Several years ago, in Pullman, Washington, Lauren Sampson asked her father a question that would later impact children in Norman, Oklahoma:

“Daddy, would you read to our class?”

Kelvin Sampson lowered the bedtime book he was reading to his daughter and said, “Yes.”

That decision took Sampson before elementary school students in Pullman, where he was head basketball coach at Washington State University. Encouraged by the children’s response, he invited his players to join him in reading to students on a regular basis. Sampson saw benefits for both groups. School children learned the value of literacy, and his athletes learned the value of eloquence.

When Sampson became the University of Oklahoma’s 11th basketball coach in 1994, he naturally began the Sooner Reading Program in Norman. Since that time, he and a number of OU players and assistant coaches Jason Rabedeaux, Ray Lopes and Bobby Champagne have read books at all 14 Norman elementary schools and three middle schools.

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Sampson traces his interest in reading to his own childhood in Pembroke, North Carolina, where his father, Ned, coached high school basketball.

“Old Yeller was my favorite book,” Sampson remembers. “I liked Dr. Seuss, too. Leaders and frontiersmen fascinated me: Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett. I read of the West and Indian chiefs such as Tecumseh, Chief Joseph and Geronimo. Now I pass that love down to my children. You can tell by listening to their vocabularies that Lauren and Kellen have read many books; Lauren has read over 70. My wife and I are proud of how much they’ve read.”

Sampson recalls that he and his three sisters never missed a day of class in 12 years of public schools. They had no choice; there was nobody at home to take care of them after school. Their father was teaching and coaching, and their mother was working as a nurse after earning her degree at age 43.

“Much of my success I owe to my parents,” he says. “I think patterns of discipline are set early in life.”

Sampson believes that players cannot be coached until they have learned, and thus the best coaches are also the best teachers. Not surprisingly, Sampson enjoys teaching more than any other part of his job.

He discovered early in life that he loved being around children. Perhaps that is why he baby-sat when he was in college, playing Monopoly with his charges. Each role of the dice presented another chance to teach, to share knowledge or experience.

Now, two decades later, his summer basketball camps bring in 900 participants, and he tries to learn all their first names.

Sampson takes that love of teaching to the elementary schools when he reads to the children.

“When I look at 50 or 60 students, I feel a responsibility to teach them something, not just read to them. I want feedback that they are learning, so I use a little reward system—three quick claps—when someone answers a question about what we’ve read.”

Sampson says his greatest reward as a basketball coach comes from using his visibility in the community to influence and shape children. He believes that too often the public takes a shallow view when evaluating a coach.

“Kids don’t look at your won-loss record,” he says. “They just know you’re the basketball coach at the University of Oklahoma. They want to know what they can learn from you, the kind of person you are. They’re open—like the books we read to them.”

Sampson enjoys listening to his players talk about their weekly reading experience on the way back to campus: how the children responded, what books they read, what a child asked them later. He sees his athletes’ self-esteem growing because of the reading program.

“That confidence pays dividends,” Sampson says, “because the easiest people to motivate are those with high self-esteem. A player like Bobby Joe Evans is one that children really like: he’s innocent, down-to-earth and loves kids. One day when he’s graduated, Bobby Joe may be working with children, because he relates to them so well. All our players understand that being a role model is not a conditional agreement. It’s all-encompassing; those children remember the players who visit their school. They know you. You’re special to them. They may walk up at the mall and say ‘Hi, remember me from school?’ That makes my players and me realize how important role models are to children.”
receive letters from parents of kids who told them that Coach Sampson visited their school. Then I know I'm giving something back to the community."

Sampson has enjoyed a positive response to the reading program from Norman public school teachers and administrators. Teachers make an extra effort to work with him, often providing material for his review before he visits the school. They want their visitors to feel welcome.

"Everywhere we go, there’s one common denominator: excitement," Sampson says. "We feel it when we walk into the school. I never get bored with that feeling; no two visits are the same. The principals put their touch on the programs. Some have me read to the entire group, and then the players read to different grades. We’ve read in cafeterias, classrooms, even hallways."

The program draws attention outside Norman as well. As this article was written, CBS had scheduled a special television segment on the Sooner Reading Program to air during its "Road to the Final Four" program in March.

Donna Neel, principal of Lincoln Elementary School, has hosted Sampson and his players the past two years. She felt excited when Sampson’s secretary, Renee Forney, first approached her with the idea.

"This program provides a win-win situation for all concerned," Neel says. "The schools benefit because we have sports personalities who are role models visiting us and promoting literacy. This is a great way to help the kids understand that they must be literate, no matter what path they choose in society. OU benefits by showcasing the breadth of its basketball program and the dynamic leadership of Coach Sampson. He’s impacting the community and shaping lives, not just trying to win basketball games. When his players visit here, they realize the powerful influence they have over children."

Neel and her staff do everything possible to make the VIP reading day special for the students. They design bookmarks to be signed by Sampson and the players and then reproduced and distributed as a memento of the occasion. Teachers rearrange class schedules so more students—in Lincoln's case grades 3 through 5—can participate.

"We see the kids’ reactions, and then we’re glad we made the extra effort," Neel says. "When the coach and his players walk in, you can hear gasps. Eyes light up. The kids get excited and can’t wait for the program to start. They are attentive and respectful. They identify with those personalities, and they want to have a dialogue and ask questions."

Neel selected a holiday theme for the December 1995 visit. Sampson donned a Santa hat, and All American Ryan Minor wore reindeer antlers. They demonstrated that sports personalities are human and possess a sense of humor. Neel says OU’s players impressed Lincoln teachers with their eloquence and rapport with the students.

A former OU softball player, Neel hopes that the Sooner Athletic Department will follow Sampson’s lead and expand the reading program to include other sports. Such a move would enable all students in the school to participate as well as allowing more individual interaction.

The Sooner Reading Program demands time and emotional involve-
Sampson, his staff and his players. However, all involved believe the positive results make their efforts worthwhile.

Nate Erdmann, a senior from Portales, New Mexico, says he felt comfortable with the idea when Coach Sampson invited him to participate in the program last year.

"I had done something similar in high school, so I knew the importance of reading to kids," Erdmann says. "Since I've read to children in Norman, I'm even more impressed with the program's value in promoting literacy. We have fun, and there's never a dull moment. We get a few surprises, too. One kid thought we were football players.

"My dad is a basketball coach," Erdmann continues. "As a youngster I always looked up to his players. I remember how sometimes they had a hard time talking to kids, and yet I listened to every word. Now I know the feeling of being a role model; I see that same look in children's eyes. Playing college athletics carries the responsibility of being a role model for children, and I accept that responsibility. I'm paying back not only to the community of Norman but also to those former players who helped shape me."

Erdmann embraces Coach Sampson's attitude that there is no such thing as a "dumb question," just honest inquiries from young minds. Each question he answers, each hand he shakes, makes a lasting memory and a new friend.

"Working basketball camps and reading to kids has made me a better person," he says. "From the interaction, I've gotten to know young people personally. I feel a part of the community. Now I get a thrill when a youngster comes up to me and says, 'Hi. You read in my class.' I know from their look that they'll never forget, just as I never forgot those past players who spent time with me."

Erdmann has a ready response when a player asks him about participating in the reading program. He points out that they will experience a new feeling, not only from growing personally but also from watching Coach Sampson work with children.

"Coach has a genius for this kind of thing," Erdmann says. "I watch him every day in practice. He's a natural teacher, a leader. He could be a motivational speaker in the corporate world. We learn those skills from watching him teach the children. So when I tell new players what they'll gain, they look forward to the experience."

Michael Cotton, a Jacksonville, Arkansas, sophomore, remembers reading magazines, Dr. Seuss and Beverly Cleary books as a child. So he quickly accepted the challenge of facing a room...
full of bright-eyed fourth graders.

"I felt surprised at their energy and excitement in seeing us," Cotton says. "To be honest, I didn’t realize how big OU basketball ranks with kids that age. You could see the excitement on their faces. I felt the responsibility; they took us totally on faith because we’re OU basketball players. At first, they were tentative, like they couldn’t believe we were there. Then after we read to them, they really got into the questions. We have to stay on our toes, though. For example, last year they wanted to know all about reindeer."

Cotton, a zoology major who graduated in the top 10 of his high school class, knows that some experiences cannot be taught in a university classroom; they must be learned by living them as part of the community.

"Those kids know we’re human now," he says. "I get a warm feeling from joking with them, hugging them. They meet us on their turf, and we break down barriers. Now we’re more than just guys in basketball uniforms down on the court. We’re their friends."

Proof of the reading program’s success must come from the children themselves. They absorb every word, remember every question, laugh at every joke. Sports idols rivet attention, build memories, shape thoughts.

But can they make children read?

Consider these quotes from students at Lincoln Elementary:

"I thought they were really neat," says Carlajo Williams, 5th grade. "Bobby Joe Evans was funny. When he started to give us ‘high fives,’ no one could reach his hand. I liked all of them because they made us more interested in reading."

Melissa Heath, 4th grade: "It was funny when Coach Sampson had someone stand up and answer a question to prove he had listened. They were trying to help us in reading, so when we grow up we can read to others."

Perhaps Brenda Sexton, 4th grade, gives the final report card:

"They made me want to read."

Kelvin Sampson’s success as a basketball coach is well chronicled, placing him squarely in the public spotlight. What elevates him above others in his profession might best be described as his humanity—caring enough to use his position and extraordinary teaching skills to mold young lives.

Add patience to those traits.

"What are you?" a young student asked one day.

Sampson, a full-blood Lumbee Indian, smiles at the recollection. "Blatant innocence is a wonderful thing—one of the reasons I love kids. I can almost see them thinking, ‘Is he Indian? Is he black?’ They don’t know. So they ask."

Every teacher who has witnessed his gift, every child shaped by his teaching, will answer:

Kelvin Sampson is a winner in the human race.