

EPISODE 219: SEAN MCDERMOTT – FOOTBALL & PRINCIPLED ACHIEVEMENT

Sean McDermott

It doesn't matter what you look like, who you are if you're older or younger. If you can help them achieve their goals, they're going to listen to you. They're going to buy into you.

Female Voice

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Ken White

Welcome to Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. Sharing strategies, information, and insight that help you become a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. Succeeding and doing so in the right manner. That's principled achievement. The William & Mary School of Business defines the principled achievement leader as one who values people, diversity of thought, empathy, humility, and success. This leader listens and inspires, practices ethical, compassionate behavior, and embraces the tenets of the William & Mary Honor Code. This year's Principal Achievement Award Ceremony was held on March 21st in New York City at Rockefeller Center's Rainbow Room. The award was presented to Sean McDermott, a William & Mary graduate and head coach of the National Football League's Buffalo Bills. Before the ceremony, McDermott sat down with us to discuss his thoughts on football, leadership, and principled achievement. Here's our conversation with Sean McDermott.

Ken White

Well, Sean, thanks so much for taking time with us tonight, not only to be here in New York with us for the principled achievement ceremony but to take time to do the podcast with us. Thanks very much.

Sean McDermott

It's my pleasure, Ken. I'm happy to be here and looking forward to a great conversation.

Ken White

Yeah, thanks. You're a Philadelphia area guy. How did you end up at William & Mary?

Sean McDermott

Boy, when I spent some time my junior year speaking to my guidance counselor, I went to LaSalle College Prep School, an all-boys school outside of Philadelphia, and he said, hey, Sean, there's a lot of really good schools down south, and they have football as well. I wanted to play football in school and go to a good school at the same time. He said, A lot of the people from some of the more well-to-do areas, even though I didn't live in that area, were sending their kids down south to go to school. William & Mary being one of those schools, and so I said, hey, I'll look into that. The football and the sports, I met the academics side of things, and it all worked out.

Ken White

Yeah. You also wrestled in high school?

Sean McDermott

I did.

Ken White

Did you think about doing that in college?

Sean McDermott

I did.

Ken White

Was that a tough decision?

Sean McDermott

Yeah. One of the things that swayed me to football, Ken, was that my grades started to dip every wrestling season because of the grind of a wrestling season, naturally. So, I decided to stick with football.

Ken White

When did you decide coaching might be something in your future?

Sean McDermott

Oh, boy. That's a rabbit hole now. We might go down. My dad was a coach, a part-time college coach, and I was a finance major at school. I just had my vision for myself was, I'm going to get a business finance degree and go live in Northern Virginia and get a dog, have a white picket fence, and have the whole American dream in front of me. Then, I

got to my senior year, and I said, wait a second. I think I want to coach. I don't think I've had enough of this football stuff. I started coaching a little bit in the spring of my senior season, my fifth year when my eligibility had already run out. Then it just turned into, let me give it a try in the fall, and here I am.

Ken White

Is it what you expected? Did you expect to be in the NFL?

Sean McDermott

No, I didn't. I mean, who would have ever thought, X amount of years later, that I'd be in the NFL, in particular as a head coach? It's like anything else, though. For driven people like us, it's, hey, trying to be the best at what we can be, at what we do, and that's a goal. It's always been a goal of mine, whether it be at William & Mary or postgraduate.

Ken White

It's interesting. Sports fans who are our listeners know this; nonsports fans might not. But in your profession, many coaches change jobs almost annually for 20 straight years. Your background is quite different. You were basically with two teams before you landed your current role. What are the pluses and minuses of jumping so often? Because we can't do that necessarily in business. But for those who do that, what's the game plan there?

Sean McDermott

The minuses, I would say, because they're mostly pluses of not jumping, but the pluses of jumping would be that you get a chance to be around a lot of different cultures and a lot of different ways of thinking and doing things naturally. The minuses are it's hard on the family, right? This is a tough business, like many businesses out there. We've been blessed and fortunate to have only been now in three places, and hopefully this is our last stop.

Ken White

As a head coach, if you have some coaches who have the background of they tend to jump, how do you build culture with that kind of a staff?

Sean McDermott

That are new on my staff?

Ken White

Yes.

Sean McDermott

They're a little bit gun-shy, I would say, because of the situations they've been in. And come the end of the season, what I've noticed is they're on pins and needles because, hey, this is the time of year I'm usually looking for a job or the staff gets let go and, yes, again, we're looking for a job and just some bad luck or whatever it is. And so through when it's come up for me as a head coach, it's like, man, wow, this doesn't happen. What I've been able to experience doesn't happen to everyone. And so you try and ease their mind a little bit and pump some confidence and trust into them and reassure them and their families that, hey, you're good, and we're going to be good here.

Ken White

Who are some of your mentors in terms of head coaches and assistant coaches?

Sean McDermott

Well, I think you'd start with Coach Laycock. He's since retired at school, and he really had a professional style approach to the way he ran the program at the collegiate level. Then, since I've come into the NFL, Andy Reid spending 12 years with Coach Reid in Philadelphia, working my way up from somewhat low on the ladder to the defensive coordinator position. Then I would say Ron Rivera as well in Carolina, who I worked for, and I'm just super grateful for those opportunities.

Ken White

What's a head coach in the NFL do? What are the roles and responsibilities in less than an hour?

Sean McDermott

Oh, yeah. Well, the bandwidth is incredible. It really is. I'm going to talk about this a little bit tonight at our event here. It's years ago when I interviewed for multiple head coaching jobs over the course of two or three years. In the way it works in the NFL, you kind of get your name out there, you get recognized, and you get on the radar, and you get an interview, maybe two, and you may not get them, but then the next year, you come out the next year, and you're expected to get one. At all of those interviews, Ken, I was asked, how do you define leadership? What is leadership to you? Back then, I really hadn't been through what I've now been through. I was in a leadership role, but only for a few years. That being the coordinator level job is a leadership job. In this case, now being through eight years or seven years, now going on eight of a head coaching job in the NFL, it's, hey, you tell me what the situation is, and I'll tell you what type of leader I have to be. And that's just, to me, you've got to fit the situation and what the situation calls for. And whether it's a player and trying to get them to play better, that's the simple stuff. It's caring for people, caring for players, their families, and really trying to help them become the best version of themselves by building a great culture and an environment around them whereby they can do that. And not just our players, but our

staff. And we are dead set on doing that. That is our vision. That is my goal daily, is to build that type of environment where people drive down. One bill is driving, they said, hey, I like going to work here.

Ken White

And I assume also you're basically a CEO?

Sean McDermott

Correct.

Ken White

Yeah, the parallels are definitely there. In your role, I know some head coaches have a lot to say in terms of player personnel, who we draft, who we trade for. Is that part of your role?

Sean McDermott

It is. The structure of that is a little bit different at every team. At our team, Brandon, being our general manager, is primarily responsible for that, but he's great. He asks for input. The reason being is no GM wants to bring a player in here that a coach doesn't want. That doesn't usually work. But I'd like to believe that we've got a great partnership, and we've worked well together for seven years now.

Ken White

You've been in the NFL long enough that players have changed, not just the names, but attitudes, how they've grown up. The generation today is different than it was even five, six years ago. How do you work with players? How do you try to embrace the differences that we see today in players who are 21, 22, and 23?

Sean McDermott

Well, it has changed. I think what has changed has also stayed the same in terms of the core principles that I believe in. The number one thing is what my dad told me years ago of, hey, they don't really care what you know until they know how much you care about them. And then Andy Reid taught me, he said, hey, listen, all the player cares about after that is, can you help them accomplish their goals? It doesn't matter what you look like, who you are, if you're older or younger. If you can help them achieve their goals, they're going to listen to you. They're going to buy into you. But it really starts and ends with people, right? I think those are the two bookends. And then in the middle of all that is the guiding principles and the process and the culture and the environment you try and build. That's really where, to me, the rubber meets the road.

Ken White

So they need to trust you?

Sean McDermott

Absolutely.

Ken White

What can a player do so that you trust them?

Sean McDermott

I think it's mutual. It's showing that they're committed, showing that they're open to being coached. It's a two-way street, that trust. I think there's probably debate out there of, is it given? Is it earned? I think it's probably a combination of both. I'm one of those guys where it is mostly earned, but you have to give it a little bit at the beginning in order to move forward in an efficient manner.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Sean McDermott in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. The Financial Times, Bloomberg Businessweek, Princeton Review, and US News & World Report have all named the William & Mary MBA program one of the best in the US and the world. If you're thinking about pursuing an MBA, consider one that has world-class faculty, unparalleled student support, and a brand that's highly respected, the William & Mary MBA. Reach out to our admissions team to learn which of our four MBA programs best fits you: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive. Check out the MBA program at William & Mary at wm.edu. Now, back to our conversation with the head coach of the Buffalo Bills, Sean McDermott.

Ken White

You've been to a couple of Super Bowls. I don't know that the average fan realizes what the odds are and how much that takes to get there, but what's it take to win at such a high level like that?

Sean McDermott

Oh, man, boy. If I could find the formula, it'd be over. To get us back there every year, it's been. I mean, you're talking about the best in the world at what they do at every position around the building. Every week, there's such parody around the NFL. It's the greatest team sport, yes, but also the greatest spectator sport because your team may be not having one of those great years, but those fans are watching because the margins every weekend are very small. That's what leads to you're seeing every weekend a new

team win or five new playoff teams because of the parody around the NFL. It's a great business model.

Ken White

Yeah. You look at the standings; everybody's at 500 half the time. Like, wow, it certainly shows.

Sean McDermott

It does.

Ken White

A couple of seasons ago, I think the whole world was watching Buffalo Bills when Damar Hamlin went down. For nonfans, he literally collapsed on the field in all of America watching; I remember everybody else watching and worrying, was he going to survive? What was that whole ordeal for you as a coach? What were you trying to do in terms of being a leader?

Sean McDermott

Sometimes, when you prepare, you feel like you've covered everything in your handbook or the manual. In this case, that was well outside of the manual. As I said earlier, the way I responded was how I thought anyone would respond in that situation and caring for Damar's life at the time. The way I look at our players and our staff, for that matter, is, hey if that was my son on the field, you're responsible as the coach. That's how I feel about it. I am responsible for his well-being. It doesn't mean that no one's going to get hurt. It's a violent sport. In that case, it was an extreme situation. We're just extremely grateful that Damar is now healthy, and doing well, and really thriving.

Ken White

Yeah, remarkable story. I think one thing that you and your peers do, probably more than anyone else, is interact with media. Is it daily? It's at least weekly.

Sean McDermott

Just about.

Ken White

It's pretty much daily.

Sean McDermott

There's about four or five mandatory interactions with the media a week during the regular season.

Ken White

How do you prepare for that? How did you learn to deal with the media?

Sean McDermott

Well, I had good training in Philadelphia, one of the larger media markets in the world, especially in the United States. That's a tough media market. At a coordinator level, you get a little bit of a junior look at what it is and the exposure once or twice a week. Then, as a head coach, now in Buffalo, it's, like I said, four or five, sometimes six times a week. And the further you go, the more concentrated it gets and the more the spotlight is on you and your team. So it's really about, like anything, preparation. And my approach, and some would rather I be a little bit more telling, but my approach is to lead. And to me, that, as far as the media goes, comes back to making sure that I do everything I can to help us win the next game. And so try and protect as many as I can and keep them as confident as they can be through the journey of NFL season.

Ken White

Well, you're here because you're the winner of the Principal Achievement Award, and we explained what that was to the listeners when we first started the podcast. You're the third winner, and this is really exciting. I know people like William & Mary are very excited. How did you hear about you were being selected? Tell us about, was it a phone call, email?

Sean McDermott

Yeah, Todd Mooradian, I'm tempted to call him Professor Mooradian, called me, and we had seen each other at my induction in the Athletics Hall of Fame last year about this time. A couple of months after, he reached out, and I think it was before our season actually started, and said, hey, we'd like to honor you with this award. I said, well, tell me more about it. I'm just extremely grateful and honored to be here and to be selected.

Ken White

Well, we're grateful and honored that you're here. If our listeners don't know, Todd Mooradian was one of your professors, of course, now the dean of the business school. That's going to be cool for you to see him. He was a young guy, a young professor.

Sean McDermott

He was.

Ken White

That's going to be fun for you to see him in this role.

Sean McDermott

Oh, it is. He was that young professor that everybody loved. Had that young family, a dog, and lived close to campus. He was just a big fan of the football program, but fair, too. I would say he definitely held us to a certain standard, and there were no freebies, as one would maybe tend to hope for or expect at times from time to time. Once in a while, you need that at William & Mary. But no, he was a leader amongst leaders.

Ken White

That's great. Yeah, the young prof. I think students come in and say, this is either going to be extremely easy, or it's going to be extremely hard. There's nothing in the middle. Yeah, absolutely. You've already actually touched on some of the pillars that the school came up with, the defined principle, the achievement. You sound very other-centric. Your approach seems to be very other-centric. You've mentioned players, you've mentioned coaches, you've mentioned family. So obviously, other-centric is a thing for you. And also empathy. You've mentioned that. One of the pillars is diversity of thought. How do you bring that into your staff, the diversity of thought?

Sean McDermott

Well, number one, hire a great staff, and then trust them to bring things to the table, and then once in a while, to just be quiet and listen. One of our assistant coaches actually has. I don't know if it's a branding thing that he does, but it's talk less, listen more as a little bit of a maybe a clothing line he's doing. I don't really know, but I think that says a lot, really, about the job of a leader is to listen. When you hire the right people, you empower them to do their jobs, create the environment by which they can do it at a high level. I tell our staff, listen, any idea can come from anywhere on our staff. As much as it's vertically structured, it's horizontally aligned as well. Just because it's an idea coming from what we call a quality control coach or a graduate assistant coach at the college level is something similar. An idea is an idea. If you have an idea, bring it up, bring it to the table. That's what it's about. Come Sunday, we want the right game plan.

Ken White

The principal to achievement leader is one who embraces compassion when dealing with others. This is the NFL, man. This is a rough game. There's not a lot of time to be compassionate. Where does that fit in to your grand scheme as a head coach, compassion?

Sean McDermott

Well, it's big. Empathy and compassion are huge. To be honest with you, they don't come naturally for me. I've had to learn that people need to see that. People need that because through the course of a business day, week, year, people go through things, whether it's on the job, off the job. I've just learned over the years that if you're not right at home,

we're off the field. In this case, it's going to be hard for you to be good on the field, and so caring for people off the field is step number one.

Ken White

Humility. You're winning. The whole nation is watching you win. You're on TV. It's hard, I think. At times, probably to stay focused and embrace humility. How do you do that?

Sean McDermott

Well, the NFL humbles you rather quickly if you don't stay humble. No, we embrace the humble and hungry approach. I think that fits A, who I am and what I've come from, and the support and the guidance that my parents have given me over the years. Then William & Mary, no different, to be honest with you. The environment around our program at William & Mary and the campus, and you earn things at William & Mary. Things are earned. Even though it's got a great reputation, you're not walking in there, and it's going to get all of a sudden easier just because you got in. I love that about William & Mary. When you hire people from William & Mary, you know that they're battle-tested because of the experience that they've been through. Staying humble in the NFL is critical because if you get too comfortable or too complacent, you'll be reminded rather quickly.

Ken White

For young leaders listening to the podcast, we certainly have a lot of working professionals in the audience, but we also have students, MBA students, and undergrad students who, whether they know it or not, are going to end up in leadership positions. Whether they want to or not, will get there. What's some advice you have for a younger professional who you see, oh, wow, they've got a great future ahead of them in terms of leadership?

Sean McDermott

Well, I would say, don't make the mistake that I made. I used to think that leadership, you either had it or you didn't. For many of us who go to William & Mary, we've been successful all the way through our lives, to that point, at least, whether it's undergraduate or graduate at this time. When you get out of school, it's a little bit of, hey, I may not have the experience, but I know what this takes. Leadership is, yes, I believe it's borne in a little bit, but it's also learned and developed. I'm a big believer in that. Most jobs have some degree of leadership baked into them. I would just encourage those young leaders to continue to grow, take notes, watch, and develop all the while because before you know it, you're going to be in that seat.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Sean McDermott, and that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of

Business, home of the MBA program offered in four formats: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. Check out the William & Mary MBA program at wm.edu. Thanks to our guest, Sean McDermott, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.

Female Voice

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