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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 151: JIM RODDY – THE WALK-ON METHOD

Ken White

From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, this is Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that help make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. If you're familiar with college athletics, then you're familiar with the term walk on. Walk-ons are college athletes who, unlike many of their teammates, were not recruited by the coaching staff. They had to try out to make the team. And unlike many of their teammates, walk-ons do not receive scholarships to be a part of the team. Yet virtually all college sports teams at all levels have walk-ons on their rosters. Most coaches will agree that walk-ons are a special breed. They work extremely hard. They're focused. They tend to persevere. Resilience is a part of their DNA, and the spotlight doesn't matter much to them. As a result, they not only make the team but, in many cases, they make the team better. Our guest today says the pattern of behavior adopted by walk-ons in college athletics can also be adopted by professionals. And he has several examples from a variety of sectors to back up his claim. Jim Roddy is a former college basketball Walk-On and author of *The Walk On Method*. He joins us today to discuss his blueprint for professional success. Here's our conversation with Jim Roddy.

Ken White

Well, Jim, it's nice to see you. Thanks for taking time to join us on the podcast.

Jim Roddy

Thanks for having me, Ken. Great to cross paths with you again.

Ken White

You know, in the introduction, when I was telling our listeners what a walk-on is, and certainly, some of them know that. But how do you define walk-on when you're talking to someone? Maybe, isn't too very well versed in college athletics. What's a walk-on?

Jim Roddy

Sure. A walk-on is someone who endeavors to be part of a college sports team. But that college sports team, most everybody else, is a scholarship athlete. And so it's a person who says, I would like to do exactly what they're doing, but for no scholarship money and for far less playing time. So there's certainly an element of servant leadership and sacrifice right off the bat, just the decision to try to be a walk-on.

Ken White

What's the mindset of a walk-on? I'm assuming it's quite different from the teammate who was invited and has a scholarship.

Jim Roddy

Good question. For a lot of folks, it kind of runs the gamut. And that's part of what we had in our book. There are some folks who felt that they were overlooked and said, I think I can work my way into a scholarship. And many of them did. And not just a scholarship, but actually ended up as professional athletes. They kind of thought that they were overlooked. And then there were other folks who and that this is kind of the spot that I was in was, boy, what an amazing experience this would be. If there's anything that I can do to be part of this team, I would give anything in order to just to be along for the ride. But I think what everybody saw in the walk-ons that I talk with. At some point, it got to servant leadership that I was here for something bigger than myself, bigger than just my individual statistics. And so that was something that as I talk with these walk-ons, you know, I'd say after about ten interviews, I realized that servant leadership was really core to this whole walk-on process. Then I would start bringing it up to folks. They would say, you know what, I never thought of it that way, but it's so true. So that was one thing that was really revealing. And I think that is a common mindset among all walk-ons.

Ken White

And so, in your book, you interview people who were walk-ons, who went on to successful careers. How did you even begin to find people?

Jim Roddy

Good question. Thank goodness for Google, and thank goodness for John Saracino, who is from Erie, Pennsylvania. He's also from Erie, and he wrote for USA Today for many years. And he just gave me a whole bunch of guidelines in terms of what search terms in order to use. So I ended up interviewing 30 people for the book, but I must have gone through more than one hundred people that I was researching, reaching out to trying to find contact information. But I can say of all the folks who I ended up connecting with. Nobody had a bad story. I always thought I'd run into somebody who's going to be like, oh, this is pretty boring or lame or the same old, same old. But boy, at some point during every

interview, I was like, I can't believe the great story or multiples of stories that were behind it. So it was a lot of digging, sifting through dirt in order to get a lot of great gold nuggets.

Ken White

You realize there's some commonalities, and there's some lessons that a walk-on takes through life. When you reached out to these professionals, did they realize that, or did you have to plant that seed before they realized it?

Jim Roddy

For many of them, I did have to plant the seed because so like the gist of the book says, ordinary people, even underdogs and maybe especially underdogs, but ordinary people will accomplish extraordinary feats when their energy is properly channeled. So the way that the walk on's were behaving in their professional life today was more second nature for them because they were forced to behave that way just to survive as a walk-on. So for many of them, it wasn't an intentional act that they were going through and saying, oh, I have to have this walk-on mentality. It was like them looking around and saying, how come other people don't behave this way? I don't get it. How come other people aren't driven like I am? How come other people aren't showing up early? How come other people aren't trying to really push themselves and educate themselves and drive to get better and drive to help other people? So for many of them, it was they thought it was in their blood, and maybe it is, but it was a lot that experience, at the very least, enhanced their skills in their mindset.

Ken White

I was walking into work today with a colleague, and I mentioned that you and I were going to talk, and she's not a big sports fan. But she said, you know, I guess there are some commonalities between sports and business. Yeah, they sure are. But when you hear that, what do you think some of the obvious commonalities are? What are the lessons that that kids and adults take away from being athletes, whether they're a wrestler and or a track and field athlete on their own, or baseball, football, soccer, lacrosse, a team sport? What are the lessons?

Jim Roddy

Well, first, I'll just take a step back. When I was planning on writing this book, I knew that sports fans would find it entertaining because sports people love reading about sports. But I test-marketed a handful of chapters on folks who couldn't care less about sports. But they're in the business world, and their reaction was, this is great, can I have some more? And that's what I really knew, that I had something because they were able to see the connections that were able to be made. So I think one is, you know, the correlation is team goals over personal goals. If you're playing on a sports team and you're putting your personal goals ahead of the team goals, you're not a good teammate. Your team's not

going to be very good or be very successful, and no matter how talented you are, right, there's going to be all sorts of disharmony in that realm. And then there's also another thing that I see is from a correlation is by going through a sports team and this will sound terrible, but you have to tolerate people, right? You have people who were just thrust onto the team. You do not get to choose them. And you have a choice of quitting that team or tolerating that person. A lot of times with the coaches as well, like there's a coaching turnover. And so you're staying with the school, but the coach comes in. You have to learn how do I tolerate that person? Might be a cynical way of looking at it, but also, how can I adjust in order to make sure that things work with that person? And I was on a team with a guy from Sudan, from Croatia, a guy who graduated in three years, guys who struggled to go to class. You know, people from inner-city Detroit, people from Tipppecanoe, Ohio. Right. And so you had all these different worlds that are kind of coming together, and you got to learn to deal with that or not. And the same in the workforce, the better that you can adapt to the culture and the better that you can fill in gaps for people and be a great teammate for them, no matter what their position, their perspective or background, that's going to be successful in business as well.

Ken White

Any differences in that athlete who plays a team sport versus an individual sport in terms of the outlook at work and the lessons learned?

Jim Roddy

I would say yes. So there are things that you might not have to go through so much as a tennis player or as a track and field athlete than you would a basketball player who's, you know, forced to sit on the bench or forced to practice or determining playing time. So, yeah, I'd say the team aspect of it has, I'd say a little higher degree of difficulty. Not that it's easy for the other people in the individual sport, but there's certainly another dimension there from a team aspect that isn't from an individual aspect. Though the thing for the individual aspect is like, quite frankly, I was a walk-on for four years. People tolerated the fact that I wasn't very good. Right. But if I was in an individual sport, they'd be like, oh, this guy's not going to play like I don't want him on the team because he's not going to contribute at all whatsoever. Like, if you're a wrestler, you're getting pinned every match. That's not going to go very far. So there is definitely a give and take for both those opportunities.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Jim Roddy in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. The Post COVID World will require new skills and new approaches. Those skills and approaches are taught in the William & Mary MBA program. We offer four different MBA formats, including the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive, all taught by our top-ranked MBA faculty. The William &

Mary MBA will prepare you to succeed and lead in our new world. Check out the MBA programs at William & Mary. Now back to our conversation with Jim Roddy, author of *The Walk on Method*.

Ken White

In a previous episode, we had William & Mary graduate, who is a successful entrepreneur, and he was a tennis player at William & Mary, you know, what he was saying is those individual sports, it's all, you. No excuses, right? You learn you either step up and perform, or you fail, and you can't point fingers. So I think there's some great lessons, of course, in the team sports and the individual sports. So the walk-on method, you have steps as you as you go through. Let's go through those for our listeners. Your first step is take a big shot. Tell us about that.

Jim Roddy

Yes, so the subtitle for *Take a Big Shot* is that anybody can make a layup. And so one thing that we saw in common with these walk-ons in both their athletic career and their professional career is that they tried something that was really hard. They didn't look and say, boy, that would be great to do, but I'm only going to go halfway because that's probably more achievable, right. To say I'm going to walk on to the University of Florida football team, and I'm going to be a meaningful player is crazy if no one's offering you a scholarship whatsoever. But that was Chris Doering, and then later in his life for him to say, I'm going to make it as a mortgage broker. Right as the recession hit in 2008. That's crazy as well. But he's very successful with what he's done because he had that mindset about taking a big shot.

Ken White

Boy, and that takes guts, doesn't it, to do that to walk on to a powerful program like that.

Jim Roddy

There's a fine line between bravery and insanity. So the walk-ons tend to dance on that line.

Ken White

Your step to make a passion statement?

Jim Roddy

Yes, p passion, not f fashion. So it talks about preparing with passion, practicing with passion, and then playing with passion. So too many people wish that their dream is going to come true or they have a goal set in business, and they hope that it's going to come true. And they say, boy, when that moment comes. I'm really going to give it my all. But

you can't wish. You can't wait. We talk about you have to walk on to that dream. So what we saw very common is the folks who are successful. It wasn't just that they were gamers, but they did all sorts of preparation, and they practice, practice, practice, and improve their skills. They didn't say; I'm going to go with what I got. They really worked on themselves to improve themselves. They realized they had weaknesses in areas to improve and focus on those instead of making excuses.

Ken White

In passion also, does that mean passion for the sport and passion for the business that you're in as well?

Jim Roddy

Correct, yes. You have to find something that you say; I really want to do this, not ugh I got to get out of bed and painful. And, you know, you roll your eyes when this thing comes around, you have to make sure you're aligning yourself with something that really makes you go, really charges your engine, and really make sure that you have the self-initiative behind it.

Ken White

Step three, run uphill.

Jim Roddy

Yeah. So run uphill. We say that it takes longer to run uphill, but it makes you stronger. So we're taught to avoid obstacles and seek the path of least resistance. Right. For these walk-ons have been way easier just to play intramurals and not to actually try out for Division one team. And so what we're told is when there's an obstacle, you should shrink; you should close your eyes. You should get apprehensive right when things get difficult. But walk-ons don't avoid those obstacles. They actually lean into the difficulties of the situation, and they embrace the obstacles because they know on the other end of the experience, they'll be battle-tested. Right, going through that fire. So when you encounter a career challenge or business challenge, you see everyone around you like wishing the moment will pass. This is way too difficult. Show courage, jump headlong into the problem, convert it into an opportunity or a potential victory for yourself. Don't shy away from those obstacles. Really embrace them.

Ken White

Are people born with that ability, or do you learn that ability to take on tough challenges?

Jim Roddy

I'd say some people are naturally born with it, just like I would never jump out of an airplane. And I work with somebody who loved high altitude extreme, you know, jumping out of airplanes. Like, I could not do that. But there are things that can be taught. And that's what a lot of these walk-ons had as well, is it wasn't just natural for them that all of them are just these wired wound up. I'm going to go get them. Some of them needed to kind of kick themselves in the butt or throw themselves into a situation where they were under a lot of stress and had a lot of difficult coaching. And they practiced and learned that we had one person who the only reason who went to Cal State, Chico, is because it was a good party school. And the only reason he ran track is because he was bored. Right. And but the coach really pushed him. And now he's a very successful doctor and actually an instructor at a college in Tennessee. So these are not just born traits. These can all be developed.

Ken White

Step four, no fuss all MUS.

Jim Roddy

Yes, so no fuss means maintain emotional control and all MUS capital m capital u capital s. Maximize unique strengths. So it's very important that especially not just in the sports world, the business world, you control your emotion, especially the negative ones as you advance through your career. Right. If you get passed over for promotion that you thought you deserved, just shake your head for a moment in private and then resolve, I'm going to work harder. I'm going to get better and then maximize your unique strengths. A lot of these walk-ons in the book, almost all of them, they were shorter, skinnier, slower than the more gifted scholarship athletes. But they figured out what is my special ability or attitude that I could bring to the team in order to do that. A great example of that is Brandon Landry. He's actually the founder of the Walk On's restaurant, the sports bistro that's growing down in the southeast. And so he got cut from his high school team, and he said, I got to get better. He got cut from the LSU team. He said I got to get better. And sure enough, they had some injuries. They called him back, and he ended up working, and being a long-term walk-on on that team took so many experiences from it. Again, he spun off an entire business model that's called Walk On's, bistro, and restaurant.

Ken White

That that that attitude that I'm not going to lose attitude, it's so incredible to see, and especially college athletics, we see it over and over again. I just read about the point guard for UMBC. He's five feet two inches tall, and he plays like he's six feet two inches tall. You know what? That's all that's that step, isn't it? That's just going after it.

Jim Roddy

And it is a choice. You know, a lot of our walk-ons, Megan Lightfoot, she walked into UCLA rowing office, said, I'd like to try out, and they're like you can try out, but you're probably going to quit. This isn't for you. So she could have walked out with an excuse to say, okay, I guess this isn't for me. I guess it's fate. And she walked out and said, I will show you. We have that choice every day where we get rejected, or we have an obstacle. We have a choice to embrace it, learn from it, get better, maximize our unique strengths, or we have a choice to crawl under our desks and cry.

Ken White

Step five, make them throw you out of the gym.

Jim Roddy

Yeah, so one person misinterpreted this as your goal is to make them throw you out of the gym. I'm like, no, the emphasis is on them. Make them throw you out of the gym. And we say never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever quit. So what we saw with a lot of our walk-ons, both again from an athlete standpoint and a business standpoint, is they said, I'm going to take that big shot, and I'm going to keep trying until they throw me out. And once they throw me out, I'm still going to go back in. A lot of folks that we've seen from an athletic standpoint, a business standpoint, the reason they never achieve something great is because they quit before they even started. Right. They just assumed it wasn't for them. They just assumed a CEO job wasn't for them. They just assumed a growing company, a highly profitable company, wasn't for them. They just assumed entrepreneurship wasn't for them. But those who said, I'm going to keep trying, I'm going to try every angle until I get my goal. Those are the folks who actually end up succeeding. So, again, it's make them throw you out. We have a lot of examples of even when they throw you out. They keep going back and back and back until they get what they came for.

Ken White

And you say all five steps are within your power. Can you explain that?

Jim Roddy

Yeah, so none of these require some advanced degree, right. To take a big shot. It doesn't require some specialized skill. Right. And to prepare with passion. Right. It's the time that you put into it. You can develop preparation skills and things like that. But you don't need, again, those advanced degrees to control emotions or maximize unique strengths. So if you want to increase your knowledge, your skills, and your competence, and if you want to change the trajectory of your business or your career, you can start thinking and acting like a walk-on. There's nobody who stopping you from doing these things. And again, these are folks we profile. Ordinary people, right. Very few accolades among them. Everybody around them was bigger, faster, stronger, smarter oftentimes. But they figured out how am

I going to get it done? And they just kept coming back for more and more until they got what they wanted.

Ken White

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