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WKU grad Coop leaves lasting legacy in world of sports psychology

By WES FEESE Central Kentucky News Journal
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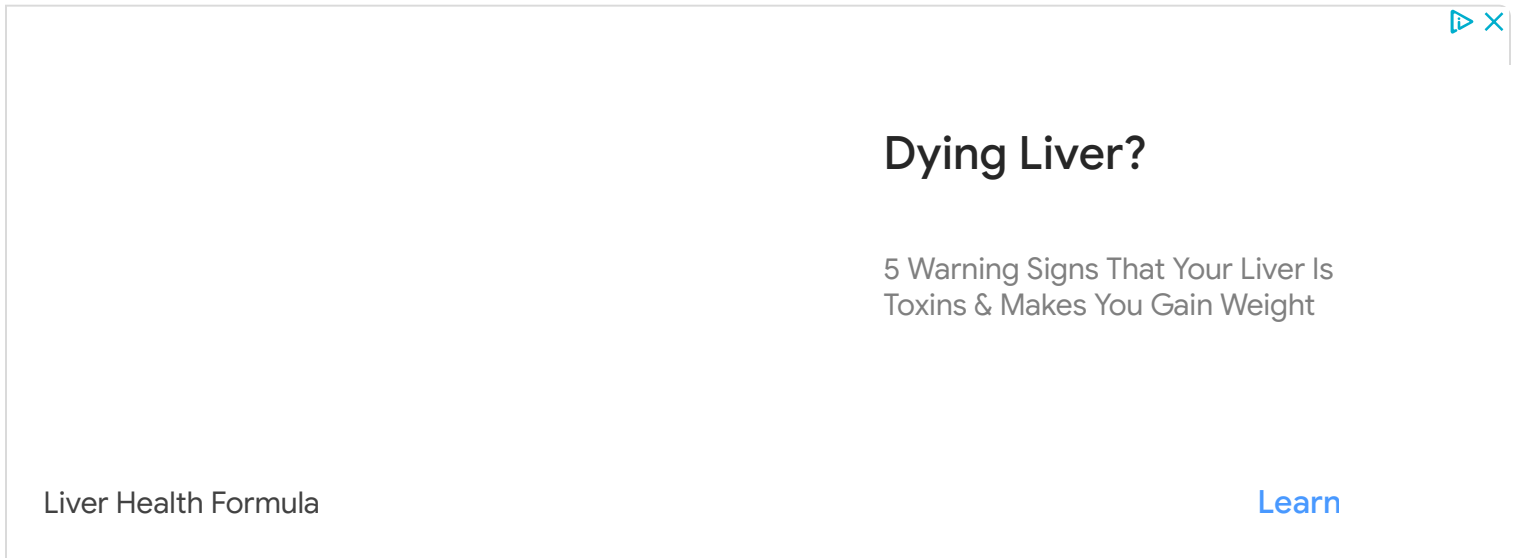


Taylor County native and Western Kentucky graduate Richard Howell Coop, one of the world's preeminent sports psychologists, passed away last month at his home in Chapel Hill, N.C., at age 81.

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A Taylor County native and one of the world's preeminent sports psychologists passed away last month at his home in Chapel Hill, N.C., at age 81.

Dr. Richard Howell Coop, known professionally as Dick Coop, was an author, educator, coach and bona fide expert on the mental aspect of sports performance.



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A pioneer in his field, Coop leaves behind a towering legacy that reads more like a tall tale than a biography.

His very first client was the Golden Bear himself, Jack Nicklaus, widely regarded as one of the best to ever swing a club. Coop met the golf legend when Nicklaus' son took a recruiting visit to the University of North Carolina, where Coop worked for decades.

The Tar Heels' golf coach at the time was out of town at a tournament, so Coop filled in as a guide on the Nicklaus family's visit, impressing Nicklaus with his theories on the mental side of the game.

Coop went on to mentor Greg Norman, Ben Crenshaw, Phil Mickelson, Davis Love III and Payne Stewart, among dozens of other top golf pros. Stewart credited Coop in helping him win the 1999 U.S. Open.

Coop worked with NASCAR drivers, NFL players, Major League Baseball players, NBA hoopsters, University of Texas quarterbacks during Mac Brown's tenure as head coach (the two became friends when Brown was at UNC) and University of North Carolina athletes of every sport, including a young Michael Jordan. Both Dean Smith and Roy Williams, UNC's two legendary basketball coaches, relied on Coop to help their team's free throw shooting.

Coop's books, "The New Golf Mind" (published in 1978) and "Mind Over Golf" (published in 1993) remain popular to this day among amateurs and pros alike. In 2013, Golf Digest listed him as one of "the top 10 golf psychologists" in the entire sport. Dating back to the 1980s, Coop was a frequent contributing writer to both Golf Digest and Golf Illustrated.

So successful were Coop's endeavors in sport that he also became a sought-after speaker to corporations and other organizations, using the principles of sports psychology with analogies to business.

Born in 1940, Coop spent his formative years in Taylor County, graduating as co-valedictorian from Campbellsville High School in 1958, where he was better known as Dickie Coop.

Despite contracting polio at 16 months old, which left him with a limp for the rest of his life, Coop was a standout basketball and baseball player at Campbellsville and later pitched for Western Kentucky University's baseball team.

"People would bunt on him from time to time, but he was amazing getting off the mound and throwing runners out anyway," said Jim Richards, the former head basketball coach

at Western Kentucky, who was Coop's third cousin and a lifelong friend. "He was a great athlete and a wonderful human being – fun to be around. He was a brilliant guy."

Coop's wife, Sharon, agreed with Richards' assessment.

"I never thought of him as handicapped because he played every sport he could possibly play," she said. "Even though he had significant difficulties after the polio, it was not a disability for him. He never let it be that."



Richards remembers a story from when he and Coop were still students at WKU, an occasion that led to the only "B" Coop earned in his entire academic career, which stretched from grade school through two doctorate programs. A physical education professor, teaching a tennis class, awarded an "A" to the class tournament winner, a "B" to the runner up and a "C" to all other students.

"He was the runner up, even though he couldn't really run," Richards said. "He had sports in his blood because his dad was a coach."

Coop served briefly as an assistant coach under Richards at Glasgow High School – including a trip to the state tournament – before Richards went back to coach at WKU and Coop resumed his academic career on a full-time basis.

“He was the most intelligent person I’ve ever been around,” Richards said, “a wonderful communicator and a wonderful friend, a wonderful person.”

Legend has it that while earning his bachelor’s degree at WKU, Coop tutored future ABA all-star Darel Carrier, helping the Hilltoppers’ star guard remain eligible.

After WKU, Coop earned a doctorate in educational psychology at Indiana University. He later became a professor at the University of North Carolina, where he remained for most of his career.

Coop met Sharon, his future wife, on a blind date. He had taken a semester off from IU to teach at WKU to make money to finish his doctorate, and a mutual friend convinced him to come to Nashville for a weekend, where Sharon was studying at Vanderbilt.

“We never lived in the same town until we got married,” Sharon said. “We moved to Chapel Hill in 1968, and didn’t expect to be here that long. Professors at that time moved around quite a bit. I think it was because of the sports here, and we liked Chapel Hill, so we stayed for over 50 years.”

Despite living more than 500 miles away and almost always having a busy schedule, Coop never forgot his hometown, returning often to visit friends and family.

“We usually came back two or three times a year, a week in the summer and Christmas vacations,” Sharon said. “Visiting his parents and friends and family in Campbellsville was very important to him.”

As his health began to deteriorate, Coop continued helping others. An aide who assisted Coop in his last years happened to have a son who was a big-time football prospect, earning more than 30 major college scholarship offers. Coop helped the mother and son through the recruitment process.

“Even when his body was really giving up on him, he was still helping athletes,” Sharon said. “He was still using his gifts really to the very end. He was not a complainer, he was not a whiner, he was a stoic. More than anything, I think I’m going to miss his wisdom.”

A memorial service will be held on Feb. 19 at 10 a.m. CST at University United Methodist Church in Chapel Hill, NC. It will be live streamed on YouTube.

In lieu of flowers, please send contributions to the Richard “Dick” Coop Endowed Faculty scholar in Education Fund. Checks mailed to School of Education, Office of External Relations, Suite 1010, Peabody Hall, Campus Box 3500, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3500. An alternate suggestion is the Church mentioned above which Dick attended for 50 years.



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