

Q&A with Director of Player Development Ray Jackson

By Ben Swanson

DenverBroncos.com

June 29, 2015

With coaches handling player development on the field, you're the one helping them off the field. What does that entail?

Basically what I am in a nutshell is a life skills coach and I provide guidance whether it be spiritually, or whether it's mentally. Any type of support that these young men need making that transition from college to pro to life itself, that's what I do in a nutshell whether it be financially, whether it be returning back to school to finish their degree or if it may be even enhancing their degree by getting their masters or a trade.

So being in this role for a decade after your own NFL playing career, what do you view as the most difficult part of the transition to the NFL for young players?

I think the fact that they're rookies at life. For the first time in their lives they're going to have a job. For the first time in their life they'll be paying bills. And as a man in life when you turn 16 it tells you you're of age to drive. When you're 18 they say you're of age to graduate. When you're 21 you're of age to drink responsibly. But there's nothing that tells you how to be a man, and especially a young man that's in his 20's making a 50, 55-year-old's CEO money and making those types of decisions right now. So I think that's probably the toughest thing for these young men coming in as well as probably more of them is gaining their trust. I think that's probably the toughest thing is getting them to trust you and believe in you, because at some point through their life, someone has let them down. So for me to gain that trust and for them to feel that they can allow me into their intimate life, that's the toughest thing.

When I was at the Scouting Combine in February, I listened to Lorenzo Mauldin talk about the trouble he had putting trust in coaches because men in his life had betrayed him so often as he grew up bouncing from foster home to foster home for much of his youth. How do you connect to players who have trouble trusting people?

Honestly what helps me – one, first of all, is being a Christian man, and myself having experienced some of the varied things these young men will experience – it's not like me reading a book and giving advice. No, I've lived it. I know where they're coming from and so that alone gives me the experience and gives me the know-how to be able to handle and talk to each one of the guys.

One thing about player development—which now our new title is 'player engagement', which consists of Prep, Life, Next. And the Prep is basically providing high schoolers and college student athletes with sports and tools to assist them in their life and then the Life is providing current NFL players with personal and professional development, and the Next is, again, that challenge of no matter what the circumstances that they've come from, they've beat the odds by making it into the NFL. And so just getting them to continue down that path once they leave the NFL and they get ready for life, real life. This game is awesome but it only lasts 3.4 years—the average NFL career—3.4 years gives most of these guys to the age of 27, 28 years old, some 29. That's a lot of life to live.

For young men making the jump and preparing for the NFL, what hurdles or dangers that they'll face though they might not realize it?

I would say this. The commercial a few years ago they came out with "Are you a doctor? 'No but I stayed in a Holiday Inn Express.'" That's kind of like the lifestyle of the players. They get here and all of a sudden

everyone believes that they have all the answers because they're in the NFL, because they make X amount of money. So now they're thrust into making big decisions, family decisions, decisions that they've never made — decisions that the average 20-year-old would never have to make, they're making right now. So I think that's the toughest thing for them is they don't understand that.

And again, they're rookies at life as well. From elementary to high school to college, everything has been so structured for them and for the first time, they're off really on their own, paying their own bills. One of the big things I always talk to the young guys about is they can't go to H&R Block like mom and dad, grandma and grandfather, aunt and uncle. H&R Block won't get their taxes done, and that's not a knock on H&R Block. They get taxed in every city that they play in. That's something that these young men don't know. That Nike deal that everybody looks at like 'Oh man, he has a Nike deal!' — he has to pay taxes on that Nike deal. So those are some of the things that I think they get caught up in, the limelight. This day in social media, it's not like when I played. As a matter of fact just about 15 years ago you could do things. No, everything that they do, everyone has a cell phone so everyone knows what they do. There is no privacy.

Previously you were with the Steelers, where you implemented the Career Transition Program and the Club Life Skills Seminar. What did those two programs aim to accomplish?

I think it gets them the opportunity to experience and see some of those experiences that they may encounter before they do it. It's a lot like life, and you alluded to this when you first started. The coaches get these players and they get to go get rep after rep after rep and being an offensive player or a defensive player, whatever their respective position is. Well life, that's what it is. You don't get repetition after repetition whether it be paying that bill, whether it be doing the right thing all the time. It is hard to fall to temptation. So basically that's what the life skills seminars are, giving them repetition after repetition of seeing what life is going to be like in the NFL. And that's what we try to do from May at the time they're drafted until they leave.

The difference in lifestyles can vary enormously from players who have earned a second or third contract and have stability and those trying to work their way up from the practice squad. What challenges does that raise?

First of all, let me start by saying this: On each team there's probably only, out of 32 teams, there's only one to four guys out of the 60-man roster that can legitimately retire and never ever have to work again a day in their life. But with the media and friends and family, they would lead you to believe that every player would never have to work again.

That's so far from the truth.

So getting those young men, that practice squad guy, that seventh-round guy, that third, fourth, fifth[-round guy] and first year guys, you have to understand: your money doesn't match that veteran's money. Those guys are going on second and third contracts. He's still on his first. And that's the tough thing to get them to understand, that your money doesn't match their money. They have long money, what we call. You have to earn that, you have to get to that second contract. One of my rules of thumb is no big purchases in the first year. No big purchases. Put it off. If that great deal is there right now, trust me, it'll be there next year and then it'll look even better because you're going to have more money put away to be able to do those things. Always plan that this game is not forever.

The emphasis in your position will always be on helping rookies get acclimated to the NFL and so they have a smooth transition, but what how do you help the veteran players?

Most of these guys have been playing football since the age of probably 8 or 9 years old. And the one thing all of us must remember is this is what you do, it's not who you are. Who you are is that young man your mom and dad raised to be, or your grandmother raised you to be. Your character, that's who you are.

Football is just what you do and I think if you get the older guys and the young guys, especially if you can get them starting young, you start to understand this is just what you do. It's not who you are. You're blessed to be able to play a game that so many would love to play because it's a young man's game. It's not an old man's game, trust me. There are no older guys playing in there. It's a young man's game and so the sooner you can understand that, especially for older guys too, you can start planning.

But at the same token, I say this: When you probably started, you wanted to be in media. Once you got there, there wasn't somebody saying that 'Hey, man, you might want to start on your second career plan.' No, this is your career plan. For football players it's not a career. A career is something you do 20 or 30 years. The body only has so many reps in it before it shuts down before father time catches up to you. And so you have to prep your life of knowing what it is you want to do. And it's a lot like college students. You get there and you start off by saying 'I want to be a criminal justice major.' By the time you get to the third or fourth year, [you say] 'That's broad, I want to change it to something else,' and that's kind of what these players have to do mid-career is find something that they're good at it because they all have tangible skills. They're competitors, they're willing to go off a ledge for you – so they have every intangible accolade that they could possibly have to run any corporation, but it's just getting them the grasp of it and getting them to understand what it is their hearts desire outside of football.