



Bio: Coach C. Vivian Stringer is the head coach of the Rutgers University women's basketball team. Stringer holds the distinction of being the first coach, men's or women's, in NCAA history to lead three different women's programs to the NCAA Final Four. She is the third all-time winningest coach in women's basketball. She was formerly the head coach of the University of Iowa women's basketball team and the Cheyney State women's basketball team.

Stringer was the 2001 inductee into the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame and was named one of the 101 Most Influential Minorities in Sports by Sports Illustrated magazine. She is the three-time national coach of the year and was the assistant coach for the gold medal-winning 2004 U.S. Olympic team. Stringer is also the author of the autobiographical book "Standing Tall".

An Interview with C. Vivian Stringer

Conducted by Leadership Scholar Vanity Jenkins, Class of 2010

Edited by Pilar Timpane

Vanity Jenkins: What type of leader do you see yourself as and did you always think that you would be a leader?

Coach C. Vivian Stringer: I don't know. I mean, I don't know if there are categories of leaders. I think there are those that demonstrate by the things that they do. I do think that I sort of always wanted to take charge because nothing seemed to move quick enough. Nothing seemed to move fast enough. My attitude is that if someone doesn't do it, I'd rather do it myself.

VJ: Do you feel a particular responsibility to the African-American community, being one of the few African-American women in a leadership position?

CVS: It's interesting because I feel a responsibility to all women. I want a woman to be comfortable and confident and to know that certainly she's been up to the task. She's more than demonstrated that she could do just everything, and specifically for the African-American female. It's so important. It's kind of interesting because the female has always been the head of the household for such a long time, has been the backbone, been the glue that kept things together. Yet, think about this — the female gets seven cents on a dime. I just heard that women have to pay more for their insurance. Now why is that?

So, you're getting paid less, you're going to pay more for your insurance. Someone needs to step up. I was saying to the team the other day, "Which of you are going to be my lawyer?" Then I said, "Okay then, you need to address these issues."

We [need to] ask questions as women. We are so used to accepting a role. We receive information and react to it. That's too bad. I think that the more women we have [as leaders], it's going to cause us to ask the questions that we need to ask and cause us to react the way that we need to react. We as women — I'd like to see us determine our own destiny a little bit more.

VJ: What characteristics do you possess that allow you to transform the lives of young women?

CVS: That's a good question. You could probably tell me better than I could tell you! I was just thinking today, you know it's that look. You know how sometimes I can really get on somebody? I hate to see them drop their heads; I just lose my mind. I hate to see them back down because I said something. Because it's just as important that they are mentally strong as they are physically gifted.

Sometimes, you can have a lot of talent, but the determination — you've seen players break, you know, mentally break. [Like] when you have 10,000 people and you know everyone is holding their breath on a foul shot. You may have 10,000 people cheering against you and you've practiced all week for that opportunity to perform. Then, all of a sudden, you just lose it.

My attempt is to make it so tough on you at practice that you are so confident, that you're cool, calm and you just know how to do it. And so, while you may not be able to appreciate it now and you may be upset, you'll come to know that you'll handle all that because there's nothing too great for you to do if you really want it. And at the highest levels to transfer the lessons we've learned in basketball and the responsibilities of everyone.

Hopefully those leadership lessons that teach you that you can be down and not out, but don't give up and keep trying and come up with another reason to get it done. I think that's ultimately what we're having happen with our team.

VJ: What have you learned over your lifetime that you believe is crucial to pass on to the next generation of leaders?

CVS: There's a lot of things, but I think today's leaders need to remember that it's a basic human function — whether it happened two hundred years ago or just yesterday — for people to have a need to be wanted, a need to feel important and a need to be a part of something. But you can't tell people to do something that you're not going to do yourself. You have to be willing to sacrifice; they have to see that you've committed yourself, that you've spent the time. How are you going to push someone to do something?

I don't think that there's anyone on this earth that really wants something just handed to them. I think that we all want to feel good about what we do and a leader can recognize the smallest thing. The leader is able to recognize that everyone wants to feel good. Everybody wants to feel good, everybody wants to feel important and everybody wants to feel wanted.

You've watched different types of leaders on the court. We need a vocal leader, as you know, and then there are some of the greatest players and they just *do*. They work hard and just do. I think if you really pour out your heart and you really show that you care, then the players will also care. I think the people, whoever they are, will also care.

VJ: What advice could you give me as a young woman with hopes of leadership in my future?

CVS: You know, when I think about you, you have so much talent and you've been soft and quiet. You're not the kind of person that says, "Yes, you know I was performing in New York at a very young age." Remember when I exposed that to the team and they were like, What? Are you serious? You were really shy about that and you didn't want to tell anybody. I can understand that, but you have so much to give. People aren't going to know that unless you're a little more vocal, expressive. People admire you, but they won't know you have all of this talent.

I'm really uncomfortable going into settings [with a lot of people]. It might seem strange because I'm around people a lot, but I'm really not comfortable. I'm not the kind of person that's going to go to a movie by myself. You would not believe how much I really have to prepare. My husband used to get on me about that.

I want to look good. I never want to disappoint the people I'm talking to, I don't want to disappoint myself, and you're that same way. One thing that helped me was to know that, contrary to what you might think, people who speak to the public and seem to be in such command are really quite nervous. A lot of times, they really are uncomfortable doing that.

I'm at home when I'm on the court. Anything else, I am so uncomfortable. My father taught me this and I remember this because I had a piano recital in third or fourth grade. If you're humble — which you are — and you're good, so you should be confident, you should realize that most people want to be with us. No one is wishing, "I hope she falls off the stage, I hope she forgets her lines, I hope her music falls off the piano or something like that." [My father] was saying to me that people imagine themselves in your spot. So, if you're nervous, just say, "I'm really nervous," so that people think, Wow, I'm glad you said that because I am too! I think that most of the time people are really wishing you well.

Be the person you are because it will come across as humble and considerate, concerned about what you do. You come across that way.

VJ: When you were in your twenties, what did you see yourself accomplishing? What were your goals and aspirations?

CVS: I used to tell my basketball coach that I was going to drive a pink Cadillac because I told her I was going to sell Mary Kay. But actually I knew that I had lots of dreams. I really thought I was going to be a concert pianist. I always knew I was going to do great things. I thought, you could be a concert pianist, you could be a track star, you could be a judge. With basketball, I only saw myself playing it until after I graduated and started coaching at Cheney University. Then, I realized that there were not opportunities for girls who had played sports. I felt so bad. I had to find a way to stay involved and change that.

[Coaching] really fascinated me and to this day I really enjoy putting all that together. As recently as yesterday, I continue to be so humble because I realize that I know so little. I listen to other coaches and I think, Wow, that's masterful. I really enjoy that nobody can enjoy their work as much as I do.

VJ: How have you seen the world change for African Americans and women in your lifetime? How would you like to see it change in the future?

CVS: I don't think that women think the only way they're valued is to just get married and have a secondary role. I think that women are more liberated, more opinionated and they are determining their own destiny more. I think that more women are working, and so she has her own money. There are so many women that at one time depended on their husbands to put a roof over their head, to feed them and buy them clothes.

For me, I got married because I wanted to get married. I didn't need any money. I didn't have any children. It wasn't any of that, but I had to do it for me.

I remember when I was growing up, older gentlemen would say, Well, you know, the best thing I can hope to do is to marry her off. Well, what does he really mean by that? "Marry her off?" That some guy will consider her worthy enough to take care of her. He's marrying her off instead of [saying], "Why don't you be the next president of a college or something like that?"

I think that there's a new-age woman who's comfortable, she's confident, she's doing what she has to do and she's able to have the family and the children and it's okay. And if she doesn't, it's okay. I think we're asking more questions. I think society is changing too; guys are looking at the female more as an equal. Are we there? No.

It's never more obvious than in athletics. Sports aren't played together, you know. And as a result, even the facilities are separate. Sports, in my opinion, are the last bastion of male dominance, and that's okay because they're going to dominate. They are going to dunk, and that's fine. That's because of God's creation itself; the guys are bigger and stronger and all. There's a difference. But I think that the female is more inquisitive, more inquiring. She's going

to ask the tough questions, and things need to make more sense to her. I don't think that there's anything that she thinks she can't do, you know. She believes she can be anything.

Here in the U.S., we probably enjoy some of the greatest freedoms. It does bother me when I see things happening in the rest of the world. I just want to keep making other women aware. I just had a talk with our team yesterday. I think it's important to do that. My father empowered me to do that; my mother empowered me, too. I have a responsibility to do that. If the women I'm working with are not empowered now, that this is the last chance I got.