the school, athletics program, coaches and its players.

Almost 100 years ago, the legendary Paul “Tony” Hinkle began what would become a legendary half century reign over the Butler athletics program and community. A true renaissance man, Hinkle accumulated an incredible 1060-800-16 record over the course of his career coaching the Butler football, basketball and baseball teams. While the future “Wizard of Westwood”, John Wooden, was still perfecting his jump shot as a player up the road at Purdue, Hinkle was performing his own wizardry, leading the Bulldogs to two national titles and a reputation as “Big Ten Killers”. Even then, the small school from a small Midwest city was [slaying giants](#).

The impact Hinkle had on the Butler program goes beyond just wins and losses. Under his leadership, Butler developed not only the first true culture of success in sports, but among modern day organizations as we know. Hinkle passed down his teachings to his coaching proteges and players throughout the years, the programs culture propagating into all aspects of the Butler community. Barry Collier, former head coach and now athletic director of the Bulldog program, eventually formalized the program philosophies by creating five pillars collectively called, “The Butler Way”:

1. **Humility** – Those who humble themselves will be exalted;
2. **Passion** – Do not be lukewarm, commit to excellence;
3. **Unity** – Do not divide our house, team first;
4. **Servanthood** – Make teammates better, lead by giving; and
5. **Thankfulness** – Learn from every circumstance

The principles that make up The Butler Way are not uncommon to coaches or business leaders. What is different is that Hinkle and those that followed him have not only lived this philosophy themselves, but built the program with fellow coaches and players who already embodied those same beliefs. College basketball teams, not unlike successful corporations, are organizations that compete to attract the top talent in their respective fields. In many cases, with the best talent also comes the biggest egos and organizations can quickly fill to the brim with toxic superstars. Rather than be like most leaders who attempt to forcibly install a “for the greater good” culture in which the individual exists below the team, Butler has instead recruited players who are already willing to sacrifice maximizing their own self-interest for the ultimate goal of winning as a team. Players can thus devote themselves entirely to playing their role without being biased towards shifting any particular situation towards an outcome that favors only them.

The Butler Way has always begun with a collective determination to conduct oneself appropriately in all circumstances. All Butler team members and coaches are required to promote the program’s culture by doing the following:

1. Living our core values;
2. Placing the well-being of our teammates before individual desires;
3. Embracing the process of growth; and
4. Demonstrating toughness in every circumstance

Yet the Bulldog’s success is more than just principles, but rather resides in the life blood of the very players who join the program and help perpetuate every positive thing the Butler name stands for. Butler’s Associate Head Coach, Matthew Graves, has been a part of the Bulldog basketball program for over two decades as both a player and a coach. Graves is the living embodiment of this very concept.

“We have talented players but even greater teammates. Everyone is consumed with embracing the core values our program while also making sure to enjoy the process of getting better everyday”, said Graves, adding, “Everyone involved with the program becomes firmly rooted by those values; it makes it easy for us to distinguish the type of player who shares our vision and goals.”

Watch any Butler game and something becomes immediately clear – many of the players on the court are of the type that don’t score often, grab many rebounds or do anything else particularly well and whose statistics are, at best, average. Certainly they have had talented players on their roster, but none have been highly rated coming out of high school. Yet the Bulldogs time and again are able to match their athletically superior opponents shot for shot. It is the ultimate manifestation of system in which the whole far outweighs the sum of its parts.

Michael Lewis, acclaimed author of Moneyball, calls a player who fits the Butler mode a “[No-Stats All-Star](#)”. A player who is, “widely regarded as a replaceable cog in a machine driven by superstars. And yet every team [they’ve] ever played on has acquired some magical ability to win.”

The most famous example of such a player is the Miami Heat's Shane Battier. According to Lewis, "Battier's game is a weird combination of obvious weaknesses and nearly invisible strengths. When he is on the court, his teammates get better, often a lot better, and his opponents get worse — often a lot worse. He may not grab huge numbers of rebounds, but he has an uncanny ability to improve his teammates' rebounding... At the same time he somehow improves the defensive efficiency of his teammates by helping them out in all sorts of subtle ways."

Craig Caldwell, Professor of Management, and Jerry Toomer, Executive Partner at Butler University, have studied the Bulldog program extensively. Caldwell believes that, like Battier, the team's players, "are literally catalysts – agents that provoke a chemical reaction between substances that would otherwise have no effect on each other. Butler has a higher percentage of catalyst players than any other program in college basketball. Alone they would be just average, but put them on the court and the pieces start fitting together."

This principle, Caldwell and Toomer go on to explain, is equally applicable to the traditional corporate environment as it is the basketball court, "In today's business world. When teams are brought together to tackle a project, a catalytic, non-star can be as important to the team's success as the team leader or star. This impact can be particularly acute on self-directed work teams as there is no traditional top-down 'we'll-tell-you-what-to-do' approach to management."

The key then is to find individuals who not only fit the existing culture of the organization, but who are driven by an unselfish desire to achieve success through improving their own teammates. In many ways, this is similar to management consultant Jim Collins' concept of "[Level 5 Leadership](#)" which requires a "paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will", but instead applies to not only the head of the organization, but to each individual member as well. It is not simply enough to have people who are "team players"; each person within the organization must actively choose to make those around them better while sacrificing the pursuit of their own self-interest. Butler University has perfected this practice by making it the foundation of its culture.

With March Madness soon upon us, the Bulldogs will once again have the opportunity to be the Cinderella darlings of the college basketball world. As they take the court, written across the backs of their warm-ups will be the word "Catalyst", a reminder to each player that deep within them lies the ability to ignite a chain reaction that will lead their team to victory.

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