

SEEKING THE EXTRAORDINARY

Ep 7 - Blitz of Inspiration: Player-Turned-Agent John Thornton

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[00:00:00] **Lisa:** Seeking the Extraordinary is sponsored by The Colony Group, a national wealth and business management company that seeks the extraordinary by pursuing an unrelenting mission of providing clients with peace of mind and empowering new visions of tomorrow. Visit thecolonygroup.com to learn more.

Michael: Welcome fellow seekers of the extraordinary. Welcome to our shared quest. A quest, not for a thing, but for an ideal. A quest, not for a place, but into deep inner unexplored regions of ourselves. A quest to understand how we can achieve our fullest potential by learning from others who have done or are doing exactly that.

May we always have the courage and wisdom to learn from those who have something to teach. Join me now in seeking the extraordinary. I'm Michael Nathanson, [00:01:00] your chief seeker of the extraordinary.

In today's edition of seeking the extraordinary. We're going to learn how a person can spend a lifetime preparing for and pursuing an elite career that the rest of us can only dream about, only to retire from that career and transform themselves so that they could do it all over again in a different, but equally elite career.

Today's guest is a top agent for the Jay-Z powered Roc Nation. One of the world's best-known agencies for entertainers, athletes, and other celebrities, from Alicia Keys, Rihanna and Shakira to Kyrie Irving and Saquon Barkley, Roc Nation's client list reads like a veritable who's who list, garnering it over a half billion followers on Instagram.

Our guest himself represents a first round pick from last year's NFL draft, as well as several other high-profile clients.

[00:02:00] But today's guest didn't start out his career as an agent. Our guest attended West Virginia University where he played football and was a two time all Big East selection. He was defensive co-captain and earned first team All-American honors from the Sports Network. A defensive tackle, he was drafted by the Tennessee Titans in the second round of the 1999 NFL draft and went on to play in Super Bowl 34 for the Titans against the St. Louis Rams. In 2003, our guests signed with the Cincinnati Bengals, where he eventually finished an outstanding ten-year career of terrorizing NFL offenses that included 303 tackles, 27 and a half sacks and four forced fumbles, along with a single year in which he had an amazing 74 tackles. Along the way he served as a defensive captain for his Bengals teammates. He's the father of three young men and an all-around great man, please welcome the [00:03:00] extraordinary John Thornton. Welcome John.

John: Thanks for having me.

Michael: It's great to have you. So I'm going to start by asking, do you agree with the way that I described your career in my introduction? Do you think of yourself as having had two principal careers that frankly many people could only dream of having?

John: I guess so I, I never looked at myself as a football player when I played, uh, even now I people ask me if I played, unless they know me, I'll say no, just to avoid , the, the full conversation, but I do. I mean, I look back on it. It was, it was, you know, you have to be very lucky to play professional in any sport and then to play as long as I did. And, you know, to be somewhat successful, being on some really good teams, some bad teams as well. But, it's a privilege. It's an honor to do it, but I just didn't take it that way when I played. And I guess that helped me in my retirement, you know, just not having that ego, where I needed to hear the crowd all the time and you know, things like that. [00:04:00] So to answer your question, yes, I respect it, uh, you know, I loved playing, but I, I felt like I was lucky. I was lucky enough to play 10 years before they figured me out or before my body started to break down.

Michael: Interesting. So that, that suggests that when you went to West Virginia, you might not have been thinking you were necessarily going to be an NFL player.

I mean, when, when one enters, you know, a great school like West Virginia, are you thinking at that point, it's a done deal that you're going to play football? Or what were you planning to do?

John: I went to West Virginia, and I was telling my kids this the other day, I went, to be a physical therapist. And it was a guy that came to my high school. I went to a military school from 7th to 12th grade, two hours away from home. So I was away from home since I was 11 years old.

Michael: So you lived away from home?

John: Yes it was like a little college campus. I was there for nine months a year. And so summertime I came home, and so this guy came to the auditorium [00:05:00] on career day and was a physical therapist. And I just liked what he was talking about. So I was like, I want to be a physical therapist. I got to school and I wanted to be a physical therapist. I didn't think about one NFL. And I remember after my first year, they said that I couldn't take that major because the classes were at 3:30, from 3:30 in afternoon on and that's when practice was. So there were like, you might want to change it before you get that. So I'm like, okay, I'll change to sports management or whatever I changed too. So that's yeah, it changed. And then after my, I think it was after my sophomore year, well, you know, we had a number one defense and I played against some really good players and I played well against them. And that's when I started thinking about the NFL. It wasn't until then. But up until that point, I was like, I'm going to be a physical therapist and I'm gonna graduate in three years and that, that was going to be my life.

Michael: What did you major in finally?

John: So I or things like that. Although we had great, just normal family vacations going camping or going in the family station wagon driving down to Virginia for summer vacations and things like that. But my sister came along, she did pretty good, my parents were by then established and she was a great addition to our family and she came along at an important time as it turned out since she was born just a few months before my accident.

Michael: Okay. And and you grew up in Rhode Island?

John: Sports Management. Now take it, I didn't graduate. I'm like a semester away. So I, I changed to sports management [00:06:00] and I had a minor in coaching. And so I did that and I was on pace to graduate. But when you go to the NFL, usually got to go away to start combine training. So the last semester that I had, I was supposed to finish up, but I went away to New Orleans to train for the combine.

Then I said, okay, I'm gonna come back and I'm gonna finish when I get a break. So after my fourth year, I know we're jumping ahead a little bit. So after my fourth year in the league, I was like, I'm coming back to finish my degree. So after that season, I scheduled the classes, I got my apartment, but my team went to the AFC championship in Tennessee and we probably thought we were going to Super Bowl and I missed the first three weeks of class. So I couldn't come back and take it, so I, I didn't go back then. But you know, I signed this huge contract and, so that, that's where I've been there every year, but I went to school to be a physical therapist and ended up being in sports management and now I'm in the sports management field, but I didn't, I didn't really get all of [00:07:00] the qualifications from school, so to speak.

Michael: See, this is interesting this is not the thing that I can learn about you from the internet. So, the way you talked about that, does that suggest that at some point you still want to do that and go back and just finish those final classes?

John: I do. I actually, if I could go back and do it over again, I would probably study like photography or like my hobbies are photography and, I mean, I know my agent, sports agents stuff is very important and I make more money doing that than being a photographer. But. You know, I will probably go back and do something different, you know, whenever I can slow down here. But my off season now is like when the business season is in football, so I gotta be available, but I'm definitely going to finish, just a matter of having the time to do it and wanting to really do it, you know, as I get older, my kids get older, I'm sure I have some time.

Michael: Okay. My sense is that you, you probably prefer to talk more about your [00:08:00] career as a sports agent, which I do want to get to but I'd like to just do a few questions about your time in the NFL, just because I think that they're relevant in terms of what we're trying to do, which is just to explore what it is that makes certain people achieve their greatest potential, which I would suggest that you've done and by the way, you've achieved such great potential yet you're still thinking about, you got to go back to school as if you need one more thing. Yeah let me ask you a few questions about the NFL. So I guess the first thing I'd like to hear about is if you could speak to one part of being an NFL football player and elite football player, what would you say was the best part of that?

John: I think the best part of being an NFL is, the NFL is a powerful machine, you know, I mean, outside of playing football, like guys that played football in high school, they dream about going to college. You know, guys that play in college, dream about going to NFL. And when you get to the NFL, [00:09:00] there's really, you know, you don't come in thinking you're going to be a Hall of Fame player. You know, some guys talk about the Pro Bowl, but you just try to exist in this space. And it's very competitive. You learn right away that you're playing with grown men. You know, sometimes guys are 10 years older than you, or, they're going to find a way to make it work. You know, they're playing for their families and they may have kids and wives and you know, all of those things and you're coming in as this rookie, just ready to get to this place that you've been dreaming about.

So you know, while you're dreaming all these things, somebody smacking you in the head and you know it's a physical battle at this point. So you grow up quickly and you just try to exist in this space and there's so many temptations, because you got money, right, and it's not even a bad temptation. There's just so many things that are available to you now, you know. You want to buy that house, you want to buy that car and you want to travel. You want to just go online and buy something. I mean it's this crazy thing that you go from being in college and not having [00:10:00] anything to be in an NFL, you know, and you're young and you don't think about it, you just focus so much on your football that you don't think about anything. So that I would say the best thing about the league is that there's just so many possibilities. You got to play football, the main thing is the main thing and that's where you got to keep it, and that's where the best players really focus on football, because that's the thing that drives the rest of the engine.

Because if you are Tom Brady, he sees that football is his vehicle to do everything that he wants to do in life to have this nutrition company, to have his marketing or whatever it is. But he said, I'm gonna focus on winning. It's going to provide me this other life. And then there's other guys that come in and don't grasp that, you know, they're not as good as Tom Brady, but they don't come and grasp it early on. So the NFL is a beautiful place. It's, you know, it's a very physical sport, so you gotta get everything you can out of it, but, it's like flying into Vegas, right? If you fly in at night and the lights are flashing, you feel like you're going to win. It's like, I'm gonna have a great time here. I'm gonna win some [00:11:00] money. I'm going to have this great time. But if you're not careful, you'll come home broke and things like that. And that's what the NFL is. When you're flying out of the league, when you're done, just make sure that you have something with you. To me, that's the best part about it is there's no limits to what you can do, but it depends on how you handle your business, you know, but I loved it. I loved the NFL. I enjoyed the locker room. I enjoyed the players. I enjoyed the competition, there's a draft every year. Team might draft somebody to replace you and there is a free agency every year. It's like a game of Survivor or the TV show Survivor, you know, it's like that every Sunday, but no, I enjoyed it, man. It's a great thing, but it's very competitive.

Michael: I like your reference to Survivor and I also like your reference to Tom Brady and that it raises a couple of other questions. You know, if you think about Survivor, I'll just say that, I think the average, I think I read recently that the average tenure of an NFL football player is just over three years and then you can actually see the breakdown for, for different positions and so I think the [00:12:00] 3.3 years actually includes kickers. And of course kickers have a much longer tenure on average, and you played for 10 years, so you didn't make it until you were 43 like Tom Brady, but you did make it into your early thirties. And for 10 years is pretty much three times the typical tenure. Any secrets to that? Was that discipline, was that luck? Was it just, taking great care of yourself?

John: It was a lot of luck. It was being at the right place, right team. You know, not having your coach get fired or, you know what I'm saying? Like, cause a lot of times you guys, they go to a team and a coach may get fired. Now they got a whole new regime in there that may run a different defense. So now you were drafted to do one thing, but they don't use you or your position on the next coaching staff. So you may be out of there in a year or two. So I was fortunate enough to never have a coach get fired while I was there. You know, you gotta have health, you know, as the main thing, you gotta be available. I had some shoulder surgeries and things [00:13:00] like that, but, yeah, I would say it's a little of skill, luck and chance. You know, I had a guy in front of me that got suspended for a year for a drug policy that allowed me to play a lot my second year, you know? And so when he came back, I had already had a year of film and you know, I mean, so if he wouldn't have got suspended, I might've been a backup for a longer period of time. So like I said, I chalk it up to a lot of chance, but you have to be available when your time comes. You don't know when it's going to come.

It's not going to be a flashing light, Krispy Kreme donuts let you know that donuts are hot. Like it's not going to be as a light that says, hey this is the time for you. Like you just, you gotta be ready when it happens and so that's the preparation. I always was a workout guy, always spent time at the facility just to be physically ready. But the other stuff, that business stuff, you have no control over the team. I remember the team wanted to sign Reggie White one year towards the end of his career. And it would've pushed, not pushed me out but I would've been a backup after that, you know. Fortunately, he [00:14:00] went to Carolina and not Tennessee, so I got to play more, but just things like that, you know. Reggie White was released, and he could've come to Tennessee because that's where he went to college, and that would've changed my career a little bit so I do credit it to chance, to love, but I also was ready and then when you get on the field, you gotta be able to play.

Michael: Yeah and I think that that's a big part of being lucky, which is just being, okay you may get a break, but are you ready for that break?

John: Yeah. When you get that, when that time comes, are you ready? And that's in life too. You gotta be prepared. You never know when someone's going to call you to perform it. You know, if I was the singer, you know, I'm in a restaurant and somebody is there, am I ready to sing for somebody that could change my life? You know, I can't say, okay, let me come back. Like, no, you gotta be ready at that point. And, um, you know, if you get an opportunity to play early on in NFL, can you play well enough that they want you to keep playing? So I had a little bit of that. I was a good player, I was on the All-Rookie team and, started on the number one defense my second year and I played well. So I did [00:15:00] play well when I got in, but I never, I always said that was a result of my surroundings and things like that. So when you don't take yourself as seriously, because it's a grind. It's a grind with everybody is a lot of good players and, you know, I wasn't super gifted or super physically gifted. So I had to just be smart, you know.

Michael: So I'm always interested when I speak to someone who's been successful in whatever it is they're successful at. I'm always interested in mentors and coaches.

And you did mention coaches, and you mentioned that you were fortunate enough to play for two coaches that never got fired. And if my research is correct, those were two pretty good ones, Jeff Fisher and Marvin Lewis. And do you have great relationship with them were they mentors to you? Did you have other mentors?

John: Marvin was probably more of a mentor because when he got the job here in Cincinnati, I was the first free agent that signed here when he got the job. And when he got it, it was a horrible place to be, you know, agents [00:16:00] wouldn't want to send their players here. They would just use the Bengals to drive up any kind of negotiations and use it to leverage. And. You know, I always wanted to play for Marvin. Marvin was the coordinator in Baltimore and that was our rival when I was in Tennessee. So we would always have the number one and two defenses. And so when he got the job at Cincinnati, I was like, I would go and play there, because of him and then, because you know, it was a four hour drive from Nashville and then Cincinnati is a four-hour drive from West Virginia where my wife was from. So it made sense for me on a few levels, but on the field, they weren't as good. But Marvin is a guy that I talk to to this day. We live in the same neighborhood about the whole time he was here.

And, I think he, he was thankful that I chose to come here and help him out a little bit. So we've always had that bond, that lifelong bond. And so Jeff was a player's coach for sure. He just, wasn't a guy that was going to talk to you a lot, and you knew that you understood it. We would joke he walked through the locker room and not say anything, but he was a former player and he let us do [00:17:00] whatever we wanted, as long as we played hard and was respectful and worked hard, you know, we didn't have a dress code or, you know, one of the veterans will come to him and tell them the players were tired, he would cut practice back. Like Jeff was very cool but yeah, I'm glad I got a chance to play for both of them.

Michael: So one more question that we're going to move off your NFL career and I have to ask it. So you made it to the Super Bowl [00:19:00] you guys didn't win, how do you think about that now? Is that, just a great accomplishment that you're so proud of because it's so hard to get there? Or is it something that you came so close. Didn't get to it. How does a guy, like you think about this?

John: You definitely see it more as an accomplishment now but when I played, it was like one of these things that, you know, when we didn't win and we got to the next year, we obviously felt like it was an accomplishment. And then we came into the next year and we had a better record, and we were a better team, so to speak, but we didn't have the same success. So we lost to that Baltimore team with Marvin as a coach. And they went on to win that year, the same way we were supposed to, they did. Same seed and everything. So now we had to see a team in our division that beat us at home in the playoffs, go on to win a Super Bowl. And they rubbed it in our faces.

It kind of hurt then, it hurts, you know, and then once as you get further removed from it, because I never made it back to the game, that was my rookie year when we went to the Super Bowl, never made it back. [00:20:00] You know, my fourth year we went to the AFC Championship but when I got to Cincinnati, we didn't come close. So now when I look back on it, I see it more as an accomplishment, you know, you never appreciate something when it's happening, you know. And you kinda got to get far away from it. And we were one of the last teams that the NFL, there was a week between the Championship games and a Super Bowl. Now it's two weeks in between.

Michael: Two weeks. Right.

John: So we were like, we played Jacksonville, we beat Jacksonville, flew back, had this big thing at the stadium and the next morning we had a meeting at like eight or nine to get all of the ticket requests in, and then we flew out to Atlanta at five o'clock. So we didn't get to think about it at all. So, just looking back on it now, it was tremendous accomplishment, and they reshew the game every year, Super Bowl week. You know, my kids know about it and things like that, but, yeah, it's sucked the way we lost, you know, the last play of the game, you know, one yard line. But I guess that kind of, that's down in Superbowl history now, you know.

[00:21:00] **Michael:** Even as a lifelong Patriots fan, I understand how hard it is to get to the Super Bowl. It's the hardest Championship game to get to in professional sports

John: To get to it and win it, yeah. So it's accomplishment and then, you know, things have to work out well, you have guys that get to that week and they, you know, you got to worry about, I know the Raiders had a center that didn't show up. You know, he went down to Mexico. I think the game was in San Diego and the center went to Mexico and didn't come back. You know, the Bengals had a guy that, had an overdose and some crazy stuff back in the eighties, late eighties. And so you, you get to that week and has a lot of success and you're at the top of your profession, the biggest game ever and you just never know how teams are gonna handle it. So you know, like I said, when you look back on it, you're very thankful for the opportunity to go there, but you know, it is, it's a tough game to win, you know, there's a lot going on. And you know, I think the veteran teams are the teams that handle the distractions are the ones that usually settle down the quickest and able to play.

[00:22:00] **Michael:** So let's move now into your, second elite and very successful career and as I said in my introductory comments, you are at Roc Nation right now, but I did some looking at your, your history and saw that you didn't start at Roc Nation. So maybe just give us a little bit of a path up to the point where you got to Roc Nation.

John: So I retired in May of '09. My last playing year was 2008, and then I was a free agent and not many teams reached out after my 10th year. It was a couple that were interested. Then the Lions reached out on the NFL draft weekend, which was in April and they offered me a contract, one year deal like a million point two, which was the sort of the veteran's minimum at that time. And, but before then I had started thinking about this type of career, you know, just working with players off the field. So I had to weigh that. I was like, well, do I want to go back and play? I need to gain weight you know, and I was, I remember [00:23:00] getting on a scale and I was holding the scale a little bit, so I could weight more. And then, you know, the nurse didn't see it, but I knew I, you know, I did, I had on this baggie sweatsuit.

Michael: For those of you who don't know, and I'm sure most of you don't know how much, John's official weight was, but I actually looked it up and I think I saw 297 pounds.

John: Yeah but I wasn't 297 then I was probably 280. I was 295 after my little, you know, grabbing of the scale. So I knew that head coach, he was my coach in Tennessee, so he trusted me.

That's why he would bring me, he was going to bring me in late. He told me I was gonna play and he wants me to be a leader. And he was like, well, you're 295, so you're perfect for what we want to do, you know, but I knew I wasn't I was 280. So I immediately flew home I told him I was going to play and I agreed to it and I hadn't signed anything, you know, and I'm starting to eat pasta and stuff and then I just didn't feel good. I'm like, man, I really want to start this business. You know, and I was comfortable with where I was financially and, I was like, I'm gonna have to rent an apartment and [00:24:00] fly my family up all the time.

I said after taxes, man, I probably won't even make as much money this year, you know, and all doing all of that. So I didn't play. I called my agent and was like, Hey, I'm a back out of this deal. I texted the coach and he was fine. So I was done. You know, I didn't think anybody else would call and I started getting into this business. And my first client was a guy that I played with. He was here at Cincinnati, he was firing his agent. And since I had four agents, when I played, I was that guy in the locker room that players would come to about representation about what they should do. And so he said, Hey, why don't you help?

So I said, cool. So I helped him find his next agent. He found the next agent. She was a local guy. And I told that agent, I'm a partner with you, 50/50, I'm bringing you a client. You really didn't know recruiting, you know, his contracts up soon. And we worked with it, I said, I'll handle them off the field you handle those contract and we split it. He was like, cool. And I think the guy got like a \$3 million deal in next year. So that was like, we split that commission and it might've been, or a two million dollar [00:25:00] deal. So it might've been \$60,000 commission. And I got \$30,000 so I'm like, Whoa, that's pretty good for one guy. And you know, those checks were coming in all the time. And so I had another guy like that, and I started getting paid money. Then I had a 1st round pick that my partner knew, you know, and I had started the company and everything. So everything was legal. And then the NFL changed the CBA where you couldn't split money with a non-certified person. So they didn't want guys like me in the industry unless I was certified. So I got my license, so that I can continue to do what I was doing. And I had a veteran agent tell me, listen, you know everything about the game, you might as well just be legit. So I said, cool, I'll do it. And I had a built in client list of like six or seven guys. Even though they were with other agents, I could claim them as well. That's when Octagon came around. They needed some agents and me and my partner, you know, we sorta merged my company with theirs and I was almost there for two years and then Roc Nation called me. [00:26:00] And that's when I went there. So, started my own little company. I was like a manager and I got my license, then I went to Octagon to Roc Nation. So it was, it was a seamless sort of transition, but I was jumping around a little bit until I found the right place.

Michael: So you knew you wanted to be an agent pretty early on after you retired?

John: Yes. I didn't want to do contracts. I didn't want to necessarily start out. I was, I started out as helping the players with their philanthropy. I felt like that would be, cause that I think that's why I stayed in the league so long because I was known as a good guy. On a team with a couple of guys that got in trouble. So the Bengals couldn't ever cut me because I was the guy raising money for the autism society. Like I was doing that way back in Tennessee. So I came here and I'm known as an okay player that they were paying a lot of money to, but I was a leader or a good guy off the field. So I just told guys, listen, if you're a much better player than me, just find something you're passionate about off the field. [00:27:00] And so I was helping guys get into charities and getting on boards. I was doing all of that. My partner was seeing the money. He was like, man, why don't we just do the agent stuff and make more money? And I'm like, I'm okay. But that's where the business started to lead to. Cause if you're working with players and doing all of the work you know, you might as well do the contract so you can get that money. Because the other stuff is very hard to come by, you know, marketing and all of those things. That's difficult you know.

Michael: You spent a little bit of time also as a college football analyst, radio host, but, no interest in going into broadcasting?

John: I had interests, so that's what I wanted to do when I was done but once I retired, I didn't get any calls from ESPN and I did a local show here, in Cincinnati, and then I called games for ESPN 2. I called a couple of West Virginia games and I liked that I didn't like the TV part, but I liked the radio, and then I had to stop because I was, I remember recruiting a kid and I'm calling his game, you know, so of course I don't want to hype the guy up while he's playing, [00:28:00] you know, and this was a quarterback of West Virginia. I ended up working with him. And even with the Bengals, I had a couple of players on the team and I was, I was doing their games. I was doing like a recap show and I knew exactly what was going on in the locker room, the good and bad. I knew the coaches, they were listening to the show. So it got to a point where I knew too much. And in most people in this industry, you know, that industry would love to know too much, but I just didn't want to, have a trust issue with any of my clients that, Hey, man, if I tell you that there was a fight in the locker room, you might mention it on the show, which I would never do. And like I said, the team, they all listened to the coaches and the front office. They listened to the show every week cause I was right. I was calling the game. I was calling what they needed to do to win, and then the fans loved it, but I just couldn't keep that up and do the player representation stuff because they started to mix.

Michael: So is it common for an NFL football player to become an agent? How often does that happen?

John: It's a handful of us. I would say there's probably about five to eight, that [00:29:00] played, like Tom Condon is one of the older agents in the business and he's been probably one of the more successful. He played in the seventies, I believe, maybe seventies or eighties. He's, you know, he's, he might be in a sixties right now. I'm not sure, but, a guy worked with at Octagon, he was off offensive lineman for about 10, 11 years. It's a few, it's probably a handful of guys, you know, because what they do is they give us an exemption. We don't have to have the grad degree. To become an agent. Like most people either have to, you know, have a college degree and then a grad degree, they make it difficult now just for guys to get in. But if you played seven years or longer, they're like, Hey, you understand that NFL, you probably have multiple contracts. You know the CBA. You're just as knowledgeable as somebody coming into it. And that's true. I've been in, when I took my test for the agent exam, there were guys that probably had a bunch of law degrees that were asking the craziest questions. They knew nothing about the NFL, and I did, but the smallest things to them, were big to [00:30:00] me but the biggest things to them was small to me. Like they were just asking all of these things, they're reading the book and they couldn't comprehend it. But with me, I'm like, I understand the practice squad. I understand second opinions. I understand if there's a lockout, I mean, that stuff was second nature to me you know. So there was some benefits to me playing a long time, but it was also a benefits to being able to understand contract languaging and things that I had to learn. So, that's, that's how I got to be in and that's probably why there's so few players, you got to play seven years or longer to bypass the educational requirements.

Michael: Interesting. Hmm. Interesting things that we lay people are learning and speaking of lay people, I think that many of us think that agents, you keep mentioning contracts, that agents mainly negotiate contracts, but you've said that it's a lot more than that. And I read a quote from you where you said "The best agents work hard at finding the right fit for their clients in all aspects of their professional lives. It's not only [00:31:00] about a contract transaction, but rather about creating the right environment in which a player and his business partners can succeed." Would you want to expound upon that?

John: Yeah I mean, I remember when I got certified and so I went up to the NFL offices. My first agent was a guy named Ray Anderson and I fired him after my first year. He ended up selling the company and becoming an executive with the Falcons and then he became Roger Goodell's right-hand man. So he was working with the NFL and now he's the Athletic Director at Arizona State. So he jumps around like I do but he was a good guy and I got certified I said, Ray, can I come up and talk to you? He said, sure. And I was asking him about the agent business. And he was like, the main thing is to stick to your principles. Like there's, you know, there's going to be opportunities to sign players. And you know if you sign with that player, might be a good player, but it can be a bad fit for you.

Or, you know, you don't want to have to do something out of your character to sign a guy, or you might, you just want to feel good when you sign a player and that player [00:32:00] should feel good about when he signs with you. But there are times where, you know, the talent will blind you to some off the field issues or some personality issues, you know, and the guy might not be on time or he might not want to pay you and you got to fight them to pay you.

You know, just little signs in there, he may not respect authority or just small things. Right. But you stick to your principles and you sign the guys that you feel like you're going to have a great working relationship with. So I think that's very important and I do see agents that will do anything to keep a client. A client will say, well hire my cousin, I mean, it's all kind of things that happen. So I do, I think you got to pick a player, obviously that's talented, but also a guy that, you know, you're going to feel good about representing, right. You're going to call their parents up and see how they're doing and vice versa, you feel like a family, even though it doesn't have to be that cheesy where, Oh, we love each other as a family. You want to feel good about your clients and [00:33:00] vice versa. Like my kids know my clients and clients ask about my kids. They follow each other on social media. Like I try to make it a special thing, even though that's not always going to happen. Every relationship's not going to last, you know, you're going to get fired and you know, sometimes you may drop a client because of something, but you try to sign guys that you see fitting not, not only on, on the field, but guys that will be a good fit off the field for you and your company, because at the end of the day, there's a lot of people that represent that player, you know. Not just me, a player has a manager, has a PR person, a philanthropy person, and they all want to feel good about the player.

Michael: Yeah, you had another comment that I thought plays nicely into what you just said. You said that "Most people won't tell a player the truth, a good agent does. Good agents never get paid for what they do best providing the benefit of their experience, giving good advice, preventing problems, eliminating distractions, building relationships. Setting up the [00:34:00] future if disaster strikes. To pay a tax deductible 3% fee to a good agent for all that is the best bargain an athlete will ever get." By the way I have to ask. So is that the deal, 3%? Is that what agents typically get?

John: mean it's, you know, guys now want it for a lot cheaper, um, it's actually negotiable.

Michael: I was trying to do some calculations about, about Andrew Thomas when you had a first round pick.

John: That was good he made a lot of money. That was great for him, you know. And it's funny. So he signed a four year, we're getting off the topic, but he signed a four year \$32 million deal. Right. He got \$21 million to sign when he signed his contract, he got that within the first two months. But the next guy at his position was the 10th pick and he signed a four year at \$19 million deal. So Andrew got, by being a couple of slots higher, his signing bonus was more than the second guy at his position, his whole contract, you know, and at four years. So I tell the guys all the time, like, you know, you always want to position yourself to be the best you can be.

You never know what that's going to be. [00:35:00] It might be your 4th pick versus the 10th pick. It might be the 6th pick first and the 9th pick, or it could be a different round. I mean, you could go in the second round and it's a lot of money, you know, guys don't see it that way, you know, Oh I'm a 1st round pick, but there was different variations of 1st round picks. No, these guys, they make a good amount of money, you know. And then some, when you start getting later in a draft, it's not as much in agents don't make as much. So that's when, to me, you need those great relationships the guys in the second or third round. I mean, that's really not, like you said, at 3%, you know, for guys making \$2 million, that's what \$60,000, and then you're paying for the training, you're paying for it, you know, and that's on us. We don't get that back. So we pay for combine training, pay for flights and food and travel. So that's where I say, if you're going to be doing that, it has to be a great relationship because you're really not, especially if I have my own company and that was the client, now I'm really depending on that guy, to not only be a second or third round pick, [00:36:00] hopefully, but then to make money in four years.

So you got to have this relationship where there's not much money coming in four years and how are you going to maintain it? Do you have to go to every single game when you got to spend \$2000 on the weekend to go? And so that's where I think the business of this gets lost because obviously agents will come in and do it at any fee just to get the player, but the everyday agent, that's not at a huge company, you know, it's hard to make it. If I had my own company, I wouldn't go after rookies like I do now. It would just be the veteran players that are changing agents that I would target. I wouldn't target the guy that I got to spend a hundred thousand on, pre-draft. You know what I mean? Those kinds of things, because the dollars just don't make sense if you're not a high pick. So I know that was off topic a little bit.

Michael: I'm picking up a sense though that you get a lot of meaning from your work, because it's not just about getting a big contract for your players, but it's [00:37:00] also about helping them live good lives and being prepared for the long-term and over and over, you know, I've read a lot of what you've, what you've said or what you've written. And that seems to be a consistent theme. I'll read one more thing that you said, you said, "an athlete is taught to think win, lose. But an agent needs to think win-win," I love that by the way. "An athlete is taught to think short term, but an agent needs to anticipate and protect for the longer term, including post-career when left without guidance and the support structure of a team, many athletes struggle."

John: That's true. And like I said, I probably want a few people that can talk to an athlete about how they come into career. And I tell them all, you're not going to have these meetings when it's time to retire. You're not going to have people knocking on the door asking to meet with you to help you in retirement. That's not happening, like people at that point, you're washed up and they don't, they see the money stopping soon. Will a person take a trip to see you when you're not [00:38:00] paying them? You know, am I going to spend \$2000 and go see you? I feel like I'm, we'll always be in contact with my players, you know, no matter what, if they need something, I'm always going to help them, but I try to teach them to be independent so that when they get into their second career, they kind of have an idea of what they're going to do.

And you know, a good thing about our company we try to help our guys regardless, you know, our company, their resources we try to just be there for them and not worry about how much things cost, but it's not like that everywhere. Some companies are really about the bottom line and okay, well, we can't go on this trip because we're only making this much, and that's what players need to know. You can charge somebody or somebody can charge a small fee for their services, but what are you really getting? And so I always paid my agents 3%, you know, I had no problem because I had good agents and they always did things for me, but life's about relationships. And I think players nowadays, that's the thing I want to teach guys, is that you're going to need these relationships when you're done, right. [00:39:00] You try to make them when you got this big name, because there's a lot of people that can help you in life and you don't want to be that guy that ignored people until you needed them. That's a hard, that's a hard conversation to have when you go to text somebody and you see that they text you three times and you didn't reply and now you really need something, I mean, you don't want to be that guy. So I try to teach him about relationships and, you think about the long-term it's not just, okay, how much do you gonna charge me? Cause that guy's charging me less. I want to go with him you know.

Michael: You mentioned a few times that you had multiple agents when you were a player, and you said something about that. You said you weren't a high maintenance client, but you made a change each time an agent promised something and didn't deliver or acted in a certain way while recruiting you, and then change once you sign on the dotted line. To me that just speaks of accountability and holding people accountable. Is that the way you see that?

John: Yeah, that's how I looked at it. And even now I look at it and so Ray Anderson, who's this accomplished guy, like Ray is [00:40:00] awesome. He went to, I think he went to Stanford, he's out there with Dennis Green and you know, he had his own agency, you know, he's a black guy in Atlanta, like doing well.

He had Marvin Lewis, his client, Brian Billick, Dennis Green, Tony Dungy. He had all these coaches like early on. He was one of the few guys, one of the agents that had a lot of prominent coaches and some good players. So the reason I fired him is because my rookie year, we go to the Super Bowl it's in Atlanta and that's where his offices are. And I didn't see him that whole week. You know, I didn't see him one time. And I saw one of my former agents that left his company. I saw him a lot. Like he would come over to my, we would go out to lunch almost every day. And now that guy was probably recruiting me, you know, I didn't know it, but he was a friend of mine. And so, but I'm like, man, how come can I call him Ray one night, and I was like, Hey, I want to come over to this part he was having, and he told me to catch a cab. And I was, I was slighted by that, you know, and I probably shouldn't have been there, if there was Uber back then I would have taken Uber, but at the time, I think he had some free agent guys that he [00:41:00] was trying to hang around and try to make sure that he was servicing those big-time guys that were about to get big contracts. But I just didn't like that. I just felt like me and him didn't have a relationship because one of the guys left. So I fired Ray like a couple, like a month after the Super Bowl. Good guy. Did he do anything wrong? Not really, but he didn't really cater to me at that moment. I'm at the biggest game of my life. And I don't see you in your city. If a guy comes to Cincinnati now and I don't see him that's on me. You know what I'm saying? The next guy, Ralph Cindrich was a prominent agent, top five agent in his career. Think he's retired now, but he was good. I hired him the next year, for the next two or three years and I was a free agent in 2002, he never came to any of my games. We really didn't speak that whole year. And again, other agent started recruiting me, like, he's not trying to get you new deal. So it gets in my head at that point and I fired him. Like, I feel like I'm a top free agent. You should at least come around. And then I fired another guy because he was supposed [00:42:00] to help me set up my charities. And he didn't, he told me he would, when he was recruiting me and I did it myself, you know, I was doing all of this stuff myself. So that's why I fired my agent. I still had to pay these guys when I fired them. But. I was just like, all right, if you're not going to do what you say, I'm gonna fire you.

And so that's how I was. I mean, this is the worst thing to get fired by a client. But if you, you know, as an agent, if you're not really giving your guys attention, But they were all good guys. And I have great relationships with all of them. Ralph's giving me information. Ralph's done articles to speak highly of me when I got into this business. Ray, he's been great with me to this day. He, you know, he recommended me to go to the Octagon when, when I merged with them, he gave me a recommendation. So, I fired a lot of guys. I did. So some of it was justified and then some of them was just the personal feeling.

Michael: So I'm gonna ask you a couple more questions and then we're going to go to our teaching moment segment of the show. I'm going to ask you a general question. As you look back at your I'm going to say careers, but really your career. [00:43:00] Do you think it was all according to, to some sort of plan or was it just, opportunities that presented themselves and you happen to jump on it? How much of it was planned and how much of it wasn't?

John: I mean, for me, I planned it. You know, I didn't see the outside. I mean, there was a lot of things that could have derailed it that you don't know about. Like I said, if the team signs one player, it could change your career. They sign a guy in free agency, it could change it. They draft a guy, or if somebody gets hurt or you get hurt, you know, I got hurt in Tennessee in my third year I messed my shoulder up. I miss 13 games. The next year the Titans drafted somebody in my position, a pretty high pick. They drafted him to take my place. So if I didn't have a great off season. And if I didn't choose to get the surgery, when I did, like, I could have played that whole year and got surgery at the end, but I wouldn't have been ready.

And I would have started the season as a back up, but I decided to do it after the fifth game and missed the rest of the season. So I could be ready soon as the off season started. So that was [00:44:00] something in my mind. I'm like, I'm not going to let them do what they want to do. This is where I'm going to help myself. So a lot of it was planned by me but you also need to be able to jump on those opportunities because teams don't have any loyalty towards you that way, even if they're paying you, they're looking for the day that they can cut you and save money and they have to pay you and they pay you, but then they start to look for reasons to replace you.

Michael: I wasn't going to go there with you, but you, you mentioned philanthropy a few times, and you mentioned autism as, as a particular cause you had been pursuing. So tell us what your philanthropic life looks like. What are your passions around philanthropy, John?

John: So when I played my first son, we thought he was autistic, but he wasn't, he had colic really bad. He has some sensitivity issues that mirrored autism, you know, like an autistic kid. So we learned about it. You know, my wife was reading a lot of books and she reached out to [00:45:00] the, the autism society of middle Tennessee and, you know, we found out that they didn't get any money from the state, right. And so they helped her out with information. She was like, we should make a donation. So I just did some charity events to raise money. And the first one raised about \$17 to \$20,000, then the next one did the same thing. And then I left and came to Cincinnati and I immediately called the Autism society and said, Hey, I'm going to do some events to bring you guys some money. I'm just letting you know who I am, blah, blah, blah. And they were like shocked that somebody called them and said, Hey, we want to help. So it was a passion of mine, more so than hers, you know, she was involved with it, but I was the one sort of driving it at that point, and I did that all the way up until probably a couple of years after I retired. And then I, started putting my clients from the Bengals into that space, you know, they had the name, and they had the recognition. So I sort of came out of it myself and pushed them towards it. So that, that was mine. I did events for about, from 2001, [00:46:00] 2002, up until about 2012. And then we raised a couple hundred thousand dollars over that time, but yeah, that, that was something that I wanted to do and I was passionate. I didn't think about it. You know, I donated a lot of my own money but, like I said, as I got going and as I got retired and had to do other things, it was hard to really have that same passion for it.

So like I said, I always positioned other players to be able to do, it guys that I was working with so the job still was getting done. It just wasn't necessarily from me.

Michael: Okay. Let's now move into our teaching moment segment. And here's where I'm going to ask you three questions. And our audience should know that John has not had an opportunity to prepare for this. He has not seen these questions in advance. So I'm going to ask you three questions and we're going to try to gain some wisdom from what you have to offer. Here's the first question. What single habit, technique or tip, would you offer that has helped you be your most extraordinary [00:47:00] self?

John: I would say habit is that I have a habit of getting up early and I work out early in the morning and I feel like that's something that I never stopped from when I was playing. Right. Because I was always competitive playing. So now my, I'm competitive with my, my scale, you know, I try to, I try to beat the scale every day and it wins a lot,

Michael: But now you want it to go down, right?

John: Yeah. I want it to go down. So I'm like, I used to, I played close to 300 pounds. I'm like, my weight today I was 262. Right. So I use that also it gets my mind going and I find that I return emails. I return calls and texts more so, either while I'm working out, or right after I'm done, because it's like, it feels like an accomplishment. It's easy to do right?. It doesn't take money or anything. So to me, I think business-wise, I get so much done in those [00:48:00] early hours. You know, when I get up early, I get my coffee. Planning, you know, drop my kids off at school, but I'm going to the gym. And then by 11 o'clock, I feel like I'm done with my day because I've talked to everybody. I need to talk to whether it's clients or talk to a team, from recruiting, I get very creative when I'm sweating and it's like, I'm thinking of all these things that I forgot and then I get done.

So it really just starts my day and it helps me. I'm not an afternoon person, like creative wise, everything is in the morning. So that that's my habit. And that also helps me get to bed early at night or helps me from keeping late hours at night, being out or doing whatever.

You know, even when I travel, I'll do a happy hour dinner, whatever. People are like why are you eating so early? I'm like, I want to be in my room cause I got to get up early to work out and I just know in my mind that's right. So that's something for me. A tip, a habit. I would just tell people if you don't work out, you know, there was one guy in my company he would work out at 4:30 every morning, and he would be in his sharp suit at seven in his office. You go in there, he's in his room, you know [00:49:00] but that's his thing. Have his little quest bar, workout and he's going, a million miles a minute. So some people that that's what really gets me going. So that will be my habit, my tip, I would pass on.

Michael: Excellent. And I can attest actually, I had the privilege of being at a conference that John was at and I'm a regular gym attendee and sure enough, every time I was there, he was there too.

John: Yeah. But it does get you going. It's something that keeps you on track. It keeps you accountable. And just for some reason, man, I want to reach out to people and get things done around that time. Then once I cool down, I kind of get back into my day, but I feel like I'm the most creative and the most aggressive to be able to reach out to everyone during that time.

Michael: Thank you for that. Okay. Here's the next question? Do you have a personal mission? What's John Thornton's personal mission?

John: My mission, my mission has changed. Obviously when I was playing, my mission was to play as long as I could. You know, you enjoy the money you make, you [00:50:00] enjoy the ability to play. And, my message was to help others, right. Philanthropy side. And when I got done it was to build my company. And now it's like, my mission is to be successful in every relationship that I have, whether it's 10 relationships or one. Right. And I'm talking about clients, be a role model for my kids. I really have a lot of balance in my life. People know like, Hey, when I have my kids this week, I'm not traveling. Right. I'm not. Unless it's something, an emergency or I have to do it, but I want to be at every game. I want a video stuff like that. The next week I'm out seeing clients I'm doing that stuff. So I, my mission is to have amazing balance in my life and to enjoy it. I don't let business upset me. You know, I don't let anybody else upset me. Right. I've accomplished a lot in life, but I think that's what helped me be successful was that I just had this tremendous balance and it helps me think clearly. So [00:51:00] yeah, I would say my mission changed from more of a monetary mission to. To having balance in life. And sometimes that helps you. That helps you attain more business, you know, when you're balanced and you're not chasing, you know, things sort of fall into place, you know, when you're doing the right things by, by the people that you're with, whether it's like I said, clients, kids, or friends. That's my mission in life is to be a balanced person, a good person. And I think things come to you that way. Cause people can sense it. People can sense your aura that you have about you and I just try to do right by everybody.

Michael: So speaking of clients, kids, friends, my last question is part of our teaching moment is what's the best advice you've ever given to someone else?

John: Wow. That's interesting. I do say this. So when people ask me about how to get in this business for how I got into it, I think I got into it because I didn't, I didn't appear to need anybody. And I feel like if you know enough [00:52:00] or if you're getting into any kind of situation. I think sometimes if people feel like you need them, or you need something from them, they'll be more hesitant to either teach you things or help you. Right. Unless they are just these great people that help but most people that are very successful in business are successful because they've climbed that ladder. They stepped on some people or just in a competition, like, you know, finished number one in their class. They don't always have time to help you, you know, it's not their job to help you. They gotta want to do that. They gotta reach back down and help. But with me, I didn't need anybody. I didn't need them financially.

And I knew what I was, you know, I was an expert in my field, right. So when I come to Priority Sports and I'm partnering with them, Rick Smith, who was one of my mentors agent, he would tell me things. Because I think because I was putting the same amount of money in as him. So he didn't see me as a guy that was, this guy doesn't have a license, he's a former athlete like this and that, no, he was like, all right, John this thing costs a \$100,000 he's [00:53:00] giving me a check for \$50,000. So he saw me as an equal and he would help, it kind of let their guard down a little bit. And even at Roc Nation, like I remember sitting in a room with Jay Z and all of these guys, and I'm a huge fan of Jay Z before I even met him. And so, but I just catch myself. I'm like, I'm in this room with these people, and even to this day. But it came about because they trusted me. Like they didn't think I was there to do anything other than what I said I was wanting to do.

So I tell people to kind of know your business, bring something to the table. Cause I think when you bring something to the table, People will be more open to helping you, you know? Cause they might think that, you know something more than them or they might say, okay, you know, you're cool. Cause everybody's naturally, you know, you put your guard up with strangers, you know, and I'm a stranger a lot of times I meet people, but I make people comfortable because I've really don't, even clients. I'm like, if you don't don't sign with me, I'm okay. I'm [00:54:00] fine. I love what I make in this, but this isn't gonna, you know, break my heart. And so I, I let them know from the jump, like, I don't need you, I want you, but I don't need you.

And that's how I enter into business with a lot of people and it's helped me get into doors. And, and then at that point, I'm a sponge. You know, I try to learn as much as I can. So that's the advice that I give even people that want to get the agent business. You gotta have players. You gotta have access to players. Unless that person is super nice why would he help you? You know, you gotta make it easier for someone to help you so to speak. And they're all nice people that will just help you. But there's not a lot of them. It's not a lot of them.

Michael: What's the future for John Thornton? You're still a pretty young guy,

John: I'm young, let's see what happens. You know, my kids are getting older. My one sons in college and my other one just got his first scholarship offer last weekend. So he's excited, my nine- year- old is, is better than both of them. So he'll probably, he says he's going to get offers early from everybody.

So, you know, I really enjoy being around the kids and, you know, work-wise, I enjoy [00:55:00] the clients that I have and, I want to do a little more in this industry over the next four or five years, see where it takes me. I enjoy everything that I'm doing right now. And it's, this is where I'm meant to be. And, and try keeping that balance, you know, because I wake up every morning and happy. And so there's nothing really taking me from that, at this point. So I just want to keep it that way. I don't want to ever feel like I have to do what I do. You know, I always want to feel like I want to do it. That's how I stay at it.

Michael: Thank you, John. Any parting words?

John: No man, I just wish everybody success in whatever it is they're trying to do, but always be willing to learn. I listen to a lot of podcasts myself. I listen to a lot of audio books while I'm driving. I just listen to people. You know, even if I'm not in that field, if it's a chef or a photographer or different things, I just like to listen to tutorials. Just so you can learn something every day and that's, that's just what I do. So I, I enjoy stuff like this or just, you never know, somebody might listen to this, they're not even trying to be [00:56:00] a sports agent, but it might help them in their field, you know.

Michael: I'm with you on that. There's nothing that equates to being a lifelong learner. That is, to me, one of the great

secrets of success.

Ladies and gentlemen, that is the extraordinary John Thornton. And thank you to our sponsor. The Colony Group., The Colony Group is a national wealth and business management company with 15 offices across the country that itself seeks the extraordinary as it pursues its unrelenting mission of providing clients with peace of mind and empowering their visions of tomorrow. To learn more about The Colony Group and how it manages beyond money visit www.thecolonygroup.com.

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