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BERKELEY, Dec. 21--"Bob McKeen is one of the truly great centers, a throwback to the old-time pivotmen. I consider him a better all-around center than Don Schlundt of Indiana."

That's the unreserved opinion of Pete Newell, California's new basketball coach. Newell is qualified to compare McKeen and Schlundt, since he had been head mentor at Michigan State for the last three years and his Spartan fives met Schlundt and the Indiana juggernaut many times during that period.

In praising McKeen's all-court performances, Newell goes on to say that California's 6-foot, 7-inch, 220-pound center and captain is every bit as valuable to his team as Tom Gola is to LaSalle. Gola, of course, is generally regarded as one of the finest college players in the history of basketball.

Another cage expert who has joined the McKeen bandwagon is Howard Dallmar, the ex-Pennsylvania mentor now coaching at Stanford. After seeing McKeen perform twice this year Dallmar told San Francisco basketball writers, "McKeen is better in all departments than Wake Forest's Dickie Hemric, who is also bidding for All-American center honors."

Johnny Wooden, the UCLA cagemaster, is also lavish in his praise of the Bear pivotman. After McKeen almost single-handedly wrecked the Bruins while leading the Bears to two stunning victories over UCLA in the Westwood gym two years ago, Wooden had the following to say:

"McKeen, though only a sophomore, is a tremendous all-around center. I would take him over Washington's famed Bob Houbregs."

In that series McKeen, then a beardless youngster of 19, scored 20 and 24 points on successive nights and owned both backboards.

McKeen is now a senior, and although he is about to re-write every scoring record in California basketball history, it's his all-around post play that is admired most by his legion of fans.

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