

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Laura Beeman

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Heartbreak a year ago. Elation this season.

It was a thrill of a lifetime. You know, and I still talk about it, I can get a big lump in my throat. And remembering in the locker room just this lump of winning the tournament. The range of emotion of seeing their hard work pay off, and being so incredibly proud of them for being that first team, to the community support and feeling the aloha twenty-five hundred miles away, and then feeling the stress that I had been under of ... We're supposed to win this tournament and go the NCAA, and what if I don't, what a failure is that? And being able to sit in a corner by myself and go, Oh, my gosh, we did this. And just tears; just tears. Tears of happiness, of joy. It was, right now, a little emotional. It was an amazing experience. I want to get back there, I want to have this feeling again.

University of Hawai'i Women's Basketball Coach Laura Beeman likes winning. Yet, her drive to make her players the best they can be isn't limited to the basketball court. She's teaching them life lessons that will continue to guide them long after they graduate. Laura Beeman, next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou. Laura Lynne Beeman moved to Hawai'i in 2012 to become the head coach of the University of Hawai'i Rainbow Wahine Basketball Team. At that time, the team was losing more games than it was winning. It didn't take Laura Beeman long to turn the team around. In 2016, only four years after she took over, the Rainbow Wahine won the Big West Conference Championship, securing a spot at the pinnacle event in college post-season basketball, March Madness. It was the program's sixth appearance overall, but only the first in eighteen years. Laura Beeman has always been competitive; that's the way she was raised.

Both my parents are very, very competitive. They're self-made. And you know, my dad opened up a pharmacy with his brother right out of college, and it was an independent pharmacy. And basically, my mom supported him. You know, his parents told him, If you guys get married, you're on your own. And they decided to get married, and my mom said, Well, I'll put you through USC pharmacology. She did.

How did she do it?

She sacrificed her education, and she worked. So, I think that drive comes from them. You know, as a kid, I watched my father work seventeen, eighteen-hour days to support his family, so that his wife could raise children, and my mom doing everything she could to support her husband. So, I saw that hard work from a very, very young age, and was always told by my parents, If you're gonna do it, you're gonna do it right. You know, you're gonna have a great attitude, you're gonna give it all the effort you have, or don't do it. And so, I think it was instilled at a very young age, even though I didn't know that was going on. Youngest of four, and was immediately just thrust into sports. I have an older brother. And so, you know, growing up, we went to school with one another, we went to a Christian school, all the way up until middle school. And sports just became a huge foundation of mine and my brother's life. You know, Sunday church, and then come home after church, go to a little grinder shop down the street, come back, open up the grinders, eat, and watch football. And so, that was kind of my life growing up.

When you went to college at California State University at San Bernardino, you earned a bachelor's in business marketing.

Yeah.

And?

I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. And someone said, you know, business is probably one of the areas that is most marketable. You can do anything from being a sports agent, to get into law, to go into sales. And so, I thought, I have no idea, you know, what I want to do. I had been told by a woman who worked for my father, You can sell, you know, ice cubes to Eskimos. And so, we always laughed about that. And so, I thought, let me go into business. So, while I was playing sports, I got my business degree with a concentration in marketing, thinking I could do sales or maybe sports agent. And then, graduated and was like, What am I gonna do with my life?

Then, what happened?

Well, I got a phone call from an assistant coach at the University of Redlands. And they said, We heard you're in town, we have a graduate assistant position open, would you like to get your master's paid for and get into coaching? And I thought, I have no idea what I want to do with my life, so let me market myself, make myself a little bit more well-rounded. So, I went and received a master's in educational counseling. And I loved the counseling aspect; had no idea I would, and had no idea how useful that would come in coaching. So, when I started coaching at the University of Redlands,

the basketball coaching bug; it bit. You know, I loved playing, but I had no idea I would want to coach.

What would you have done if you hadn't gotten that call? And then, you get a free master's. I mean, that's quite amazing.

It is. Again, right place, right time. I have no idea. You know, I was working for my dad at his pharmacy. I probably would have continued to work for him. Had no desire to become a pharmacist. I don't know what I would have done, but I would have worked for him until I landed on my feet someplace.

Do you remember how and when that coaching bug bit you?

I think pretty immediately. You know, when I went to the University of Redlands, it was sitting back and watching with the coaches did, and what I liked and what I didn't like, and how kids responded and how kids didn't respond. And then, really figuring out, Okay, these kids respond to me with a little bit of a different approach. And all of a sudden, it was like, Okay, this is kinda cool. You know, I can kind of figure this out as I go. I was there for two years, and that's when Mount SAC, Mount San Antonio Community College in Southern California, the job opened up. I was not hired as the head coach; I was hired as the assistant women's basketball coach. And again, watched how coaches did things, and how players responded. Fortunate for me, and unfortunate for that coach, it didn't work out for her, and they hired me the next year as the head coach.

You were twenty-five years old.

I was young; yeah. I had players that were older than me, so I had to establish some pretty strong boundaries. And again, that goes back to my parents; it goes back to watching them have very, very good boundaries in their life and their relationship, going back to coaches I'd played for and coaches that had really good boundaries, and coaches that maybe didn't.

What kind of boundaries do you need when you're younger than your players?

Well, you can't go party with them. You know, you can't go drink with them. If you're a male coach, female coach, you can't date players. So, there's a lot of things you can't do. And you see that all the time; you hear of both female and male coaches that get involved with players, and that's just a boundary that's not appropriate. Going to clubs with them. So, it's just setting these boundaries of ... I'm in a different category; in a position of power, I guess, a little bit. And I think that a lot of people abuse that. And that was something that I was always very cognizant of, is respecting the young ladies. You know, I would never walk into a locker room and just walk in unannounced.

Hey, I'm coming in, put your clothes on, you know, get yourself appropriate, whether it's a male assistant coach walking in with me or not. There was just a very strong, strict boundary that I was always ... always made sure that I held, and I wanted my players to see that. Because that's something that as they grew in their life, there has to be boundaries in their life as well with relationships and other things.

From the beginning, were you pretty good at reading players? I mean, you've been in sports all your life, so you knew a lot about dynamics. What about reading individuals?

You know, some people think I'm crazy for saying this on the show. I went through a lot of counseling, you know, later on in my life. And that is probably what helped me read people, and understand human behavior. And it also allowed me to develop a philosophy that if I wanted players to be their best, then I had to help them get to their best; if I wanted my players to be their best, I had to be at my best. And so, reading players and reading people, human behavior, I feel like that's something that I'm pretty decent at.

Sometimes, the things that help you get to where you are aren't the best thing for where you need to go.

No; sometimes they're painful, sometimes they're hard. You know, I'm not a believer that everything happens for a reason, although I guess it does. But I'm not a believer in that. I think things just are cruddy sometimes, and they happen. But it's how you deal with that, and it's the after effect that can take you to a really good, solid place in your life where you can continue to live in that yuck. And I just decided there was a point in my life where I didn't want to live in that yuck.

You were already an authority figure when you went for counseling; right?

Yes.

Was that hard, to ask for help?

Yes. Absolutely. It's hard to go in and kinda put your heart on the table, and get very vulnerable with someone, particularly someone you don't know, and let them kinda not pick you apart, but say, Okay, let's go here, and you're like, I don't want to go there. Very, very difficult, particularly as a coach, 'cause you're always in control.

How do you deal with stress? I mean, there are so many things you can't control in your life as a coach.

Yeah. I think one of them is—you just hit it on the head, is admitting and knowing what I can't control. There are just certain things that I cannot control, because I don't know

what's gonna happen with it. I have two huge dogs that walk me, and I love that. So, I get them out, go on hikes, try to just enjoy the beauty of Hawai'i. The quality of life here is very different than the mainland. And so, for as busy and as stressed as I am, I have learned to enjoy that. And it's a forced ... take a deep breath. Again, going back to what I said earlier, being my best me. I know when I'm tired, I know when I'm overworked, I know when I'm cranky and people don't want to be around me. And it's that moment I need to say, Okay, pause, and admit it.

For fifteen years, Laura Beeman was head coach of the women's college basketball team at Mount San Antonio in a suburb of Los Angeles. She became a legend, leading the team to a record number of wins and state championships. Three years after she left, she accepted the position of head coach for Hawai'i's Rainbow Wahine Basketball Team. The program was in serious need of revitalization, but before Beeman could turn things around, she would first have to change the team culture.

The first year of recruiting, you did bring us out of a big stall.

Well, you know, the cupboard wasn't bare. You know, the coach prior did a great job of putting, you know, things there, pieces there for me. And so, we were able to take that group of young ladies and kind of regenerate and rejuvenate them and say, Let's go. And they really bought into the philosophy of it's not okay to be okay, we want to be better than okay, we want to be great, we want people to recognize us as great. And they bought into that.

So, was that kind of a culture of, we're good enough, it's good enough?

Very much so. When I met my team the first time, that was the running theme. I said, Okay, what's gone on? And I remember Shawna Kuehu; love her, came into my office last week. She said, Coach, I'm tired of just being okay, and it's okay to be okay here. And I said, I've never been okay. I've never been average, I've never been okay, and now I know what the problem is. So, give me your laundry list of things we need to change, I'll let you know the things that I can try to change and the things I know I can change. And the one thing I can change is that culture. We're not gonna be average here. But you're gonna have to work.

Yeah; you can't change the culture by saying, That's not okay. How do you change a culture? I mean, this is not just one thing, this is a system of beliefs.

Yeah. One, I think you have to walk the walk as the coach. You know, you can't walk in and be on your cell phone, and again, the things I spoke of earlier, you know, using foul language. You have to present yourself as a winner. You have to present yourself as a champion. Whether or not you feel you are, you have to present yourself as that. And I truly believed that if I could get this group of young ladies to buy into, I don't lose,

you guys, and I'm not trying to be arrogant. Not at all. I've been fortunate to have wonderful assistant coaches and resources, and have been able to get kids to come together and say, Hey, look at my record, this is what we're gonna do here if you buy in. And here's another thing; if you don't want to buy in ... what you're doing isn't working, so try something different. And they did. And so, it was a daily challenge to say, No, tuck your uniform in, tie your shoes this way, get in here, get to class, do what you're supposed to do. Get on the end line, work hard, or please leave the gym, because you're the one that said you didn't want to be okay, not me. I have my degree, I've won. Let's go. And so, when you talk that way to kids and you paint that picture of, I really think I can do this, and we have a leader that knows how to do it ...

And you challenge them.

Big time; big time. I'm not gonna let a kid sit back and say they want something, and then not work for it. You have two choices; tell me what you want and we're gonna go, or tell me what you want and not do it, and then I'm gonna ask you to go ahead and sit over there in the corner by yourself, and do your thing. Because you can do that without me. But if you want to win, and you want to be good, then let's get together and let's do this the right way. Don't tell me what you want do; do what you're gonna do. And that was a challenge, and that's where we took that first group of young ladies is, let's go, that's enough of this, we have talent. And they bought into it.

So, you started with these young women.

M-hm.

And you made inroads. When you find somebody you really want to bring over, how do you get them here when they're really looking askance at Hawai'i?

We sell Hawai'i on connection. We sell Hawai'i on relationships. We sell Hawai'i on the community. You know, we have been fortunate that four of our five years, we've done very well. And so, we can approach the, Okay, we've won.

How did your system of recruiting change as you went along, where you got to be the Big West Conference winner and coach of the year?

Yeah. That was fun. You know, as young ladies evolved as players, we all of a sudden said, Okay, this is the system we want to run, this is what we need to do to be successful in the Big West. And so, you go out and you kind of recruit pieces that fit your puzzle, and fit your system. And so, we were able to, after that first year—we were late in the recruiting process. You know, you recruit two and three years in advance.

And you came, I think, before the 2012-13 season.

April; yeah.

April.

And so, recruiting, though, for you know, 2012, 13, 14, coaches are already in the mix. They've already offered kids that were '14s, you know, graduating in '14. So, we were behind the gun. We went after some key pieces. We found a couple JUCO kids.

What does JUCO mean?

JC.

Okay.

Community college, two-year. Found a couple, you know, JC kids, went and found a fifth year transfer; immediate fixes, immediate pieces. Good character kids, but they were gonna have to work. And they were able to get the group together. And then, we were able to play catch up a little bit in the recruiting process, and then bring in people that we wanted; high character, great work ethic. Pieces as far as whether it's post player or guard, bring in those right pieces. And then, by the year that we finished second in conference and went to the NCAAs, we had put our puzzle together, and that was a really fun year.

When you were looking for those pieces, you were looking for specific athletic strengths; right?

Yes; absolutely.

And you said, high character.

M-hm; m-hm. That's important. You know, if I look at a kid that's high character and I can get the effort piece, then I know I'm not gonna have problems off the court. When I'm bringing in a young lady where I'm constantly, Go to class, don't go to the club, what are you doing, it's taking energy away from where we want to put our energy. So, you know, I say as a coach, the two things you should never have to coach as a coach are attitude and effort. I'll coach your ability, I'll motivate you, but I'm not gonna coach your effort, and I'm not gonna coach your attitude.

But you don't know how a young person is gonna act when they get to this new exotic place away from their parental eyes and family.

You hope that you've developed enough of a relationship in the evaluation process of going out and watching them play, over the phone, through some text messages, talking to parents, that at least you're not gonna completely get it wrong. Now, have I got it wrong? Absolutely. And I'll get wrong again. But you really try to develop a relationship. Recruiting is a relationship, it's a fit. It's not just a, I like the way you play, come play for me. There has to be more to it, so that you can keep kids here.

And I'm sure there's always the temptation to say, This person has great raw talent.

M-hm.

I'm gonna take a big chance on somebody who doesn't have a lot of the other elements.

M-hm.

Have you done that in your coaching career?

I have. I did that at Mount SAC a lot, because I'd already developed a culture, and I knew when I had a kid, say, that would come in with a bad attitude, I had fourteen young ladies in that locker room that were gonna help me manage them. And a couple really good captains that were gonna keep them in check. I couldn't do that my first two years here, because we hadn't developed the culture. When you get a good culture, you can take some risks, you can take some chances, because you have that base of great locker room talk. Where they come in and they're like, Hey, let's do this; and your captains go, No, that's not what champions do, let's not do that. So, when you get a little bit of a better culture and a foundation, you can take more risks.

How have local recruitments gone?

Tough; it's tough. The theme right now and the trend right now, they want to go to the mainland. They want a mainland experience. And some of them do well and stay, a lot of them come back home. Um, I would love to keep our local talent here, but it's—it's tough to fight the—the allure of the mainland. So, right now, we're going after 'em; we're offering kids. I just have to keep them home.

And you don't have a lot of people who are really tall awaiting your call either in Hawai'i.

Yeah, you know. But I have some tremendous athletes, and I have young ladies that understand the culture, and understand what it feels like to represent the State of Hawai'i, and uh, play in front of their family and their aunties and their uncles, and that's—that's huge. So, um, I can find the guard or the forward, possibly, that wants to

stay; yeah. Would I love there to be a six-four, six-five local kid that wants to stay home that can play basketball? Absolutely. Um, whether or not that happens, those are things I can't control, I don't worry about it. Right now, my challenge is to keep 'em here.

Recruiting players and training them to perform during practice and games are only part of Coach Laura Beeman's job. Teaching young people to become top athletes often requires coaching them off the court as well to learn the life skills they'll need to achieve their athletic goals.

John Wooden, a great basketball coach, coined for this phrase of, Kids don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. And so, when you get people, business, team, whatever it is; when people really know you care about them, then you get a common goal, and people want to work hard for you. And that's not just. Let me fake caring about these kids, and then they're gonna work hard. My players know I genuinely care about them.

How do they know? Do they test you?

Of course they do. What children don't test; right?

How do they test you?

They're gonna see how far they can take the discipline. You know, if they miss a class, is Coach really going to, you know, suspend me?

And that's constant management for you.

Oh, yeah.

Isn't it?

Yeah. And it's constant discipline for me to stay consistent. Kids say they don't want discipline. Kids love discipline, and they want consistency. So, it's a test for me to say, We just talked about this last week, here we go again. That's where I have to be very disciplined in what I do.

And the punishment is, they sit out?

Yeah. And you know, I don't like a lot of rules. I want my players to manage themselves and discipline themselves, and know the right way to go. There is an area, though, that I don't have any wiggle room; and that's academics. A lot of coaches,

when kids don't go to class, they put 'em on the track and they run 'em. Well, my kids are already in shape, so running 'em is very easy. I sit 'em. And for my mainland kids, I sit 'em when they go home. I let 'em warm up, and don't tell 'em, and they go through all the warmups so people know they're not hurt, and then they don't play. And then, the parents come and say, Why did my kid not play? Go talk to your kid about her academics. Doesn't happen again. And I tell my players that up front. I will put you in the position where you're going to now get in trouble by your parents, not just me. So, we have a 3.1, 3.2 GPA. And that's a pretty good GPA when we do as much traveling as we do. And I have a committed group of young ladies that understand that rule very, very clearly.

Through the time you've been coaching, have the issues that your players bring to you, personal issues, have they changed?

No. When I was at Mount SAC, I dealt with a population that—most of the population, single parent, first generation college, a lot of learning disabilities, and a lot of abuse. Whether it was substance, domestic, sexual; a lot of abuse. And so, basketball became the carrot that they wanted dangled in front of them, because that was their way out. That was their way into a better life. So, I would say that I didn't deal with it as much. Not that it wasn't there, but the kids didn't have the need to come and talk to me as a coach. It was USC, different socioeconomic status. Coming back to Hawai'i, the problems are the same, and it's just do kids know that they're there, do kids want to talk about 'em. And my door is always open in case they do.

What about a difference in—you know, we're seeing a change in generations and use of media. I mean, all kinds of changes in society. Is that reflected in the players you coach?

It is. You know, they're very connected all the time to their devices. And I remember the first time I ever thought, Wow, there's a separation with connection. A player texted me and said, Coach, you know, my grandmother died. And I'm like, Don't text me that; come and see me. We need to give a hug here, we need to have a conversation, I need to check in with you. And all of a sudden, you get those types of conversation in text; there's a disconnect. There's an appropriate way of text messaging; Hey, meet me for coffee. Great. But don't tell me a life issue through a text message, because I can't see how you are and you can't relay how you are, and it just allows kids to build this huge wall where they don't get vulnerable, they don't share emotion. And it doesn't have to be with me. But I don't think anyone can hide behind a wall their entire life and have healthy relationships. So, there's a huge disconnect, more today than when I started at Mount SAC. And I'm dealing with the same age group; right? I get older, they stay the same.

And so, you've gotten a chance to see what happens to your eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one-year-old players. What have you seen as far as after their sports involvement? What happens?

Lot of them have gone on to coaching. Couple of them are in administration. You see them get married, have children, or great relationships, you know, get jobs where they're successful. And a lot of them come back and say, Coach, you know, this is what I'm doing. Going to weddings, and you know, it's been great to see them grow as young women, and see them apply some of the things that they fought you on so many years ago.

And now, they enforce.

And now, they enforce. You know, I watch them coach, and I'm like, Okay, now they get it, they get how hard this is. And watching them have those boundaries and those rules, and it's really fun; it's really fun.

Did you have to go through a learning curve to be accepted here? Did you have to change anything about yourself?

That's the weird thing for me, is I feel like I'm more myself here than I've ever been, because of how accepting people are. I got some great advice when I was hired. You know, don't get political, stay out of it. You know, understand the culture, and some key things about the culture. And I listened to that. And also, saw that the people that were mentoring me, and on my interview committee, and women that came up and said, We want to be on your hui, we want to help you, were authentic. And they were just transparent in everything they did with me. And I saw that. And I thought, Okay, you need to be Laura Beeman, you can't be anybody else, you have to be Laura Beeman. And if you're honest and do things the way that you feel is right, even if you make a mistake, people are gonna be okay with that. I don't know why I was embraced here so quickly. But I'm thankful for it.

You have a statewide constituency as coach, especially in the islands, because we don't have professional sports. And so, you know, statewide audiences are watching, and proud, or willing to complain.

And when they see you embrace the culture, and they see you embrace—I'm just gonna say it, the aloha spirit, they love that. And so, when you have an off year—I've probably had more people come to me this off season and say, Coach, great job. And this is the worst year we've had. Because they see it in my face that this was a tough year, we struggled. This is not what I wanted. You know, this is not meeting my expectations. And so, pounding my head against the wall, what I did wrong, I've had more people come up to me and say, Keep doing what you're doing. That doesn't

happen in a lot of other places. You walk through the airport, and instead of someone looking at you and giving you stink eye, they come up and they ... Thank you, Coach. And you know, Can we take pictures with you and your team and, can you sign this and, my little girl wants to meet you. And that comes at wonderful, wonderful times when it's tough. I feel that the community here sees these kids in the community, they see these kids going to class and graduating, they see the work that we're putting in, and embracing what we have here. And I think that that's something that when you live here, you understand it. If you don't live here, you don't.

You've been through a lot of victories in your life, though.

Uh, yeah.

Does it get old hat?

No, no, no, no, no. Winning is fun.

When Laura Beeman first arrived at UH, the buzz was quite positive. Her hire was considered a good get for the University of Hawai'i. And since then, there have been rumors about certain Pac-12 schools being very interested in hiring her away. At the time of our conversation in 2017, five years in, Coach Beeman said Hawai'i has been good to her. She did mention that coaching at this level is tough on the body and the daily schedule, and there will be a time when she'd like to explore athletics administration. Mahalo to Laura Beeman of Honolulu, and thank you for watching Long Story Short on PBS Hawai'i. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.

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You have to make a lot of real time, fast decisions when you're in the middle of a game. How do you do that? And do you have trouble doing that at all?

At times, for sure. At times, you can get caught up in the emotion, you can get caught up in a certain play and miss what's going on over here. That's why I have incredible assistant coaches. They don't miss a thing.

It's teamwork. This is not the Laura Beeman Show; trust me.

[END]