

IT'S ALL ABOUT ATTITUDE

Woody Coddington

Athlete and Entrepreneur



A week before his 70th birthday, Richard "Woody" Coddington, a member of the planning committee for the Summer National Senior Games, which will be held in Cleveland in 2013, shared his thoughts on what it takes to succeed in business, sports and aging.

"It's not for sissies," he says.



When and where were you born, and where are you in the sibling line-up?

I was born in Monticello, New York, on October 27th, 1941. Monticello is in the Catskill Mountains, about 100 miles northwest of New York City. Both sets of grandparents lived in the Monticello area at the time.

I'm the oldest of two children: my brother is 2 ½ years younger than myself. His name is Barton.

Where did you grow up, and what did your parents do?

I spent my early years in the Bronx. We moved to Rye (New York) in 1952, when I was going into the sixth grade.

My father, then, was a body-and-fender man. At age 40, he quit banging on fend-

ers and became an auto claims adjuster. He used to joke that he was still climbing under cars, but that he was doing so wearing a clip-on bow tie.

My mother worked and that was somewhat unusual at that time...She was a part-time columnist for a local weekly paper when we lived in the Bronx. And that, as well as being a part-time librarian, was something she continued to do when we moved to Rye.

Growing up, what you were good at in school – and not so good at.

I was very good at geography. My parents had papered my room at home with National Geographic maps and I collected stamps from all over, too. I was a very early reader. And I was always very good with numbers. They always made sense to me and they talked to me.

I was always one of the smallest kids in the class, but that didn't stop me from being athletically competitive. When we lived in the Bronx, there was almost no sports or athletics at schools...When I got to Rye, it was a whole new world. The funding that was available in that school system provided for a lot of extracurricular activities.

I wasn't good at listening. I had a bit of a smart mouth. And I wasn't very good at English, even though I was a good reader.... But I managed to fumble along, graduating in the top third of my class...from a suburban high school in the New York City area that sent 95% of its graduates to college. Many of my classmates went on to Ivy League Schools, or the next tier down.

Today, you're a ranked senior athlete and have "medaled" at the national level (more about that later). Were you athletic as a kid, in high school, in college? And if so, what did you excel in?

I was always coordinated and had good reflexes, but I was small, so in high school the only sport that I had any level of achievement in was track. I was a hurdler, a low hurdler. I still hold a conference record back in New York, (laughs) but that's only because they disbanded the conference and the event got eliminated.

You "came of age" in the economically booming 1950s. How do you think growing up in post World-War II America influenced the man you are today – or did it?

Certainly the '50s are looked back upon by the participants with a great deal of nostalgia, and rightly so. It was a somewhat ideal time. Cold War tensions were minimal in the '50s and it was a good time to grow up.

The community I lived in was a fairly wealthy

suburb of New York City, and almost all my friends' fathers' were professionals who went into the city to work. My father worked with his hands...(W)e lived in an entirely different economic strata than my friends, but that was one of the things that motivated me. I saw what my friends had access to because their fathers had gone to college and achieved some degree of professional success. I thought that was cool.

When you went to college – Syracuse University – what were your career plans?

Early on, I locked into computers and electronic data processing, so I started out as a math major, then switched to economics, with a math minor. This was at the very advent of the computer age. I wound up taking computer programming when I was a junior in college and, at that time, maybe there were 5000 people in the US who could program...My senior year, I was one of only 6 people at school authorized to run the mainframe (computer). I was paid the princely sum of \$2 an hour at a time when most campus jobs paid between 75 and 90 cents an hour.

I had a small scholarship from Syracuse and a small one from what would be called the PTA today – then it was the Mothers' Guild – but I had to earn money for college, too. Over summers, sometimes I worked 84-hour weeks. I'd get up at 4:15 in the morning to be at the post office to work from 5 a.m. till 3 p.m. in the afternoon. Then I'd have 3 hours off before I went to the country club to work as a bar waiter....Some nights, I'd work so late that I'd go right from there to the post office and sleep on the mail sacks out on the loading dock and punch in for the 5 a.m. shift.

Is college where you met your wife, Cynthia?

Yes, my freshman year in college, and we got married in 1963, a week after I graduated. There were debts to repay, so we moved to Glen Cove, Long Island, where I had a job in New York City at Con Edison, the electric utility. My wife was a teacher and she taught out in Huntington, Long Island. Each morning we went in different directions to work.

(Laughs) The Con Edison job was a mistake. It was a regulated utility, most of the senior employees had a “regulated” mind set, and it wasn’t a very stimulating place to work. That’s when I decided that I wasn’t interested in becoming a computer programmer, but rather a business executive – because of the salary potential.

I applied for the MBA program at Harvard and was accepted, so we moved to Boston in 1964. My wife got a job teaching in Brookline (Massachusetts) and entered the program in the fall. It was a demanding, two-year program – the first year we had Saturday classes – so about the only time I’d see my wife was Sunday afternoon.

When I got out of that program, I got a job with Xerox in Rochester, New York...That’s where both our children were born. Andrew was born in 1966 and Christina was born in 1968.

After that, I was recruited to take a job in New York City at ITT Corporation...It was the 6th largest company in the world. But it was a meat-grinder: I was in mergers and acquisitions – at that time they were making 12 acquisitions a month – and I worked all hours of the day and night.

You and your wife moved to Cleveland in 1976. What brought you here? And, more to the point, what kept you here?

By then I was working for Chicago Pneumatic

Tool, a Fortune 500 company headquartered in New York City since 1916, and I came to Cleveland as part of a corporate transfer. There (in New York) I was their head of corporate development, which encompassed corporate planning, mergers and acquisitions, and new product development. One of the acquisitions I made, in 1973, was a company here in Cleveland, Allied Steel and Tractor Products, a construction equipment company.

In 1976, there was an opening at the company: head of marketing. At that time, my entire corporate career had been at the corporate staff level and I thought that I needed field experience to enhance my resume and chances of moving up in the organizations, so I took the position in Cleveland.

When I came here, all I knew about Cleveland was what I’d heard on Johnny Carson’s monologues. But I quickly became a Cleveland fan. It was affordable – and taxes were lower! – and it was accessible. We’d been living 35 miles north of New York City and to come in on Saturday night for dinner and the theater meant leaving at 4 in the afternoon and getting home at 1 in the morning.

We lived in Shaker Heights – we bought one of those nice, big, old Tudors – and I worked in Solon. We lived there for 28 years, and that’s where our kids went to school.

In 1979, the company (Chicago Pneumatic Tool) wanted me to take over a division in Franklin, Pennsylvania. It was a small town and I knew I couldn’t live there, and that I was also going to be the fourth person in five years to run the facility. It was a facility that should have been closed – and they did close it a year-and-a-half later – but I didn’t want that to happen on my watch, so I cut

a severance package and went to work for APCOA (the largest airport parking company in the nation). In 1982, I left there to start my own company.

You spent decades in corporate America – starting out at Con Edison in New York, finishing up as president of your own consulting company in Cleveland. What’s the most important life-lesson you learned moving up the corporate ladder?

I bailed out of “corporate” America in 1982 – at 41 – and started my own consulting company. I had a home office – that was ahead of the curve – and my first client was my boss (at APCOA, Edwin Roth). He put me on retainer.

(Laughs) I wasn’t overwhelmed with clients that first year, so I did a lot of networking and taught at John Carroll. By the second year, things had pulled together and I made a decent living.

“If you are positive and have things on any given day that you look forward to – the first game of the World Series, a new Sudoku puzzle, the daily paper, certain meals – you are going to age well. ”

But to answer the question, on the negative side, I learned the undue influence of office politics. I wasn’t good at that and wasn’t interested in playing that game, either. On the positive side, I learned the value of relationships that were built on a foundation of respect and hard work and mutual interests. And I learned negotiating techniques and the importance of analysis and due diligence and hard work.

And I learned the importance of mentors. One of my bosses in Rochester was Stephen Hardis. He came to Cleveland to work for Eaton Corp., as chief financial officer, and rose to become chairman and CEO of the company. He’s someone I paid a lot of attention to.

The info you shared with me said you’d made it to the semi-finals in the Jeopardy Contestant Search. When was that...and what was the competition like?

Around 1995, I read in the paper that they were doing auditions for Jeopardy in Cleveland, and they were issuing 600 tickets for the audition at two area public libraries. One was the Beachwood library, so I went early to pick up a ticket. There must have been 150 people already in the line.

The audition was held at a church on Rockside Road. To move on to the next round, you had to get 7 out of 10 questions correct, and I got nine, and I moved on to the next level with 60 others, where you had 50 questions and you had eight seconds to answer each one. To make the finals, you had to correctly answer 35 of the 50 questions. I got 32, and only 6 people – 1% -- of those who’d come for the audition made the “cut.” I was close, but no cigar.

You are on the planning and organization team to bring the Summer National Senior Games to Cleveland in 2013. How, and why, did you get involved with that?

I’ve actually participated in the Senior Games – or Senior Olympics as it’s sometimes called – so when I first heard about it, I immediately called Dave Gilbert, President of the Cleveland Sports Commission, which brings sporting events to Cleveland, and volunteered my services. That was in 2008, but things didn’t start ramping up until this year.

Bob Gries (another MythBuster) and I are the Athlete Advisory Board. Right now, we are working on getting (local) representatives for all 19 sports that will be included in the games. (Laughs) I play on softball teams – both here and in Florida – so I’m personally working to line up softball teams in four different age groups from the Cleveland League.

To prep myself for what it would be like, two years ago I entered all 16 events in the local games in Collier County Florida, in the Naples, Florida area, where we spend our winters. I was the first and only person to ever enter all the events. (Laughs) I have to admit that there was some degree of abject humiliation in participating in all the events. There were sports I’d never done, such as pickleball and shuffleboard, and there were sports I hadn’t done in 30 years, such as bowling and ping-pong – table tennis they call it today. It was an interesting experience. And I figured it would help me on the (planning) committee.

At least 15,000 athletes are expected to participate in the Senior Games. The logistics on the event sound daunting.

Not really. The National Senior Games is the largest participatory sporting event in the world, and preparation for all the events is substantial, but they (the National Senior Games Association) do this every two years. They know what they are doing.

MythBusters is all about successful aging. Everyone’s definition of that is different, so what’s your definition of successful aging?

I believe age is more a state of mind than a number or a physical issue. I won’t be the first person to say that I’ve met people who are considerably younger than I am who behave as if they were old, and then you meet the people who are young at heart.

And within that group are senior athletes. They tend to be a somewhat different niche, and there’s some snobbery: they are fitter than a lot of people because they work at it. When you go to Senior Games you’ll find that participants look at least five – maybe 10 – years younger than they really are. (Laughs) They aren’t concerned about walking up stairs and getting winded, they are concerned about being able to do it carrying a set of dumbbells.

While a lot of their fitness does have to do with genetics – who your parents were – most senior athletes didn’t get in the shape we are in by luck, it’s comes with a certain degree of hard work.

But there’s more to it (successful aging) than just maintaining fitness, you have to enjoy getting older, too.

What are you doing, on a daily basis, to live your definition of successful aging? In other words, what are you doing to stay physically, mentally and spiritually fit...and get in shape for the 2013 games?

I work out every day, and by that I mean I pump a lot of iron. I don’t have a home gym, but I do go to a fitness center. I do strength training and other exercises...I could go every day and it wouldn’t cost me a penny and that’s because insurance companies started underwriting gym and fitness club memberships...It was the best thing they could have done for seniors....Today, approximately 40% of seniors use this benefit to some degree.

I’m goal oriented. My goal with the pumping iron is to get stronger – build strength and muscle – so that I can hit a softball further, (Laughs) over the 300 foot fence. I’m always a bit sweaty by the time I finish.

I'm active. I play softball – four games a week in the summer in Cleveland and four games a week when I'm down in Florida. Plus, there's a pick-up game on Sunday if I so desire.

I'm a great believer that if you don't exercise your brain, it will turn to mush. I do a variety of puzzles – crossword puzzles, Sudoku puzzles, jigsaw puzzles – that reinforce different cognitive skills. My own personal bias is that if you only do one of the above, you only enhance a narrow range of your cognitive skills.

I've been cooking for years, since my wife went back to teaching. It's something I enjoy doing. And I eat what I want: a lot of red meat – for muscle development – but not a lot of fruit or carbs (carbohydrates). And I supplement that with copious quantities of red wine, which, in combination with adult aspirin is my poor man's Coumadin.

(Laughs) I think the average nutritionist would pull out their hair at what I cook and what I eat.

Do you feel like any of this is work?

Sometimes...but I'm motivated. If I viewed this (workouts and cooking) as drudgery, I wouldn't be doing it. If I don't actually enjoy the workouts, at least I'm motivated enough to do them, to stick with them, because I know I'm going to be a stronger and better athlete. For some people the motivation comes from their doctor (saying): if you don't exercise you are going to die.

Being a senior athlete doesn't come without some cost. In the last five years I've had a hernia, one rotator cuff and a torn meniscus in both knees. (Laughs) I see my orthopedic surgeon more often than I see my kids.

What role do you think attitude plays in aging successfully?

It's all about attitude, positive attitude. It's a mind set. If you are positive and have things on any given day that you look forward to – the first game of the World Series, a new Sudoku puzzle, the daily paper, certain meals – you are going to age well. And I consciously set things up so that I do.

You retired as President of Woodco Associates in 2003. Is the life you are leading today the life you'd planned when you retired?

I'd tapered off by then. Doing what I did, I could do that.

Since then, I've been writing a book – a biography about Edward Eagan who I knew from my hometown of Rye, New York. He's the only person on this planet to ever have won a gold medal in both the Summer and the Winter Olympics. Others have medaled in both summer and winter games, but no one has won gold in both.

He was not the typical dumb jock. He grew up in abject poverty and was a Rhodes Scholar and married an heiress to the Colgate fortune. He won the gold medal for light heavyweight boxing in the 1920 Summer Olympics. Boxers were the rock stars of their era and he was good enough to do boxing exhibitions with people like Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey, both of whom were world heavyweight champions. In 1932 he won a gold medal for bob sledding at the Winter Olympics at Lake Placid (New York). And he hadn't ever been on a bob sled until three weeks before the Olympics....He was absolutely fearless.

I've really enjoyed the researching. The writing is sometimes tedious, but I'm coming down the homestretch.

If you could be remembered for only one thing you have accomplished in your 70 years, what would it be? And why?

That's a tough question. For someone who grew up in the Bronx, to achieve what I did, that's an accomplishment. I was able to do most things on my own and on my own terms. I was not dependent on a lot of people to accomplish what I did. I largely helped myself....I didn't have anyone carrying me or pushing me along.

We've covered a lot of ground in this interview. What did I not ask you that I should have?

To know a person fully, you have to know what their shortcomings are, and you haven't asked about my weaknesses....If you don't know your strengths and your weaknesses you can often get off on the wrong path.

Me? I enjoy being alone a lot: I don't need people around me. I'm impatient. In fact, I like quiet and tranquility and my day-to-day routine. Sometimes that's seen as not being sociable.