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| Julian Dudley | G | UCSB | 70 | Julian is really in the spirit of awards season and really anticipating the Oscars. Tell him about your favorite Oscar winning movie and what lessons it taught you about coaching. | 1290 |
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# TEXAS A&M MEN'S BASKETBALL

HEAD COACH SNIPIN' SEXTON



Julian,

In many a pitch to many a recruit I have made mention of my past as a chef and a restaurant manager before becoming a college basketball coach in the NCBCA. I have even, before, extolled the virtues of having come up in that environment and how it has benefitted and effected my coaching style and career.

So it should come as no surprise that I am a big fan of the Pixar animated film *Ratatouille* from 2007, which took home Best Animated Feature at the 80th Academy Awards. It was nominated for four other awards besides that one, and is considered one of Pixar's finest works.

Perhaps more importantly, it is one of my favorite films of all time. It is certainly my favorite Pixar film. The moment Anton Ego is brought back to his childhood by the titular dish brings a tear to my eye to this very day. The visuals, the music, the setting, the story - all contribute to a total package that compares favorably to few films in my eyes, animated or not.

But what lessons can one learn from it about *coaching*? It is a good question. An animated film about a rat cooking in a kitchen doesn't seem to have any lessons to be taught on the surface. There's not even any competition or anything sports-like in it.

Well - let us peel back a few layers of this onion, shall we?

## 1. Nurturing Talent

In the beginning of the movie, Remy the rat has a talent for identifying ingredients in food by smell. Remy's talent is both exceptional and he is passionate about it, yet he is stifled by his father by being made "poison checker".

When talent is present, it needs to be identified and nurtured. Remy's father identified Remy's talent, but failed to nurture it; instead, he put Remy in a position that he chafed in, which lead to mistakes in the future (overstepping bounds and getting the colony exposed).

Properly identifying and nurturing talent is a key component of coaching, because you run the risk of alienating your players if you miss something and put them in positions where they might succeed, but won't enjoy. With that said, though...

2. Put Players in Position to Succeed

And also...

3. Teamwork and Communication is Key

One of the most important scenes of the entire film to me is the introduction to the kitchen at Gusteau's restaurant. The animators at Pixar worked closely with real-life Michelin star chef Thomas Keller and his restaurant, the French Laundry in Napa Valley, in portraying an accurate high-end restaurant kitchen.

Some historical context - the great French chef Auguste Escoffier was credited with developing what is now called the "brigade system" in culinary parlance. This is what Remy and the ghost of Gusteau go over from the rooftop skylight when he points out all the chefs and what they do in the kitchen.

The Chef [de Cuisine], as he points out, is Skinner (at the time) - he is the captain of the ship and in command at all times and ultimately responsible for everything. Next he identifies the Sous Chef, second-in-command and responsible for everything in the Chef's absence. Then he goes down the line to saucier, multiple chefs de partie, and commis. In a kitchen, there is a clear chain of command and division of labor. Everyone has their assignment and is responsible for it.

In the Sexton System, especially on offense, we have a few clearly defined roles. The center rarely leaves the low block, and if he does, he needs to let someone else know so they can fill his spot (more on that later). The wings on the outside are constantly moving, and need to know their assignments and when to set screens or move. To borrow a culinary term, I want my team to practice *mise en place*, which I learned as “everything in its place”. I put my players in position to succeed, and we move from there.

Going back just a moment in the film to that kitchen introduction, we see another immensely important coaching lesson - communication is key. A well-run kitchen such as Gusteau’s has all the different chefs working together despite being responsible for many different things.

We immediately see one chef plating his portion of a completed dish, with another chef adding his vegetables, then moving over to expo station where the sous chef is adding garnishes before the server takes the food out to the dining room. Filling the air is constant communication from the chefs and servers.

The sous chef calls for hands to take the dishes to table 7. Chefs call for a refill of ingredients in the background. A server calls for two new orders of salmon. The chef responsible for salmon immediately starts two orders and *calls it out to the rest of the kitchen*. The sous, having sent out the first course to table seven, calls for the next course to be fired. A chef in the background is in the weeds and calls for help.

Just like in a restaurant kitchen, everyone on a basketball team has an assigned role and responsibilities within that role. Everyone is playing their part towards their goal, which in the kitchen is getting the food out correctly and on time. This correlates well with putting the ball in the basket out on the court. It is a coach’s (Chef’s) job to put his players (cooks) in position to ensure a quality product.

Keeping them honest is what the constant communication is for. Instilling the need for communication in my players like a kitchen environment keeps everyone working towards the same goal and letting each other know that they are supported in their shared outcome.

The Sexton System can be complicated and involves a lot of off-ball screening and movement, and communication allows my players the luxury of knowing that their teammates are both in the positions they need to be in and also putting their teammates in the positions they need to be in.

#### 4. Nothing is more important than the team

A key moment in the later stages of the film is when Linguini takes credit for all the great cooking Remy is responsible for and doesn't even credit Remy even in a subtle way. This insults Remy and leads to a potential disaster when he decides to raid the walk-in.

No one is above the team, not even the leader of the team. We all move towards one common goal, and to put yourself above it is outside the bounds of your assigned role. If one of my players believes he is more important than the team as a whole, he does not get to continue playing. No one player is the key to our success.

#### 5. Anyone can play

So I admit that for this one I am conflating something I learned outside of the film with one of its key lessons, but I do feel it is relevant. Chef Gusteau's constant motto in the film is "Anyone can cook", and Remy the rat is proof of this.

Something I learned in my own kitchens is that while not everyone is good at everything, everyone is good at *something*, and thus can be a productive member of the team.

The fun thing about the Sexton System is that, despite what I may say about "athleticism" or "shooting" or whatnot, any skill set can fit into it and contribute. Anyone can play.

*Ratatouille* has always been an influence on me, in the kitchen and on the court. I treasure the lessons I learn from it and the emotions it brings out in me. It truly deserved the Oscar it received. I hope to watch it again soon.