

This Week at VA

Episode #51 Mike Krzyzewski- Army Veteran, Duke Basketball Coach

Hosted by Timothy Lawson

(Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:00] PSA:

Woman 1: When my husband came home from Vietnam, he didn't really look into all his VA benefits.

Man 1: But now I've got some health issues, and I'm glad VA is there for me.

Narrator: To learn what benefits you may be eligible for, visit www.va.gov [Link to VA's website]

[00:00:16] Music

[00:00:25] OPENING MONOLOGUE:

Tim Lawson (TL): Hello, everyone, and welcome to another episode of *This Week at VA*. I am your host, Timothy Lawson. This is Episode 51 and I am *super* pumped to bring you today's guest, none other than Mike Krzyzewski, coach of Duke University's men's basketball team. But before we get to him, I want to remind you of how you can nominate a Veteran for our daily Veteran of the Day post. We post that on our blog [Link to VA's blog page: <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/>], Facebook [Link to VA's Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/VeteransAffairs/?ref=br_rs], Twitter [Link to VA's Twitter: https://twitter.com/DeptVetAffairs?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor], Instagram [Link to VA's Instagram page: <https://www.instagram.com/deptvetaffairs/?hl=en>]. All we need is a basic service information like branch, occupation, years of service, deployment, etc. along with a few photos and a list of any notable awards like Bronze Star, Purple Heart, NAM, Army Comm, you get the

idea. Send those materials to newmedia@VA.gov [VA media team's email address]. NewMedia@VA.gov. And we'll be sure to recognize that Veteran. Oh- and be sure to include the Veteran's name. You'd be surprised how often we get nominations that do not include the Veteran's name. You can always reference this information at the bottom of any Veteran of the Day post at blogs.VA.gov [Link to VA's blog page]. Today's feature interview is with legendary college basketball coach, Mike Krzyzewski, who is affectionately referred to as Coach K. Coach K graduated from West Point, became an Army officer, and later transitioned out of the service to pursue a career in coaching college basketball. He is going to tell us about his time in the Army, what he learned from his service, and how some of that applies to coaching college basketball. Enjoy.

[00:01:55] Music

[00:01:57] INTERVIEW:

Mike Krzyzewski (MK): Yeah. I'm good. Yeah. Anxious and very honored to do the interview with the podcast.

Timothy Lawson: Thank you, thank you. Coach K, we always start these interviews with what we all have in common and that is joining the United States military. I know your service starts at West Point. So, bring us back to that decision for you.

MK: Well, coming out of high school, I was a decent basketball player in the inner city of Chicago. So, I had some scholarship offers and then West Point came. And, you know, my parents had never even gone to high school- Well, my dad went to two years of high school, my mom never went to high school. And they said, "Holy mackerel! You have a chance to go to the best school in the world." And I didn't look at it that way at that time. But I then started looking at it through my mom's and dad's eyes and then, once I got there, you know, I understood how hard it was but also how great it was. And I thank God that I was given that opportunity because everything that's happened for me since then is the result of making that decision. And then, in the five years that I was

an Army officer in the field artillery- You know, those nine years I was in the military really helped me immensely.

TL: So, do you- do you have a story from your time in the service that you can share with us?

MK: Oh, I've got thousands of stories [Laughter]. And—

TL: Right. Is there maybe one that you feel is the epitome of your time in?

MK: Well, I don't know if it's the epitome, but how you learn and you learn about the talents of the people that you have with you. And, you know, when I was a field art, my first assignment I was an executive officer for a firing battery at Fort Carson 1/19th artillery and, you know, your self-propelled howitzers. And, you know, you're a young- you're a young lieutenant, I'm a second lieutenant, and I'm there. And, you know, you don't know everything. In fact, it's important for you to know that you don't know a lot And-. But my staff sergeant, my E-6- the 'Chief of Smoke' they call him- he knew everything. And one of the best things I did was meet with him and he explained, and we- You know, the expression 'two is better than one'? If two can act as one- and we did- and that was really a learning experience for me, is to use the talents. Just because, you know, the officer is so-called 'above', that E-6. But he doesn't necessarily know more than that E-6. And so, you know, respect the commitment, the knowledge, the experience of the people that you have, that you're afforded the honor to lead. And I've tried to do that, carry it over to basketball, you know, where I'm with the US team for 11 years. Those guys, LeBron James and Kobe Bryant, are pretty good. Or at Duke, you know, they have guys like Jason Tatum, and Brandon Ingram, and Kyrie Irving are pretty good. Let them use their talents. Don't just think that you- you know, you're the only one that has it. So, the military has really helped me immensely in learning a multitude of lessons.

TL: Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for sharing that. Is there another skillset that you got from the military that you think has contributed to your success as a coach and helped you manage this team?

MK: Yeah, definitely. I mean, so many things. I mean, it started at West Point where, really, the military- in teaching you to have, you know, to get new limits, to have new talents, to develop. A lot of times you fail. And, you know, you're- It's not like you can just dish out talents or, you know, dish out new things. You know, you have to learn them and you have to learn them under fire. You know, when I was at West Point, I failed a number of different times. And, you know, two of the main lessons that I learned there- and I've carried over for, you know, the four decades I've been a head coach- is, one is failure is not your destination. In other words, you get knocked down, you know, get back up and figure out how to get it done. And then, along with that, don't think that you have to get it done alone. You know, how do you develop teamwork? Whether it's a basketball team, a squad, a company, a platoon, you know, what's your mission? How do you- How does everybody help in- in, you know, in developing that teamwork that's necessary to be successful? So, you know, that carried through my entire military experience and I've used that as the foundation for what I do as a basketball coach.

TL: Yeah. I imagine—

MK: Mhmm.

TL: you see plenty of parallels between coaching and developing young players and mentoring young soldiers.

MK: There's no question about it. I mean, the thing that I do, you're not- you're not- you're not preparing for battle. You're not preparing for combat. In a combat zone, you're preparing to play a basketball game which- [Clears throat] excuse me- is not at the same level, obviously, but- [Clears throat] excuse me- the principles are- the principles are the same. And, you know- And, basically, to get the men and women that you have the honor to lead and have them own it, you know, have them coordinate their talents and come at the opponent- whatever that opponent might be- and to do it as one. And it's the same stuff. I- And to get to know them. When I was a young lieutenant at Fort Carson, I would go every- Once a week, one of the afternoons, they would have, like, a field day where people could go and play sports or

do whatever they wanted to do. And I would always go to the battalion gym. And, although I was one of the- maybe the only officer there, I was a pretty good player. And so, I'd play with the men that I was leading and I got to know them. And, you know, what better place to get to know them than to, you know, through sport? And I earned- I got to know them, they- I earned their respect. And, you know, a leader has to find different ways to get to know his people. And I do that with my team, and I did it with the men and women I had an opportunity to lead in the military.

TL: I know you continued your career in basketball soon after the military, but what was your experience transitioning from the military environment into civilian life?

MK: You know, the transition was not difficult because entering, you know, the collegiate world, it also is, you know, top-notch world. You know, there's- You're part of a university, you're around people who care. You know, they want what's good for the whole. And I thought that I was immensely prepared to move on into coaching. When I left the military, I did not leave the military because I did not like the military. You know, we- I was a captain and stationed at Fort Belvoir and we were doing well. And it's just that I couldn't coach [Chuckles] in the military. You know, I couldn't be a college basketball coach and that was my dream. And I stepped aside. But I've kept my association with the military at a really high level. You know, I go up to West Point once or twice a year, speak to the cadets and the corps. And when we- The last 11 years coaching US team, we were intimately involved with the military because they served as an example. Where there're Wounded Warriors spoke to our team, we had functions with military units or families of deceased men and women who have given their lives for our country. And- uh- I wanted our US team to understand what selfless service was all about. And the military, obviously, is the best example for that.

TL: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. When you have a player on your team that shows interest in the military, do you share your military experience with them?

MK: Yeah. In fact, we- You know, one of my recent graduates is Marshall Plumlee. You know, Marshall came to me during his years here at Duke and said, "You know, Coach, I don't know if it's possible, but I'd like to be in ROTC here at Duke." And, you know, I have a- You know, he got to meet one of my former players who's now a four-star general in charge of the- our troops in the Pacific, General Bob Brown. And he got really turned on to the military and I said, "Of course." And then, he did all of his training. He went to summer camp, and whatever, and actually was commissioned. And although he's playing for the Clippers right now, he's also in Reserves. And, you know, when his time is up or, you know, if he's not allowed to play professional basketball anymore- I'm sure of it- Marshall will be- You know, he has a passion to be an Army officer. He is an Army officer, but as far as making it a career. So, I would not hold any of our guys back from doing that.

TL: That's very cool. I know your time is sensitive, so I'll rap up with this question. You mentioned that you like to keep in touch with the military. Is there- Is there a Veteran or a Veteran organization that you're familiar with or that you're aware of that has you excited about what they're doing right now?

MK: Well, I think there's so many. You know, I think we owe it as a country to every man and woman who has served to make sure that we take care of them after they leave the service. And whether it be because of injury, or they retire, or at any time. I'll tell you one organization that- The last one, when we won the Olympics in Rio, we got to be really close with TAPS, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, where they raised an immense amount of money to help all those families who have lost a son, a daughter, a husband, a wife, a father, a mother in combat. And we, in every exhibition game we had, we had TAPS kids there. And then, we had a huge function in Chicago before leaving for Rio where we met hundreds of family members. And they actually shared their buttons. They wore buttons of the deceased person on, right over their hearts. And they gave us their- those buttons to take to Rio when, you know, where it was their way of saying, "This is what was given up with selfless service. Lives. And we're proud of my mom, my dad, my son," whoever it was. And then, we shared that with them. And so, you know, there's a lot being done. I just wish more could be

done. But God bless the people who have founded organizations to help our Veterans.

TL: Wonderful, wonderful. Coach K, thank you so much for taking the time and speaking to our Veterans. It is a true pleasure talking to a legend in college basketball. And good luck in the upcoming season.

MK: Alright, thank you very much. I'm honored to be on.

[00:14:58] Music

[00:15:01] PSA:

Woman 1: There are nearly two million women Veterans who served and deserve the best care anywhere.

Woman 2: VA is dedicated to meeting the unique needs of all women Veterans. VA offers comprehensive primary care and women's health specialty care.

Woman 1: Women Veterans who are interested in receiving care at VA should call the Women Veterans call center at 855-VAWOMEN.

Woman 2: Or contact the nearest VA medical center and ask for the Women Veterans Program Manager. Visit www.VA.gov/womenvet [Link to VA's Center for Women Veterans website]

[00:15:31] Music

[00:15:33] CLOSING MONOLOGUE:

TL: I have to thank my colleague, Mike Migliara, for helping set up this interview and to the wonderful people at Duke for helping make that happen. If you are a disabled Veteran and sports are your thing, you should consider getting involved with VA's Adaptive Sports program. To get started, it takes some time to review the many sports opportunities

available to you by reaching out to your VA clinical team and checking out the website, [VA.gov/AdaptiveSports](https://www.va.gov/AdaptiveSports) [Link to VA's Office of National Veterans Sports Programs]. Today's Veteran of the Day is Army Veteran, Francis Brown Wai. Francis served during WWII on October 20th, 1944. While pinned down by enemy fire, he exposed himself and was killed while leading an assault to destroy the final Japanese pillbox in the Leyete area. We honor his service. To read Francis's full write-up [Link to Francis's Veteran of the Day blog post: <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/42051/veteranoftheday-francis-brown-wai/>], and to nominate your own Veteran of the Day, visit [blogs.VA.gov](https://www.blogs.va.gov) [Link to VA's blog page]. That does it for Episode 51. Thank you so much for taking the time to listen. I know there are a lot of options out there for entertainment, so I appreciate you taking the time to listen to these stories from our Veterans. Be sure to follow us on Instagram @DeptVetAffairs [Link to VA's Instagram page: <https://www.instagram.com/deptvetaffairs/?hl=en>] for more images from our community. If you have a question you'd like to have addressed on this show, email us, NewMedia@VA.gov [Email for VA's new media team]. Once again, big thanks to Coach K for taking time out of his busy schedule to join us. I'm Timothy Lawson, signing off.

[00:16:54] Music

(Text Transcript Ends)