

# Coach Bob Knight

“ACG” interviews “The General.”

**F**riends and family call him “Coach,” but to his worldwide army of supporters, Bob Knight is known as “The General,” a noble nickname bestowed on him by ebullient sports commentator Dick “Awesome Baby!” Vitale. Knight marched into sports history during 41 seasons by winning the most college basketball games ever – including three NCAA championships as a coach and one as a player – with 902 victories. However, his first 102 wins formed his foundational philosophy. Those conquests came at Army, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where the 24-year-old coached the Black Knights of the Hudson’s basketball team for six years, learning the ways of West Point from the “Best of the Best.” From 1965 to 1971 Coach Knight lived, loved, and learned the military, absorbing its history and leadership lessons from living legends. These career-defining influences helped inspire his own legendary career.



**Knight (right) with former West Point player and current Duke University men’s basketball coach, Mike Krzyzewski, circa 1969.**

**ACG** What began your interest in military history and led to your major in history at Ohio State?

**KNIGHT:** I had a really good high school history teacher, and I took both U.S. history and world history from him. His name was Paul Tustin, and I just liked history. I liked the study of why people succeeded and what kind of leadership different people had, good or bad, and I just thought history was a real study of people, fear, and success, and I just enjoyed reading about it.

**ACG** Explain your enlistment in the Army and how it led to your job as basketball coach at West Point.

**KNIGHT:** I went into the Army in 1963, and nobody had ever heard of Vietnam or

Southeast Asia problems. That was a very dead period for enlistment and certainly for the draft. I coached for a year at Cuyahoga Falls in Ohio and had this opportunity to go to West Point. But to do so, I had to go into the Army. I thought that in itself would be a good experience, let alone the opportunity to coach there, so I volunteered for the draft and went into the Army on June 11, 1963, and got out on June 10, 1965.

to see Colonel Murphy and I said, “You know, we’ve got to have a chance to get ready for this game. What are the chances of our being excused from class in the morning, and we can work on it, and then we’ll go down to St. John’s and play tomorrow night.” And he said, “Well, I’ll get that done. I know things will work out.” And I asked, “Well who do we need to tell?” And he looked at me and said, “Robert, we don’t tell anybody because when they find out about it on Monday morning, it’ll be too late.” That was my kind of officer.

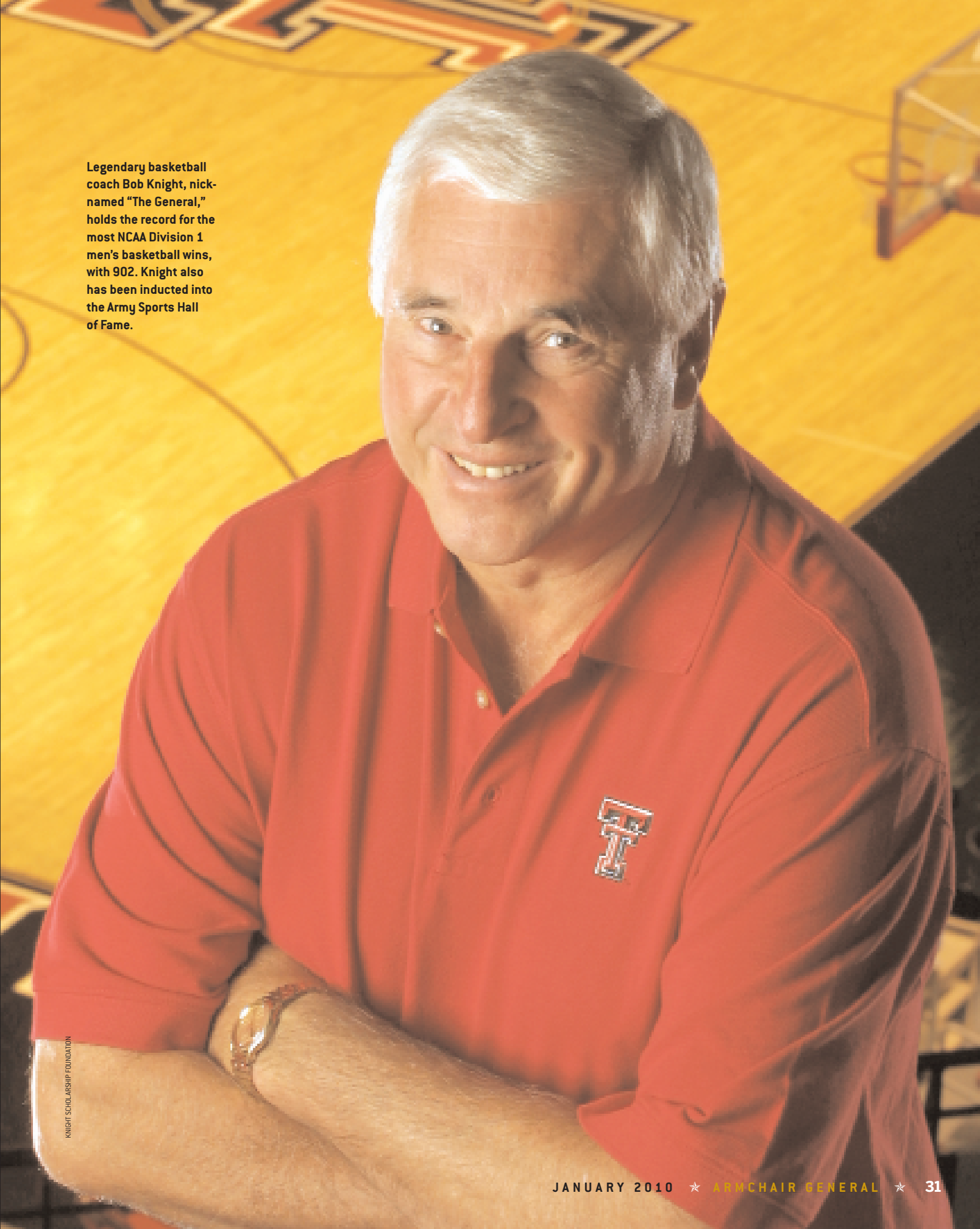
**ACG** Who was the most impressive military figure you met while at West Point?

**KNIGHT:** There were a lot of different people there. One of the commandants of cadets was Bernie Rogers, who later became the U.S. Army chief of staff and then was NATO supreme commander. Another one was Sam Koster, who had been the commanding general of the Americal Division in

Vietnam. I also had a tremendous admiration for Pete Dawkins, [West Point’s] 1958 Heisman Trophy winner. Then I had General Richie Cardillo, who was the officer representing my basketball team and who retired as a one-star general. And lastly, the guy who hired me, Ray Murphy, retired as a two-star general. Murphy was inducted into the Army Sports Hall of Fame at West Point this September, and I was honored by having that done to me September of last year.

**ACG** What did your induction into the Army Sports Hall of Fame in 2008 mean to you?

**KNIGHT:** It’s the most significant honor that I think I’ve ever gotten because I was just there [at West Point] six years. I could never



Legendary basketball coach Bob Knight, nicknamed "The General," holds the record for the most NCAA Division 1 men's basketball wins, with 902. Knight also has been inducted into the Army Sports Hall of Fame.

KNIGHT SCHOLARSHIP FOUNDATION

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have had a better opportunity to start out in any place or learn any more about coaching than I did [when I was] given the chance to be there.

**ACG** Among the military history sites you have visited is Café McAuliffe in historic Bastogne, Belgium. What are your memories of the legendary town where General Tony McAuliffe defiantly replied “Nuts!” to the Germans’ surrender demand in December 1944?

**KNIGHT:** Don Donoher, the Dayton Coach, was with me. He had been in the Army in Germany after the war was over in the ’50s, but he had never been to where the Battle of the Bulge took place. We were standing on the town square, and there’s an American tank in the middle of it. As we looked across the square, we saw the Café McAuliffe in red, white and blue, and I turned to Donoher and said, “Where else would we eat except the Café McAuliffe?” Earlier, I had met General McAuliffe when I was at West Point.

**ACG** You have a plaque on your wall with a quote from General George S. Patton. What is your opinion of him?

**KNIGHT:** I think Patton gets criticized for his egotism, and in some cases, the criticism is valid. But on the other hand, Patton made himself a very unusual military figure, and that captured the imagination of the people that fought and worked with him and that he commanded. The guy had a genius for putting himself in a position where his Soldiers were willing to do for him what he expected them to do. As I studied Patton’s 1944 campaign across France, I realized he probably operated against more enemies with fewer casualties than anybody in military history.

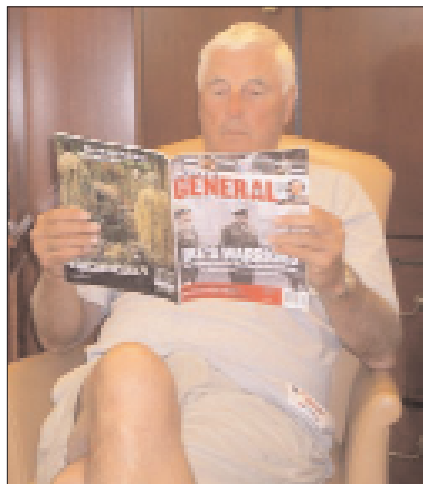
**ACG** Are there any other generals whom you particularly admire?

**KNIGHT:** My all-time favorite general is John S. Wood, the commanding general of the 4th U.S. Armored Division, “Patton’s Best,” which was Patton’s spearhead across France. Wood was an all-American football player at



**Above:** This banner commemorates Knights’ 880th career victory. On January 1, 2007, Knight broke the record held by former North Carolina coach Dean Smith.

**Below:** Knight enjoys the May 2009 issue of *Armchair General*® magazine.



Arkansas and ended up going to West Point after that. And Wood’s nickname was “Tiger Jack,” because when Patton growled at Wood, Wood just growled back at Patton. I think Patton acknowledged that Wood was the greatest of all the officers that ever served under him.

**ACG** As a proud American, what are your most significant memories from coaching the U.S. Olympic basketball team that won the gold medal in 1984?

**KNIGHT:** The most significant thing in the whole process is the telephone call I got from Henry Iba, who coached three times in the Olympics. When I became the coach of the Olympic team, he called and said to me, “You keep one thing in mind: When you’re coaching the Olympic team, you’re not representing your school or your state, you’re representing your country.” Henry Iba is one of my all-time favorite people.

**ACG** Mike Krzyzewski, Duke’s “Coach K,” was your point guard when you coached at West Point. What are your thoughts on his success at Duke?

**KNIGHT:** Well, I didn’t know what a point guard was back then, and I’m not sure I do now. What Mike had been was the leading scorer in the Chicago Catholic League, one of the better leagues in the country. I told him in 1966 when his sophomore year began at West Point that his role was going to be to handle the basketball and play defense. And I never had a player in all the years that I coached who did a better job of changing from a high school player to an effective college player. Most kids have a very difficult time doing that, and a hell of a lot of them never get it done. It was a huge change because it meant becoming an entirely different player, and his ability to do that is one of the reasons why he was able to become the kind of coach that he’s been. ★

*John Ingoldsby, a leading writer on the intersection of sports and the military, conducted this interview. He is president of IIR Sports & Entertainment, Inc. (IIRSPORTS.com), a public relations and marketing firm in Boston.*

TOP: NORSHELLE KENNEDY; BOTTOM: COURTESY, BOB KNIGHT