

EPISODE 191 - Forever Strong

- Parallel Tracks of Success
- Developing Horizontal Leadership
- Creating Leadership Units
- Perpetuating Culture Across Generations

[Larry Gelwix](#) was the head coach of Highland Rugby for 36 seasons. During that time he compiled a career record of 418-10 including 20 USA Rugby national championships. His story is featured in the Hollywood movie [Forever Strong](#) (2008).



Prologue

The most important thing that transformational coaches do consistently is one-on-one conversations with their players where they ask questions, listen intently, and affirm the individual.

Transformational coaches value their players as people regardless of their previous transgressions.

What was it like to have your story portrayed in the movie *Forever Strong*?

I loved the idea - but they had the wrong story. The story is about the players who work every day in practice, who practice and make sacrifices, to make our success possible.

Championships are won before the season even starts.

How do you define success?

I started loving the sport and focused on winning. If you don't win - you don't coach. Period. Over time, it became more about the players and trying to help them grow.

The Preseason Talk

- In terms of human dignity & respect - there is no difference between the coach, the captain, the 7th grader, or the senior. We are all the same.



- Our jobs and responsibilities are very different. I can't win without the players, and they can't win without me. Let's focus on cooperation.

We always say: ***"It doesn't matter who scores, it only matters that we score."***

Two Parallel Tracks of Success

- 1) Wins & Losses
- 2) Helping young men grow up

My ultimate success as a coach will first be measured in gold medals and trophies, but that is secondary. The best judge of me as a coach will be measured in the decades that follow their playing careers.

- What type of men, husbands, and fathers do they become?
- How do they interact with their community?
- What kind of contributions do they make in society?

What are some challenges you have faced while striving for success on the field and simultaneously trying to help young people grow?

You have to establish an identity that becomes a magnet to draw people in.

Two Philosophies of Leadership

- 1) **Vertical Leadership** - The coach is on top. If you win, it's great coaching. If you lose, it's because of bad players. The focus is always on the leader.
- 2) **Horizontal Leadership** - All members of the team deserve the same dignity and respect regardless of roles, but every job is important.

One way to facilitate horizontal leadership is to create a mentoring program matching older players to younger players. They encouraged them to make good decisions off the field.

It's critical to involve your key players to be a positive influence in ways that coaches and parents sometimes cannot.

How have you stayed grounded in the midst of all your success?



The culture was already embedded in the team. With our success, we had a target on our back. We were everybody's Super Bowl. We wanted to live up to that challenge.

We had leaders assigned to groups of 4-5 players and did a lot of interdependent activities around **Fun & Food**.

The varsity hosted players-only dinners the night before our games. After dinner, the captains facilitated "Ball Toss". Whoever had the ball spoke whatever was on their mind - a thank you, a challenge, etc. Someone else could call for the ball, or they could toss to someone to hear from them.

Talk about how you structured your leadership units.

The coaching staff selected two captains. Then 5-6 additional players were chosen as "team leaders." These leaders had the respect of everyone on the team, and when they spoke everyone listened.

They were responsible to make sure their units practiced well, performed in class, and that their groups gathered together to build relationships outside of rugby. They shared their goals, personal issues, etc. and supported one another.

When there is a level of trust - players will open up like a book including about their behaviors on and off the field, in-season and out.

These leaders offered invitations to change and pointed younger players in the right direction through their words and example.

How did you use team bonding activities to build such a high level of trust?

All of the activities must have a **PURPOSE**, and they have to be **FUN**.

We emphasized what a unique opportunity it was to be part of our team.

We did service projects. Service teaches players unselfishness. When giving to others - you have no thought of receiving anything in return.

How did you manage to perpetuate your culture from one generation of players to the next?



In rugby the jersey number goes with your position on the field. Having former players write letters to current players wearing the number, playing the same position, was powerful because they understood what was required of that position. Often that alum would follow-up with a text, or come watch a game to encourage the current player.

For example, NFL player Haloti Ngata played rugby for Highland. When he addressed our team he told the boys, "Rugby was the best preparation for college and professional football that I could have possibly had."

For more information on how to create a leadership council, visit [CoachTube](#) to learn more about JP's Captains Council System.

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EPISODE 192 - What's Important Now

- **The Law of the Price Tag**
- **Beginning with the End in Mind**
- **Balancing Family & Rugby**

Prologue - We want every player on our team to have a great experience, to enjoy each other, to embrace struggle and challenges, and to grow through that process.

WIN - What's Important Now - This philosophy was first mentioned in the book [Essentialism](#) by Greg McKeown.

The Preseason Talk - There are two approaches we can have:

- 1) We can be a social / recreational team with lots of fun parties and eat a lot of pizza.
- 2) We can be a highly disciplined, competition team striving to win a national championship.

This decision allows them to take ownership and have some "skin in the game."

The Law of the Price Tag - There is a price to be pursuing a national championship and having a winning team. It requires discipline and intense personal training.

The Fun Run - The captains lead the team in a grueling run through the park with intervals of hills, sprints, calisthenics, carrying teammates piggy-back, etc. They start early in the



season with a 10-minute run, and eventually, by the end of the year, finish with an hour run followed by full-field sprints to learn “there’s always more gas in the tank.”

This is how players learned, “We can do hard things.”

No Regrets - Does not mean “no mistakes,” it means no unresolved mistakes.

We didn’t yell and scream at players - we were intense - we would stay in practice until they got it right. We work hard at maintaining personal dignity.

Discipline Conversations

- a) We reviewed the situation
- b) I asked the player, “Is there anything I have said that is inaccurate or unfair?”
- c) Because it’s fair and correct, focus on YOU, your behavior and the choices you made.

We wanted to move them away from a “victim mentality.”

The Lawn Chair - I’ve always had 1v1 conversations with players, usually in the stands during or after practice. Usually we talked about their life (though there were times we had rugby talks too).

When performance is measured, performance improves. When performance is measured and reported, the rate of improvement accelerates.

Five Championship Strategies

- 1) We Not Me
- 2) Don’t Play with Snakes
- 3) Attitude and Effort is EVERYTHING. Attitude and Effort are the muscle of resilience.
- 4) What’s Important Now?
- 5) Focus on the Final Score

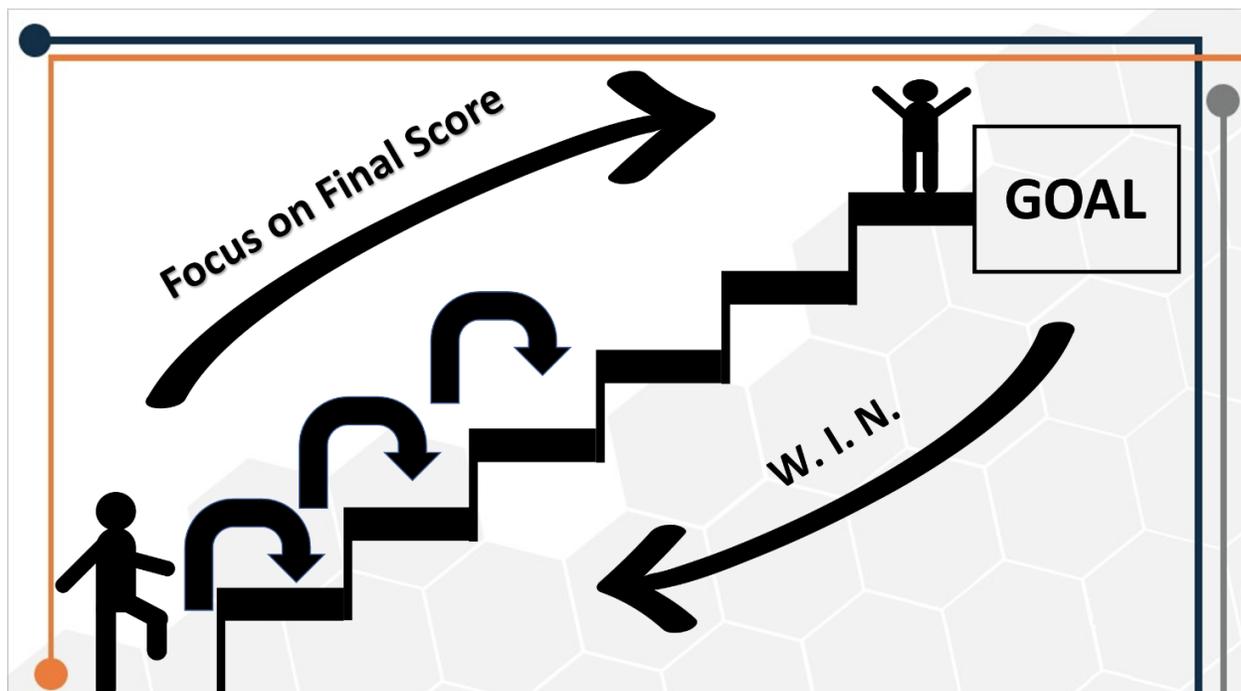
In the movie, there is a disgruntled player who challenges team standards and is a negative teammate for most of the first half of the film. Yet, you never gave up on him, and in fact played him despite it costing you a game.

How do you know when to stick with a player in situations like that?



One of our mantras is to **Focus on the Final Score**. We encourage parents to take the long view. It's not where you are at the moment, but the direction you are moving that makes the difference.

You have to see players as they **could be** rather than who they are in a single moment. We try to show them a roadmap of who they can become.



GPS - When you enter a destination into your GPS the end goal disappears and a series of specific steps appear to get you there.

What's Important Now - We always **start with the end in mind**, but we focus on the single most important thing a player can do **right now** to start moving toward the goal.

Then we measure their performance (progress) to ensure they are moving in the right direction. When something is measured and reported, it will improve.

Individual Progress Varies - Some players will run up the stairs, some skip steps, some will walk, and some will identify a goal but never start. Those who refuse to take the next step may ultimately be left behind.

What advice do you have on balancing fatherhood and coaching?



It would have been impossible to do what we did without my wife.

There has to be a purposeful plan. You have to make emotional deposits into the family bank account with your family. I would talk to my kids at bedtime about their day. Kathy and I always had Date Night.

If the relationship bank account with your family has a positive balance, you can make withdrawals without bankrupting the relationship.

A friend shared with me, "I've been to a lot of retirement dinners and they always say the same thing... I wish I would have spent more time with my family. Not a single one wishes they worked more."

It's easy to put your family at the end of the line because you know they'll always be there.

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