“It was love at first sight. . . . One day I picked up a basketball, and it never let me go.”

For fifty seasons Lute Olson has been teaching young athletes the skills of basketball---and life. Starting as a high school coach, he worked his way to the top of the basketball world, winning more than a thousand games, a national championship, and a world championship, producing some of the NBA’s biggest stars, and eventually being enshrined in the basketball Hall of Fame.

This is the story of his upbringing in Mayville, North Dakota, where he learned his famous work ethic and survival skills; the telling of the eighteen years it took to finally coach for a major college team; the fond memories of coaching famed players as well as the stories of bitter losses and breathtaking wins. This is his story, from recruiting in the dangerous projects of big cities and the vast farmlands of the Midwest, to finally winning an NCAA championship. It’s the inside-the-locker-room story of many extraordinary emotional moments that will live forever in basketball lore. “Lute! Lute! Lute!” The cheer by which the Arizona fans greet their coach before each game is the story of a man with a lifelong passion for a game. This book will take the reader inside the incredibly popular world of collegiate basketball, as seen through the eyes of a giant of the sport.

But his is far more than a basketball story. Lute’s partner for forty-seven years in building championship programs was his high school sweetheart, Bobbi, whose blueberry pancakes became as widely known in the basketball world as his own full head of white hair. While Lute was the taciturn coach, she became the player’s mother-away-from-home. America got to meet her as she fought her way courtside through cheering fans after Lute’s Arizona team had earned a trip to the Final Four, and on national television he swept her off her feet and the two of them whirled round and round in joy. It is a love story of a couple who together built a
sports legend. Lute and Bobbi Olson were a team. The Arizona community loved her almost as much as he did—traditionally at the beginning of each game the Wildcat band greeted them with a cheer. Their almost half-century love affair ended with Bobbi’s death from cancer. Lute explores how he dealt with her death, and how he moved forward to find a new love.

This is the chronicle of one American boy’s dream to become a great basketball coach---his achievements, his coaching strategies, and the wins and losses he faced as boy, man, and coach, but always with one constant in his life: the game of basketball. This is the story of fifty seasons in the life of Lute Olson.

My Personal Review:
As a longtime follower of the University of Iowa Hawkeye sports teams, I have many fond memories of some of the more memorable victories. My most vivid recollection is of Steve Waite receiving a pass and driving to the basket and drawing a foul. The basket and subsequent foul shot sealed a victory and earned the Hawkeyes a trip to the 1980 NCAA final four. Lute Olson was the coach at that time and this was one of many successes in his long and successful career as a basketball coach.

That career actually began quite slowly, Olson started out as a high school basketball coach with other major duties. However, once he hit the college level, he quickly demonstrated his talents as a coach as his teams have always done very well. To me, the high points of the book were the sections where Olson described his years at Iowa, his successes and failures. Olson notes that had two foul shots been made in the NCAA tournament or if superlative point guard Ronnie Lester had not been (re)injured in a final four game, it is likely that he would never have left Iowa.

Another high point is near the end when he describes a reunion of his 1980 Hawkeye team and the revelation of the illness of guard Kenny Arnold. When Olson and the other members of the team learned of Arnolds problems, they banded together to see that he received the best of care. This more than anything is a demonstration of how Olson built teams first and stars second.

Olsons life is one of great success, he is as devoted to the game of basketball as anyone can be and his record as a coach is one of the best. While this biography is very interesting there is one flaw, a continuation of what most observers believe was Olsons one weakness as a coach. He often mentions bad calls by officials as a reason for a loss. While bad calls do happen, they are a part of the game and to claim that the reason your team blew a fifteen point lead is one or two bad calls is bad coaching.

This aside, this is an excellent biography of one of the best basketball coaches of all time and a man who took character development as seriously as he did wins on the court.

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