



LEADERCAST

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Clear Eyes, Full Heart

An Interview with Coach Mack Brown: The Extended Version

By Ken Coleman of OneQuestion.com

The acclaimed television drama Friday Night Lights made the statement “Clear eyes, full hearts, can’t lose” famous. It defined how a team played the game of football, but on a deeper level it was a rallying cry for life.

Mack Brown coaches in Texas, the same state featured in the television drama. The National Championship winning coach of the Texas Longhorns, Brown embodies the famous statement and takes it to the next level. Join us as we peek in on a discussion between Ken Coleman and Coach Brown and hear how purpose is formed.

Coleman: Purpose means a lot of different things to a lot of different people. What does purpose mean to you and what has it meant in your life?

Brown: In my life, and currently, it would mean that you do everything in your life for a reason. My granddad said you always do the thing that you know is the right thing to do, and you have a plan to get there. My purpose right now at Texas is to make sure we bring in coaches and players that have earned the right to be here and who will embrace the philosophy that I and the university have about integrity and moving forward in the right manner.

Additionally, my purpose is to make sure that our players have an experience that is fun, but also helps prepare them for life after football. And of course part of our purpose with the football team is to win as many games as we can because the players can’t fulfill the goal of having a wonderful experience without winning.

Coleman: You’ve outlined a few of the things that fulfill the purposes of being the head football coach. But beyond being the head coach at the University of Texas, what do you feel is the purpose of Mack Brown the person?

Brown: I feel my purpose is being the head football coach right now at Texas, to reach out and be a great role model for young people, male and female; to make sure that I can have a positive influence on young coaches and show them that you don’t have to grab and scream and cuss and hit kids and break rules to win football games.

And at the same time I want to use the job that I have, which is very influential in this state, to reach out to people who are sick, families in need, and charities, and to give back to society a lot of the things that I’ve been given.

Coleman: Describe the process or the time period in your life when you really began to realize that your purpose was to be a football coach and influence young men in their lives.

Brown: I first went to Vanderbilt to be an attorney. But I decided that I didn't want to stay in school that long, plus the massive amounts of reading did not appeal to me. After that I actually looked at being a geologist—it's interesting that I ended up being in Texas where we have such great geologists with the oil fields.

But as a young person my granddad was the high school football coach and I used to ride on the bus with him. He ran the recreation centers after that and then became the superintendent of schools, so I was coaching little league baseball and junior high basketball at a very young age. Coaching seemed to be part of my DNA.

After I left Vanderbilt, I transferred to Florida State to be around Steve Sloan, who had a great influence on my life. After being around Coach Sloan, who was the offensive coordinator at Florida State, I realized that what I really wanted to do all along was coach and be around young people. It was at Florida State that I realized I wanted to become a coach.

So, I became a graduate assistant and the freshman coach at FSU. Following that, I moved to Southern Miss. I've been coaching ever since.

Coleman: You mentioned that you have a desire to help young men figure out their life and purpose beyond football. Purpose can be a scary, mythical thing for a lot of people in life. How do you relate passion with finding your purpose? How important is passion in that process?

Brown: If you don't have passion, you don't have anything. It's hard to find sometimes. I'm not sure whether you're given that through your faith, but I know you're given it through your heritage, through your family. My dad, my mother, and my grandparents established a great work ethic within our family when we were little. We always had to have jobs, we always had to work, and we always had to be accountable in everything we did.

I won't hire a person who does not have passion. I wouldn't try to sign a player who doesn't have passion. And the day that I feel like I don't have passion for this job, I'll try to change and put my passion somewhere else because if you don't get up every day excited about what you're doing, then I don't think you have a chance to do it correctly.

Coleman: What process do you lead players through, as they search for that passion in life, to prepare them for life after football?

Brown: We tell our guys the minute they get here that we want to help prepare them for life after football. You don't know whether it'll be your freshman year when you get disinterested or injured. We've got some wonderful examples of young guys that never got to play here that ended up having great lives after football. We constantly tell them that one of these days, God's going to take your legs away and time will take your football away and you have to be prepared to do something else.

So, as they're preparing for their football on the field, we're asking them to prepare for their life after football off the field. I'm constantly getting letters and pictures from guys who played for us at one time and who now have families, talking about the influences that our programs have had on their lives.

Coleman: In terms of a football team, a sports team, or a business or an organization, how do you and your coaches address that collective purpose with each new team?

Brown: You really have to reinvent yourself every spring. You start over. It's not like the NFL. You have new leadership, you have some goals that are similar to each team, but you have to start with a theme. You have to start with trying to figure out who your leaders are.

I went to Iraq two years ago and spent time with generals. The generals told me that you teach leadership every day. You don't recruit leadership and you don't expect it to happen; you teach it. And that's something that's very important.

As we came back we started working daily to determine who our leaders were. The generals even told us that if a young man is not a good leader you need to start trying to develop him toward becoming some type of leader because the guys on your team will either end up positive or negative. The more that you can pull into the positive area then obviously you have a better chance to be successful.

Coleman: Is there one key moment or experience that really shaped you in your growing success as a leader?

Brown: I would say there's absolutely one defining moment that helped me with my leadership, and that's when we lost Cole Pittman in 2001. He was a young man who just turned 21 years old, he'd just gotten engaged, he was going to be a sophomore as a starter on our team for the first time. He was returning home after spring break when he missed a curve—his truck flipped, and he died.

For the next three or four day period, I felt the importance of being the head football coach at Texas and trying to manage a tragedy; trying to make some sense out of it for our parents who were afraid of losing their children. It affected me as a father with children; I had to try and make sense out of it for me. I felt the weight that came with trying to figure out how to help Cole's parents.

How do you call a father and tell him he's lost a son? How do you walk downstairs and tell a football team that was getting ready to start spring practice that one of their peers was not with us anymore? There's the funeral and the memorial service that stick in your mind for life—you never forget. And even as you move forward it lingers, it shapes you. That experience changed my life.

Coleman: After playing all the roles you described during that experience and you're alone in your office reflecting on it all, what was the big lesson that you walked away with?

Brown: Well, I was telling my wife Sally what an awful day to be the head football coach at Texas and she said, "No, what a wonderful day to be the head football coach at Texas because you can have an impact on how people feel. You can put some sense into something that's very awful and they need that right now. This is one of the times that you can have a huge impact on other people's lives." That was my big lesson.

Coleman: We see young men coming into sports programs, many of whom do not have father figures, or fathers at all in their lives, and yet they come into big time sports with great expectations, and then discipline problems happen. Explain the tension between second chances, showing grace and mercy. When is it too much and you have to make the cut and say, "You've run out of chances, it's time for you to move on"?

Brown: It's a very difficult decision, and everyone handles it differently. What we try to do is handle it on an individual basis. I try to make sure that the team and the purpose of the team is bigger than the individual, but then when we get back to dealing with the individual who has messed something up, I try purposefully to make sure that we're getting a punishment that fits the crime, and that when he's 40 years old hopefully he will remember that we asked him to be more accountable, we took some things away from him, we did some things to hope that he would remember when he was 40 and not make the same mistakes.

Coleman: Every leader experiences highs and lows on some level. How do you balance that as a leader, with your fans, with the expectations, and with your coaches and the team?

Brown: What I've learned is that the perceived pressure at Texas is pride. And our folks want you to do what's best; they want you to do what's right. If you're making mistakes they want you to admit them and they want you to move forward and fix them. And I'm a fixer. That's what we do. So we ask our players and our fans, let's forget for a moment what happened in '05 when we won the national championship, let's forget a moment about '08 when we were hundredths of a second away from playing for the national championship, and let's forget '09 when we actually played for the national championship and lost. If we're going to temporarily put those out of the way then let's for sure forget 2010, and try to put some sense into the things we need to change and get back on track.

Coleman: If you could just share one piece of advice to young leaders everywhere, what would that one thought be?

Brown: My one thought would be to follow your heart, follow your passion, and always do the thing that you know is the right thing to do. Never look back. If you gather information and you make the best decision at the time with all of the information that you have, and you do it in the right manner, I don't think you ever have to look back.

Coleman: That's a great statement. And shows such balance. So now I want to ask you about the leadership tension that exists in letting your position coaches make the decisions that you've hired them to do, when you're the head coach, and you're on the phones. What is that tension like when overruling or using a veto in a pressure game situation?

Brown: I tell the guys that number one I hired them because I feel that they can do a great job. And I expect them to do that job, understanding that I sit in a different seat that none of them have sat in at Texas. I see the big picture better than they do, and I will make big picture decisions. And when I do tell them that I want something done, it needs to be done. They need to trust me, and it needs to be done with a positive attitude. They understand that. I also tell them that if I'm asking them to do their job and I'm giving them the leeway to do that, if they're not doing it properly I will try to help them. And if at some point they can't do it, then I will have to change them.

Coleman: Competition and high pressure is best modeled in big time sports, I think. So explain to leaders how important rivals or big time competition is all the time, every week--how does that make your team better? How does that make our organizations better?

Brown: When you're at a place like Texas, you're at a place like you guys are with Chick-fil-A; you're in a position where everybody's always chasing you. We have a little saying around here: "you can't ever take a lazy step because all of our competition circles our game every year, and we're going to get their best shot." About the time that you're feeling really comfortable and good about yourself, that is a place where complacency can step in. If your competition ever sees just a little bit of a crack, they're going to come after you. You've got to keep them feeling like they have no chance.

Coleman: Coach, who are some of the other coaches or leaders in other industries that you have looked up to?

Brown: In this state specifically, I would have to say that Tom Hicks, who owns Clear Channel, the Dallas Stars, and the Texas Rangers, has been great to me. President Bush, Jr., has been fun to be around. He was the governor when I first got here and he worked out in our weight room. Don Evans, who is the chairman of the Board of Regents that hired me, is in the oil business but he was also the Secretary of Commerce for President Bush. Tex Moncrief is an oilman from Fort Worth who has been a guy I bounce things off of. Red McCombs is also involved in Clear Channel, and he owned the Spurs, the Denver Nuggets, and the Minnesota Vikings, and our business school is named after him. He has been a great friend and great mentor. There's a guy named Lewis Pierce who is 94 years old now, and he started the Houston Rodeo. He owned a heavy equipment business and still does with his three sons, and has been very instrumental in my life since I've been here. There's a gentleman named Bill Duval who owns Lincoln Properties, which is a huge development property. He has been a mentor and a great friend. And probably as much as anyone here has been Joe Jumel. Joe is a prominent lawyer out of Houston that has been a great confidant. And obviously when you start looking at the coaches, Coach Royal has been like an older brother to me here; he's been unbelievable. And then Coach Paterno and Coach Bowden have been great friends and mentors. Then there's Coach Dietzel who I mentioned before when he was the athletic director at LSU when I worked at LSU. But there are a lot of coaches my age that I've worked with that are friends and have been fun. But those guys would have to be mentors along with my dad and my granddad.

Coleman: Let's talk about those peer-to-peer relationships because big time college football is a small fraternity. And we hear every once in a while in the media of relationships where coaches are spending a little time together sharing knowledge back and forth. Who are some special peerto-peer relationships that you continue to learn from?

Brown: We're lucky that for the last 20 years, Sally and I have gone on a trip with Nike. They have 30 coaches and wives each year that go, and we spend a week together. So you have friends across the board. Jim Tressel has become an outstanding friend. Frank Beamer's been a friend for years. As I've mentioned, you start looking at Coach Bowden and Coach Paterno--they're a lot of fun to be around. Lovel Edwards, Spike Dykes, R. C. Slocum, Grant Taff--these are guys that I've coached against but been friends with for so long. There's so many people that I can pick up the phone and call when I've got an issue that will just spend countless hours trying to help me.

Coleman: Coach, as you look through history, leaders that you emulate that are no longer with us and have had a great impact on history, who are a few of those leaders that you admire and try to emulate?

Brown: I think the number one would be Coach Wooden at UCLA in basketball. I think he is one that I have really patterned my style of coaching after. He's a guy that I thought really got it. And he got it in a classy manner.