

# Using a Basketball to Shape Young Men



By Suzanne Wilcox English  
Photography by Richard Orr

**For men's basketball coach Ron Niekamp,  
the accolades continue to pile up:**



**A 36-0 record in 2008-09, en route to the NCAA Division II National Championship**

**A record of 550-174 after 24 years as head coach of the Oilers**

**NCAA Division II National Association of Basketball Coaches Coach of the Year for 2009**

**Division II Bulletin and Basketball Times Coach of the Year – 2009**

**Miami University's Cradle of Coaches, inducted 2005 along with his former professor, Bo Shembechler**

**Regional coach of the year in 2009, 2007 and 2005**

**Conference coach of the year in 2009, 2007, 2006, 2005 and 2003**

**W**hile Niekamp can't help but enjoy the accomplishment of the 2008-09 Oilers — as well as the work and accomplishments of many past players who helped the program to advance to that level — he is most proud of his team members' development as young men.

"Seeing our players leave here, and go on and do really good things with their lives" is the most rewarding aspect of his job, he said, sitting in his second-floor office in Croy Physical Education Center as he waited for summer camps to start, tanned, relaxed and smiling.

"They come back and support the program, with their wives and their children. You hope that you've helped them in some way, beyond winning a game," Niekamp said, reeling off a few examples including Jason Grimes, a grad of recent years who was accepted into medical school at The Ohio State University. "Many do well and stay involved with the program," including coming back for games and alumni events.

"Certainly, winning the national championship caps everything we've accomplished here," he said. "We felt it was an accomplishment that reflected the efforts of a lot of people," including past players who helped move the program to the next level.

"One of our goals — our ultimate goal — was to win a national championship.

Our priorities lie elsewhere, and we'll never sacrifice our priorities to accomplish a goal," he emphasized. I knew we had a really good team, but I didn't think we needed to win a national championship to validate our program. But having won a national championship — it's really a good feeling," he admitted with a smile.

The team notebook for the year emphasizes the team's tradition of quality and characteristics such as respect, dependability and consistency:

- Quality people who get their degrees!
- Tremendous work ethic!
- Great self and team discipline!
- Total commitment to the team concept!
- Outstanding competitive spirit!
- Mental toughness and ability to accept criticism!
- Humility – Know who you are!

Along with the inspirational messages are very specific expectations, including do's and don'ts for behavior on and off the court, attitude and contribution to the program.

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**- Ron Niekamp**

Niekamp is proud that when people watch the team on the floor, “they see selflessness — guys willing to give things up for their teammates, and really excited to see a teammate do well,” Niekamp said.

“We are far from perfect. You do have to deal with discipline,” he said. “But by the same token, it is stimulating to be around them, and be engaged by them, because they have such great energy.”

Niekamp has been fueling up on the energy of young basketball players for a long time: His 24 years with the Oilers have followed 13 years as a high school coach in the region. When he heard Jim Houdeshell was stepping down, he applied for and got the head coaching position for the program, which he described as solid and successful in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics.

Later, the administration took the institution to NCAA Division II, with an invitation to membership in the Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletic Conference, one of the most competitive in the country in Division II.

“I never looked at this job as a steppingstone,” Niekamp said, noting he and his wife, Doris, a teacher, had four children whom he was not interested in uprooting again. “We were able to attract quality young men here to play ball. It had a lot to offer, a lot of pluses.”

Coaching requires a great time commitment, particularly during the season, but Niekamp feels he was able to be there for his own children as well. “Any coach would tell you, if you have regrets, they are ‘did I really do enough, and should I have been there more?’ But most of my recruiting trips have not been overnight trips,” and his children were involved in events at the University, as well as theater, volleyball and many other activities. “While it was hectic, I’m thankful I was able to be there for at least most of the things” they were involved in.

As far as coaching, fans can expect some more good years. “I’m not ready to retire,” Niekamp said. “I’ll take it year by year and hope that I maintain good health, and we continue to succeed.”



## Niekamp’s Loyal Lieutenant — and Rising Star

When you see Ron Niekamp — at least during basketball season — you nearly always see associate coach Charlie Ernst somewhere nearby.

Ernst, a 1992 UF graduate who played basketball for Niekamp, majored in public relations and marketing. He at first worked in the Admissions office, but also joined his former coach as an assistant. “He’s one of many who have that special feeling here because it’s their alma mater,” Niekamp said. “We have been what I would describe as a good team.”

Ernst is responsible for the Oilers’ defense and serves as recruiting coordinator. He also works daily with the guards, serves as equipment manager and assists Niekamp with day-to-day operations.

This fall, Ernst will begin his 19th season as an assistant and his eighth as Niekamp’s right-hand man.

After the men’s basketball team won the NCAA Division II national championship this spring, Ernst was selected as one of five assistants, and the only non-Division I coach, to receive the “Rising Star” award as one of the best assistant coaches in the nation.

“I delegate a lot of responsibility” to Ernst because of his capabilities, the coach said. “Our success in many, many ways can be linked back to Charlie’s effort.”

“I have been very lucky to work for and with someone that I have great respect for. Ron has given me many responsibilities and I guess I have just tried to take advantage of those,” Ernst said. “Our program success can be related to many factors, none possible without Ron’s leadership and example.”