

Steve Kerr: What is he?

I, with little idea of what was about to come out of my mouth, tried to argue to my sports journalism class that Golden State Warriors Head Coach Steve Kerr was the second most valuable figure in the NBA after LeBron James. I was met with, as you'd expect, confused faces, perplexed gasps, and a disappointed look from my professor who had tried so hard all semester to keep garbage out of our mouth and only present clear, focused arguments.

But what could I have expected? I let my emotions take over and blurted out something I had no defense for.

I pondered my decision to bring such an irrational perspective to my peers. Why did I say that? Was there any truth to it? If not the second most valuable figure in the NBA, what is Steve Kerr?

My aberrant sentiment about Kerr made me curious. Those who know basketball know that Steve Kerr is more than just a coach. He spent a few years winning championships with Michael Jordan and Tim Duncan before he took to broadcasting, where he called games alongside legends like Marv Albert and Jim Nantz. As the general manager for the Phoenix Suns, he helped orchestrate the trade that brought Shaquille O'Neal to the desert and eventually became the coach of the Golden State Warriors, winning three titles along the way.

That said, to break down the dynamic career of Steve Kerr, I strung together a series of interviews and research in hopes of finding what compelled me to have such high praise for the NBA mogul.

The results were compelling. Did they help to support my original statement regarding Steve Kerr's value as a figure in The Association? Absolutely not. But if there was anything I did

learn about Steve Kerr, it's this: Through joy, charm, and humor, Steve Kerr has utilized his most valued morals in each of his chapters through the business, and this unprecedented style of leadership has imprinted itself on the likes of fans, players, and journalists like myself.

In order to accurately convey my findings, I felt there was only one way to do so. The following is my interpretation of Steve Kerr's humor, joy, and compassion as an NBA legend through the years. And just as Kerr's career began on the court, that's precisely where we will start...

Steve Kerr (the player): "... is exacting and gritty," says Sports Illustrated writer Chris Ballard, who has intensely covered Steve Kerr throughout his career. The 6'3"180-pound guard was handed the daunting privilege of guarding Michael Jordan in practice every day as a member of the Chicago Bulls. So it was only natural that the young guard from the University of Arizona become a stalwart defender. But what about on the other end of the floor? As an undersized guard with minimal athleticism, Kerr had to often rely on his jump shot to score.

And so, as a mental tool to keep his jump shot steady and reliable, Kerr employed a saying that he would write on his shoes before every game he played: "F.I.," which stood for "Fuck it." Ballard says, "With the 'fuck it' thing, Steve was trying to remind himself to 'just go.'" It's this thought process of "unthinking" that helped Kerr on the offensive end of the floor, and perhaps what allowed him to win the 1997 three-point shootout in addition to knocking down the game-winning shot in game six of the finals to seal Kerr's first of five titles as a player.

To add to his repertoire of mental tools, Kerr would often play a mental game of tennis in his mind. The players? Self one vs. self two. Ballard says, “A lot of times Steve talks about the inner game of tennis and it’s about ‘self one’ and self two,’ and letting ‘self two’ come forward. Because ‘self one,’ which is your active brain, gets in the way and starts thinking about the situation and the stakes. ‘Self two’ is your trained body.” The goal here is once again to enjoy the game from its fundamental level, which according to Kerr, is done best when just playing, not thinking.

But despite his grittiness on the court, Kerr’s humor and joy for the game still were apparent. At the Bull’s championship parade that year, Kerr famously joked about how he once again “bailed” out Michael Jordan when he hit the championship-winning shot. Ballard says his relationship with the media was natural, and he was as gifted as anyone he had ever seen. “He was always able to take any situation and diffuse it with some humor. There’s a lot of media attention, but it’s one of those things he does so naturally that it’s not a chore,” he says.

Kerr went on to play for another six seasons and eventually won another two championships in San Antonio playing alongside their big three of Tim Duncan, Tony Parker, and Manu Ginobili. Today, Kerr laughs about the fact that he’s considered an NBA legend despite averaging a mere 6 points per game and less than 2 assists. But Ballard’s cognition on Kerr’s relationship with the media is exactly what leads us into the next chapter...

Steve Kerr (the broadcaster): “He was one of the best color [commentary] guys we’ve had in the last 25 years,” Ballard says. Kerr went straight from the court to the sidelines when he was hired by TNT in 2003. Alongside legendary broadcaster Marv Albert, Kerr’s charismatic

approach to covering the game earned him his own segment on TNT called *Steve's Refreshing Thoughts*, where he shared thought-provoking facts about NBA history.

What made him such a great broadcaster, according to Ballard, was his ability to understand the delicate challenges that sports journalists face on a regular basis. He says, "His ability to understand our perspective as journalists is welcomed and valuable. He understands our constraints and what we're looking for."

After a brief stint as general manager of the Suns, Kerr decided to go back into broadcasting in 2010. His voice continued to resonate with fans, so he was included as the broadcaster in each of the NBA Live video games from 2004 to 2014.

Even journalists note Kerr's compassion as a member of the basketball industry. Such has been a staple in the career of Steve Kerr, which would prove to be a valuable skill in our next chapter...

Steve Kerr (the father): "It was 90% Stephen Curry and 10% you," Steve Kerr sarcastically told his daughter, Maddy, after he accepted the head coaching position of the Golden State Warriors in 2014. Maddy Kerr, a student at University of California at Berkeley at the time, expected her father to become the head coach of the New York Knicks, along with the rest of the NBA world.

Only a few weeks before Kerr decided to step in to lead Golden State, Phil Jackson, Kerr's former coach and mentor in Chicago, had offered him the head coaching job in New York. It seemed like the perfect fit: An NBA team in turmoil with a history of hiring 'big names'

to coach in an effort to please the angry, disappointed fan base that has been the New York Knicks faithful since 1973.

But Kerr decided to stay out west, and coach a team that was down the road from his kids rather than across the country. It seemed to make sense that Kerr chose to coach in the Bay Area, as this was exactly where he had his first (and only) prior coaching experience.

When he was in seventh grade, Nick Kerr watched his dad break a clipboard after his middle school basketball team wasn't bringing forth the effort he wanted. He claimed that Kerr coached with "a quiet ferocity," but always preached having fun.

Perhaps it's easy to coach a group of seventh graders while making "fun" the main objective, with the occasional clipboard rage. However, the question for Kerr was: Could he do it at the next level? The answer leads us to our next chapter...

Steve Kerr (the coach): At a leadership conference in San Francisco, Steve Kerr had a conversation with Seattle Seahawks head coach Pete Carroll as they exchanged tools that they instill on their respective teams. Carroll asked Kerr what his most cherished value in the world was. "Joy," Kerr replied. "Then that's what your team needs to reflect in everything they do," Carroll said.

And such sentiment has led to Steph Curry's dancing down the court after skying a three-pointer from thirty feet and beyond. It's the same idea that would allow for 280 consecutive sellout crowds at Oracle Arena. Who wouldn't want to watch the joyous, jovial playing styles of Kevin Durant, Steph Curry, and Klay Thompson mixed together on one court?

But to manage such assets takes a rare skill, Ballard says. “His greatest skill is in managing people. That’s a rare skill, he’s got very, *very* high emotional intelligence, he’s humble, doesn’t make it about himself.” He describes the Popovich way of thinking: It’s the player’s team, so it’s about them. It’s for this reason that Ballard insists Kerr is a “horizontal manager,” opposed to a vertical.

However, limiting Kerr’s coaching to just Gregg Popovich doesn’t properly paint the intricate, colorful style of play that is the Warriors.

Their style has a hint of Mike D’Antoni’s pace, mixed with the ball movement of Popovich and even some shades of Phil Jackson’s triangle. The result? 73 wins and the most efficient, dynamic offense the game has ever seen.

However, Ballard mentions the final immeasurable aspect of Kerr’s style. He says, “This team is an extension of his personality. He built it around what he loves, and how he sees the game. Especially in the first few years with the team, you could just see the joy that Steph Curry played with out there.”

From letting Andre Iguodala coach the team to allowing families to take the team plane, Kerr employs compassionate leadership tactics to create a team that aligns with his most precious value: joy.

And with that, we’ve touched on nearly every aspect of Kerr’s basketball career. From his playing days to his coaching, it’s clear through Ballard’s coverage that he’s one of the most intricate, philosophical leaders the game has seen. My initial statement about Steve Kerr’s value remains suspect to question. But Ballard reminds us that there’s one certain thing about Kerr:

“I’ve never met anyone who doesn’t like Steve,” he says. “And if they exist, I have yet to meet them.”