

Coach Mike Krzyzewski

ACG interviews “Coach K.”

In college, Mike Krzyzewski was a star basketball player under Coach Bob Knight at the United States Military Academy at West Point. After graduating in 1969, he served five years in the Army and then returned to his alma mater at USMA and began his phenomenally successful college head coaching career. During more than three decades as head basketball coach of Duke University’s Blue Devils, Krzyzewski – known as “Coach K” – won four national championships, a gold medal at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame.

ACG How does it feel to be in college basketball’s most exclusive fraternity, the “900-Win Club”?

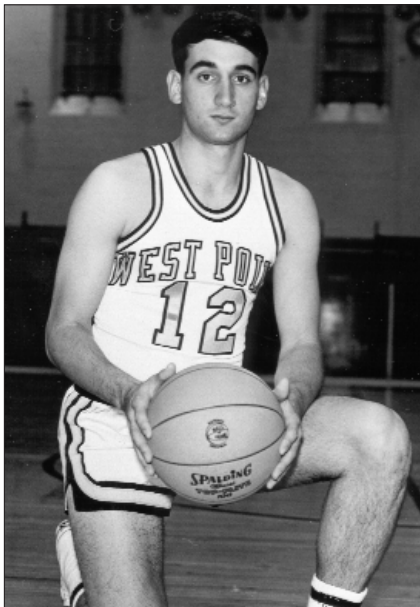
KRZYZEWSKI: It’s an honor, and it’s even more of an honor because I’m joining my head coach, Coach Knight. I think it’s unbelievable that a coach and his point guard are the first two coaches in Division I basketball history to reach the 900-win goal, and I’m very proud of that.

ACG What was it like to play for Coach Knight?

KRZYZEWSKI: It was a tough but great experience, and while you’re going through it, sometimes it’s difficult because he demanded the most. But what you do is you learn the most; and being point guard, I learned the whole game. I learned from maybe the best coach in the history of all sports, [one] who prepares the best, who is as passionate as anybody and is definitely as smart as anybody who has ever coached. It’s really an experience that shaped my entire professional life as a coach.

ACG How was being an assistant coach under Knight at Indiana (1974) different than playing for him?

KRZYZEWSKI: The main difference when you are an assistant – whether it be at Indiana, or working with him during the Pan Am Games or the Olympics – was that you could see what went on behind the scenes. That



Mike Krzyzewski played point guard at West Point under Coach Bob Knight from 1966 until he graduated in 1969.

opens your eyes really wide because that’s when you learn the nuances of what goes into being an outstanding coach. It was just such an honor and privilege to see what happens behind the scenes at the highest level of coaching, and to see a teacher do his magic and how he prepares to do his magic.

ACG What do you recall most from being West Point head coach (1975-80)?

KRZYZEWSKI: The main thing for me was just learning to be a head coach in a fairly difficult environment. We took over a program that was 7-44 the two years previous, and so we had to develop a winning culture and our own program, and that helped me immensely in establishing our program when I went to Duke. We had a lot of success at Army, and it was a great proving ground for me. West Point was a key place for me as a cadet for leadership, as a point guard to learn about playing, and then as a coach to learn how to be a head coach.

ACG What is your strongest memory from your Army service (1969-74)?

KRZYZEWSKI: Being in the service as an officer, it’s really like being a coach. When you’re with your men and with your unit, you have to figure out how do you function as a team and how do you develop leadership. As a young lieutenant and young captain, I learned to rely heavily on the noncommissioned officers who had been in the service from 15 to 25 years and to make sure that they were given the opportunity to lead along with me. I learned a lot about leadership during that time and putting together teams, and it was an honor to serve with those men.

ACG How did you end up attending West Point?

KRZYZEWSKI: Coach Knight recruited me, and I really didn’t want to go. It was at the end of my senior year, and I was an All-State player. I went on a visit to West Point and was impressed, but I wasn’t ready to commit. I was going to go to another place, and my mom and dad, who were never given the opportunity to finish high school let alone college, told me that I was making a big mistake. They said West Point was an opportunity that would change my life. I reluctantly went, but I didn’t trust them reluctantly, and as a result, [I found out] they were right. It showed me that whenever you’re making a big decision, to make sure you get good advice from people who want something good for you. My parents are responsible for me attending the United States Military Academy, and it did change my life.

ACG What was it like at West Point during the turbulent 1960s?

KRZYZEWSKI: I thought it was great, really. It was a time when you could show your patriotism even more, but you’re still trying to figure out everything. It brought the guys even closer together, and the brotherhood that we formed in the Class of 1969 is a brotherhood that I think most people can’t relate to. We were so close as a class as a result of the turbulence that surrounded us.

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Krzyzewski, a West Point graduate and current Duke University men’s head basketball coach, is the NCAA Division I’s all-time winningest coach.

ACG Are you still in contact with your West Point classmates?

KRZYZEWSKI: I stay in touch with my classmates, and when I’ve had a chance to go to a reunion, I have. But I go back to West Point quite a bit. For a two-year period, I was in the Leadership Department and, with the Class of 1951, was Leadership Chair where we brought in speakers, and I’d speak at the Academy to the cadets. In the last five years, they have an award given by the Physical Education Department called the “Mike Krzyzewski Character Through Sport Award” to show how every cadet is an athlete. Club level, intramural company level, and varsity level athletes and coaches compete for the award, and there’s a big awards ceremony every spring with the Corps of Cadets, and I speak at it. I’m very proud to maintain my association with what I think is the best school in the world.

ACG What are your thoughts on your 2009 induction into the Army Sports Hall of Fame?

KRZYZEWSKI: When you are inducted into the Army Sports Hall of Fame, it’s a humbling experience, especially for me, because I was a good player, I wasn’t a great player. And then I had the opportunity to coach, so I had two things going for me. But when you’re with the icons of Army sports, and you’re able to be in the same area honored with them, it’s pretty humbling. It was an amazing day.

ACG What was it like coaching the 2008 U.S. Olympic Gold Medal Team?

KRZYZEWSKI: To coach our national team is the ultimate honor, and to represent your country as a player/coach is the ultimate

thing that can happen to a competitor, and we had supreme cooperation from everyone. They were all great guys, and they all wanted to do what was necessary to win the gold medal and also to win the respect of our country and the world. We were successful in both – getting the gold medal and gaining the respect – and I’m proud of our guys. ★

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ACG Congratulates Coach K! After this interview was conducted, Mike Krzyzewski surpassed Bob Knight’s record to become the winningest coach in NCAA Division I history.