



# Focusing on Improvement When You've Reached the Pinnacle

How Roy Williams Motivates His Team

by Don Yaeger

## High Ranking

A Basketball Hall of Fame inductee, Williams coaches the perennial favorite Tar Heels.

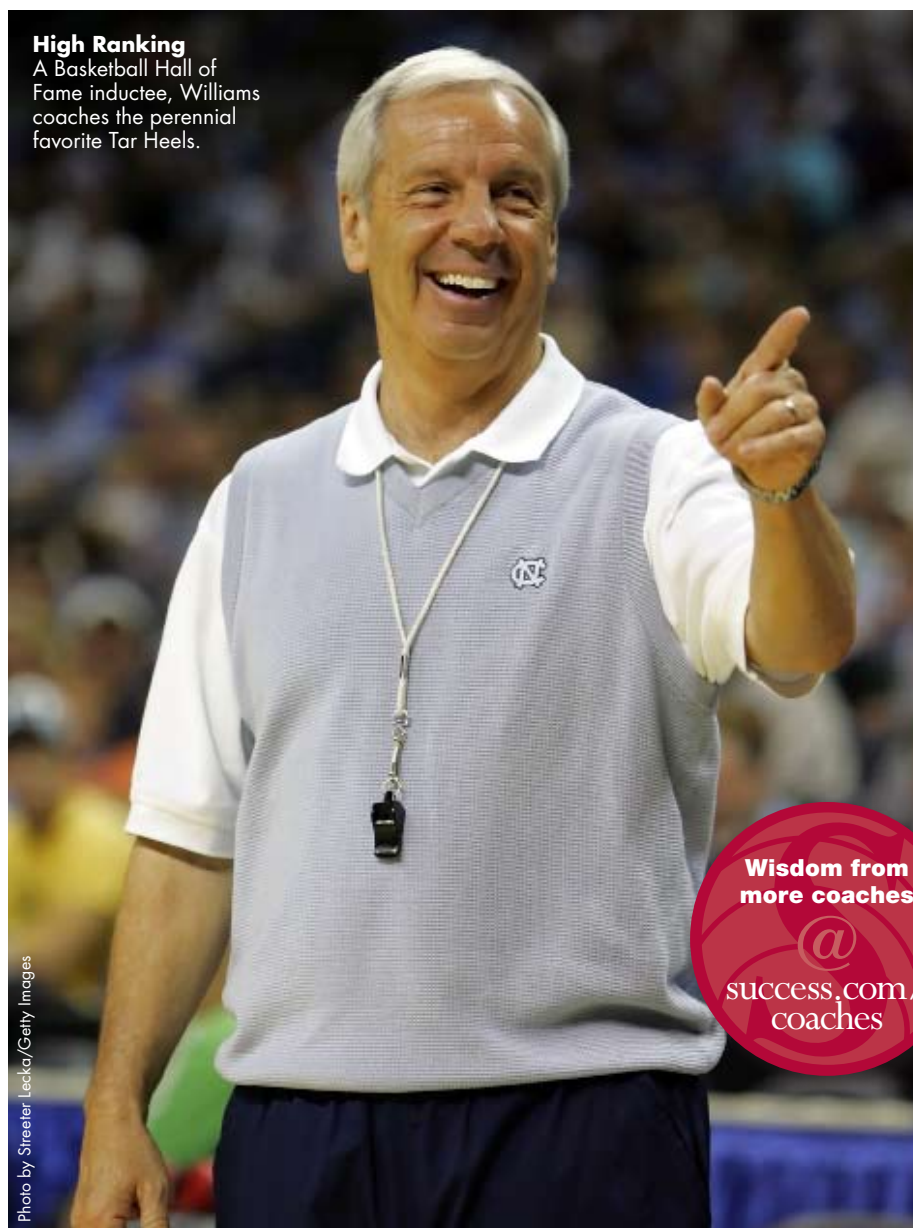


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Roy Williams knows about expectations. The veteran coach of the University of North Carolina's vaunted basketball program has, in years past, fielded teams of which little was expected. And he has come to play with teams when anything less than a championship would seem, at least in the public eye, a failure.

Williams doesn't hesitate in saying which he prefers: "Give me great players and big goals anytime."

As the college basketball season tips off, Williams has plenty of the former and, if preseason pundits are correct, should be focused on the single goal of hanging another national championship banner from the rafters in Chapel Hill.

And that lands Williams in the challenging position of leading when much is expected, motivating when everyone proclaims your superiority.

"I believe we've taken the right approach as we prepared for this season," Williams tells *SUCCESS*. "From the moment we met during the summer—we had everyone together for a meeting at the end of the first summer academic session—we talked openly about what everyone was going to write and say about us and what we should achieve. I told them that they may feel pushed because everyone outside that room was going to have expectations of them.



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“But I want them to have dreams, not expectations. I want them to have goals, not be concerned about what others say. I wanted them to realize from the earliest point that others who have lots to say have nothing invested. We will be successful if we make the investment and ignore the hype. If you have dreams and goals and are committed to them, are working toward them, it becomes easier to block those outside forces.”

That same type of leadership challenge led Tom Coughlin, coach of the Super Bowl-winning New York Giants, to seek advice from other coaches who had racked up numerous winning records. Coughlin placed midsummer phone calls to Los Angeles Dodgers manager Joe Torre (who won three consecutive World Series titles with the New York Yankees) and former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden (who won seven consecutive NCAA basketball championships). Coughlin asked the two coaches for tips on keeping this year’s Giants from living in the past.

“Leading when everyone expects you to win really requires that you convince every member of your team that last year doesn’t matter,” Torre says he told Coughlin. “And that’s tough to do because all year long they’re seeing the words *Defending Champion* placed before their names. The only thing that winning last year means is that your opponents are looking forward to playing you. At this level,

none of them are intimidated by what you did a year ago, and none of them are going to roll over. Your team will learn that quickly.”

Williams and Torre agree that the challenge of leading their teams when everyone expects greatness is no different than the test facing a CEO at a company flying high or a manager of a top-performing sales force. To maintain your view from the top, you have to beat back your ego as well as your opposition.

**“We will be successful if we make the investment and ignore the hype.”**  
—Roy Williams

“It is human nature that once you get to the top, or when it appears you are better than your opponent, to take a breath and enjoy the moment,” Williams says. “What we’re trying to teach runs counter to human nature. We are trying to instill in everyone within our program that all those polls, all that praise, means nothing once they toss the ball in the air.”

Torre says teaching that lesson was a focus at each Spring Training following a World Series championship. “You are trying to tell young people—and the younger they are the more challenging it seemed—that their instinct to believe they’ve ‘arrived’ has to be set aside

because you never really arrive in this business. The second you think that, someone passes you. You have to always be in pursuit.”

Williams, who has coached a team ranked No. 1 at some point during nine of his 20 years as a head coach at Kansas and North Carolina, says he believes this year’s team could live up to that challenge and focus on constant improvement rather than postseason accolades.

“I recruit character as much as I recruit ability,” Williams says. “And if you’ve built a team of character, they can handle moments that others cannot and they accept coaching on how to manage pressure.”

The Tar Heels return the nation’s Player of the Year, Tyler Hansbrough, plus Ty Lawson, Wayne Ellington, Danny Green, Marcus Ginyard and Deon Thompson—92 percent of the scoring from last year’s team. That team went 36-3, won the ACC Championship, went to the Final Four and was the highest-scoring team in America. Add to the returning stars a group of four freshmen that many consider among the nation’s best and it’s no wonder that UNC is the prohibitive favorite to leave the Ford Field floor in Detroit with the national championship trophy in hand next April.

On paper, UNC hasn’t looked so overwhelmingly dominant since 1984. That team featured future NBA stars Michael Jordan, Sam Perkins, Kenny Smith and Brad Daugherty.

Williams says that for this year’s Tar Heels, it all starts with Hansbrough, the first national Player of the Year to return for another year of college since Shaquille O’Neal 15 years ago. Hansbrough, his coach says, sets the example by working incessantly to improve his game. When the most decorated member of your team is always looking to progress, everyone else is pulled along in his wake, Williams says.

#### Hometown Hero

Williams returned to his native North Carolina—and alma mater—to coach them into the win column.



**“The second you think [you’ve arrived], someone passes you. You have to always be in pursuit.”**

—Joe Torre



Photo by Mike Zarrilli/Getty Images

“Most elite teams have elite players,” he says. “And when the guy others look up to also happens to be dedicated to constant development, that’s a dream situation.”

Williams used his preseason time with players to reinforce his message and offer his prescription. “I reminded each player that the way you deal with expectations is to focus only on today,” he says. “Yes we have a plan for the entire year, but it all begins with what we are going to do today. If you work to be the best you can be today, you’re preparing yourself to be the best you can be tomorrow. It sounds simple, but it’s not.

“If each of us works every day to be the best we can be on that day and then come back and do the same tomorrow, then we have a better chance of being our very best at year’s end. Will that be enough to win a national championship? That’s hard to say in college basketball today.

“But handling as high expectations as we are gives us our best chance for success.”

And for a national championship. Roy Williams wouldn’t have it any other way. **S**