

Fireside Charla Episode #18 Soft Landing After College with Justin Stewart and JR Tolver

Transcript

De la Torre: Welcome to the Fireside Charla, I am so excited to welcome two Aztecs for life to chat about life after graduation via zoom. Since we all remain in quarantine due to the Coronavirus homestay restrictions. We may not have the crisp studio sound we're used to, but I know that anyone listening will benefit from this timely conversation and leave inspired as you contemplate the future in light of these challenging times. Joining me today are Justin Stewart and JR Tarver, two former scholar athletes who have gone on to have rewarding careers by developing a going pro vision and mindset. They continue to invest in our students by sharing their journey from SDSU to their professions. Justin and Jr. Welcome. Let's start with introductions. Can you share a bit about yourselves, how you met and what you currently do? Let's start with Justin.

Justin Stewart: Yeah, thank you very much for having me. First foremost, congratulations to you as well for being the ninth president and the first female president for San Diego State. It's an honor to be on this interview with you today. Again, my name is Justin Stewart. Aztec alum, graduating class December 2002. I walked on at San Diego State to play football and that's where I met my good friend JR. We were one of three receivers in that particular class and I believe there were 20 some odd defensive backs that we had to go up against almost every single day so JR, and I got a chance to really get to know each other as we went rep after rep after rep after rep. And we just built a really good friendship and bond over that timeframe and over and as the years have gone on, we have maintained a great friendship and we've been able to really bring our business and professional mindset, that going pro mindset together and have been able to partner with San Diego state's athletic department to offer some advice, career advice, financial advice, life advice to help students prepare for the next step in their journey. I am a staff talent acquisition specialist. Or as I like to say, I'm a self proclaimed talent acquisition Jedi Master. I'm a big Star Wars fan if you couldn't tell. I work for a company called Illumina in UTC area. We are the world's leader in genetic sequencing. We are currently sequencing the corona virus and working on breaking down the virus itself so that we can understand and hopefully be able to develop, not so much our company develop a cure and a treatment but be able to provide the information to the organizations that do. Amazing organization and be a part of I really feel lucky to be part of that team. But from a town acquisition perspective, I've been

doing this for about 12 plus years, and it's given me an opportunity to look at the bigger picture from a career perspective and see how many gaps there are for individuals that don't do this for a living. That can be challenging in terms of interview preparation, resume reviews, I'm kind of blanking on a few other things but just really preparing for that next step in your in your career journey. I've had an opportunity to to be a part of that I've had a chance to lead seminars, trainings etc. And it's really given me a knack and a, an affinity for for helping those that are looking to further themselves in their career. Married for about 10 years we have one little guy, his name is Casen and he turns five in June. It's been an absolute phenomenal journey. I met my wife on match.com so it does work. We are flourishing. Right now with the situation obviously we're we're doing what we can but at the end of the day, we are truly blessed and just making the best with what we have. That's a quick tidbit on me in a nutshell. Like I said before, Star Wars fan, I love Marvel movies, I play a lot of rec sports, I'm still an avid flag football player, softball player, big San Diego State alumni and fan. And again, I just feel really lucky to be here having a conversation with you and with JR, and Maria, so thank you again for your time.

De la Torre: Well, wow, Justin, what an exciting pathway and now JR. Can you share us a little bit about your journey? And where what you are doing now and again, your connection to Justin?

JR Stewart: Yes, ma'am. Will like Justin said, President de la Torre, thank you. Thank you for having me. It's been awesome watching you galvanize the San Diego State Community amongst everything that's going on in San Diego State. So it's really an honor to be on the on the podcast with you. As Justin mentioned, he and I we play football together at San Diego State. We came in as freshmen together. I had an opportunity after playing football at San Diego State and receiving my business degree in 2002, to go to the National Football League, which was a lifelong dream dream of mine. I played for the Miami Dolphins and the Dallas Cowboys and the Carolina Panthers. So I spent four years in the National Football League playing for three different teams. And I have to give all of the credit to my teammates, my coaches and the institution that is San Diego State that gave me that opportunity. After leaving the National Football League, I became an athletic director and a head football coach at a small private school in Newport Beach, Sage Hills School. And that really ignited my passion not only for the sport of football, but for education. And that was something that I wanted to do as well, was to give back to the community community in a meaningful way, but also in a way that could support the lifestyle that I wanted as a professional. But I've always had an entrepreneurial bug in me. So I spent six years coaching and

teaching at the school and I decided to step off the ledge into entrepreneurship. And I'll tell you Principle de la Torre my first, my first round of entrepreneurship wasn't a great one. I got my butt kicked in a in a venture that I started. But I learned a lot. And and that's really what kind of brought me back to San Diego and San Diego State. So today I'm the proud father of three children, two boys and one girl, married to my beautiful wife Mariel we've been married for, for almost eight years. And I'm currently the extra sports analyst for San Diego State football. I've done that for the last three years. And it's really just been an honor being back in the community and helping and giving back to the program in any way that I can.

De la Torre: Wow, what impressive journeys. Now I know a lot of people are going to wonder, you were both scholar athletes at SDSU. And I think oftentimes we wonder how do scholar athletes transition from being students, to professionals, because we know how much time you put in the field and in the gym, and of course, all the excitement in the games, but eventually the graduation hits and our scholar athletes need to walk out that door into a brave new world. So what was that like? And what would you say to a scholar athlete that's graduating this year in 2020, and now has opened the door into an uncertain world? Justin, you want to start?

Justin: Sure, I'd love to start. So it's, it's great that you're actually bringing up this topic because I had a chance to conduct a LinkedIn seminar I want to say about three months ago with some of the graduating seniors, some of the juniors and the sophomores as well. And it was great to talk with, I don't want to call them kids because I don't want to age myself number one, number two, it'll be disrespectful. But it was great to talk to some of the students about the next step in their journey and starting to prepare as early as possible because one of the things that I've really come to learn from the time that I graduated went to the work world is the work world has become so much more competitive than it was when I was looking for a job. That the sooner you start, internships, building your resume, creating an awesome LinkedIn profile, networking, building out your plan for success, in a sense of where you see yourself growing from a career perspective, what kind of companies are you interested in? Do those company values align with yours. The sooner you start building out that plan, the sooner you'll see an opportunity opened up for you, to make a career. I would tell students, my favorite tool and I'm a big advocate of LinkedIn. I see that it's one of the most visited tools right now, especially with what's going on with COVID-19. But it's an opportunity where the students can gather information, they can share their thoughts, they can share content that aligns with their career path with their passions, and really

attract employers like myself to their profiles to say, you know what, I think that Maria could be a great fit for this internship, I think she could be a great fit for this process technician position or this process engineer role. There, there are tons and tons of students that are currently active on LinkedIn. So the sooner that you are active, networking, and creating that great content and profile, the sooner you started gathering, grabbing that attention of those employers and creating that new career path for yourself. So my first career advice would be number one, identify what kind of a role you would see yourself working in two years, four years, 10 years from now. Try to connect with a professional or even professionals preferably a mentor that's in the in a position like that, and start to understand their journey so that you know what's ahead for yourself so you can start gathering the skills and experience needed to be successful. I would say, start building out your, your LinkedIn profile, it's your living resume, it's an opportunity for you to bring your professional and I like to use the word professional not professional, it's a combination of your personal and your professional personality, and really show who you are as a professional through social media. That right there will give you an opportunity to start building a network, creating a career path, as well as the plan that you can stick to to start enhancing your career opportunities. So those would be a few pieces of advice. I can give tons and tons more but I know we're kind of limited on time and I don't want to take away time from JR sharing some of his knowledge as well.

De la Torre: JR now it's your turn. What ideas can you share for these 2020 graduates and our scholar athletes that are walking out the door in this environment, post COVID?

JR: You know, I would say first and foremost, most changes start with acknowledgement. And you can't, you can't measure or change something without acknowledging that it's about to happen. So first and foremost, student athletes or athletes and students, make sure you realize that this is a big change, you know, you're going to go from being a student, to now trying to build a bridge into your profession. It's going to be a big change, do not run from it, acknowledge it. And once you acknowledge it, put a plan behind it. We have a saying in football that says, If you fail to plan, you're, you're you're planning to fail. And I think that's one of the biggest things about this transition is understanding first and foremost it is and will be a transition. It's not going to be like any other thing that you've done before. So it's going to take a lot of planning on your part to make sure that you handle this transition as best you can. And that's coming from somebody who transitioned from playing college football, transition to pro football, transition to being an employee. Now transitioning to being an

entrepreneur. The transition and the change is always going to happen. But if you take the time in between those transitional spaces, you sit back, you relax, you take a deep breath, and you manifest and you write the things that you want to see come to life. If you take the time to do that, you are more successfully transition than if you didn't.

De la Torre: Wow. Um JR, I want to follow up with what you you learned in football, if you fail to plan you're planning to fail, because it really dovetails well with one of our alums Jordan Evans, who has done tremendous work in the area of aerospace engineering and the Mars rover. And one of the things she said, doing work in space and in planning is that failure teaches us more than success. And it sounds like for both you and Justin, failure has been an important tool in your own personal development. Can you give me your thoughts on how you've handled adversity and how that has made you a more effective leader, employee, person, husband, a community member?

JR: Yeah, that's a great question. And I believe sports transitions very well to to failure. You know, we celebrate one of our one of our heroes, Tony Gwynn, and Tony Gwynn batted 394 as a professional baseball player. Obviously an Aztec alum as well. And what we don't talk about is the 600% or 60% of the time that Tony Gwynn did not hit the ball. He did not make it on base. And what I would say about failure is, failure teaches us what worked. And it teaches us what didn't work. And it puts us in a position to improve on what we didn't do before. So don't run from failure. Don't expect not to fail. I mean, I think all successes come with trials and tribulations. But that's why it's so important to create that vision up front. Because when you create your vision up front, all failure is is a teacher. It teaches you what do you need to do a little bit differently so that you can take the next step forward and get a little bit closer to that vision. And that's one of the things that I think that I would I would be very very adamant about, is to make sure that don't take failure as losing, take failure as a lesson and use that lesson to continue to track towards the goals that you set out for yourself.

De la Torre: Wonderful thought. Some additional thoughts? On failure as being a tool?

Justin: Yeah, I would say from a career perspective, I know I've failed a few times. And those different failures have made me a better employee, has made me a better recruiter, they've made me a better husband because it's made me vulnerable. Which I think vulnerability is something that, as from a human trade perspective, people look at it as a weakness. But I feel vulnerability, once you're really able to identify your

vulnerability, you can use it as as as an asset as a weapon because it allows you to be human and allows you to understand what you need to do to improve upon, it allows you to do just like what JR said, to identify what you you've done wrong and how you can improve. You know, it also brings that human element into shows that you're open, you care and that you want to get better at the end of the day. If you don't have that trait, then obviously, it's a whole different ballgame. But at the same time, every single leader that I can think of, every single business owner from Jeff Bezos, down to say JR, for example, have all failed in some point in their career, but they haven't seen that failure as something that put them down, discouraged them, they saw it as an opportunity to come back bigger, better, stronger, and they've done just that, ie JR's success, and then of course Jeff Bezos speaks for himself. But every single leader that I've interacted with, can tell stories about how they made mistakes in the office and their career and their marriage potentially, and how they are able to rebound and by looking at those failures, they were able to make adjustments that now I've turned them into successes. De la Torre: So, JR, one of the other areas I want to focus on is how can our graduates adopt a going pro mindset. And how can it help them as a face to future?

JR: So, you know, I'll jump right in, and I'll talk about what it means to go pro. It means that you're no longer sitting in a classroom for free. You're no longer sitting in a classroom and paying to be there. going pro means that the shoe is now on the other foot. And somebody is going to pay you for your expertise, your energy and whatever skills you can bring to the table. And that is exciting stuff. And so when I say what does it mean to go pro? I think that it's about understanding money, understanding how money works, understanding how one should approach their money, creating a philosophy for your money and understanding what you're going to do with it and how you're going to use it. Again, if you fail to plan you are planning to fail. So if I give you a billion dollars or \$100, and you don't have a plan for either one of those increments, you're probably going to end up in the same space. And that's going to be a bad space. And so one of the things that for me that I think of going pro mindset means to create a philosophy, create a philosophy for yourself on how you're going to approach the money that you're going to get for the skills that you're now giving to the world. And understanding that that philosophy is going to drive your actions. Keep in mind, there's only five things you can do with money, you can spend it, save it, invest it, insure it, or donate it. That's it. So my philosophy on going pro is to create a system around how you want to attack your money, and therefore define your goals and make sure that your actions and how you apply approach this newfound compensation that you have, how that approach is going to get you closer to your goals and not steer you away from it.

De la Torre: Justin, as you know, we have some amazing student athletes that's graduating and I know that JR shared with us this important mindset, particularly in the financial area of really understanding and making plans. And yet oftentimes, you'll see that there will be this hiccup in life, especially at that point of graduation, where even a student athlete who plans to go or hopes to aspire to get into the pro leagues, they don't quite make it. And when they don't make it, they don't have a backup plan. Tell me how you would advise a student in that difficult decision and who may not have had the foresight to understand the importance of financial planning. And direction in career?

Justin: So I'll do my best to answer that question. I think this is one that that would really align with JR's expertise, but just from a from my perspective in terms of just talent acquisition, and the things that I've talked to the student athletes about recently is, everybody's going to go pro, right? Doesn't mean you're going to be a professional athlete, you could be a professional recruiter, you could be a professional business owner, you could be a professional salesperson, you have to as JR said multiple times, you have to have that plan. So I know that athletes plan is to go pro, but the chances of an individual actually making it to the big leagues, just from a statistic statistic perspective, is very low, right. So you have to have that plan B, and you're attending a university you're going after that degree for a reason. It's time to put together that plan B and identify if something were to take place, if I were not to make it in the league, if I were to make it in a league and I get hurt for example, and say my career unfortunately comes to an end, not in the fashion I was planning. Do I have a fallback plan that can still allow me to grow personally as well as professionally? You know, I think that these are conversations that student athletes should start having more so around maybe their sophomore year, maybe even their freshman year. So that they can start building that plan out with their coach with their career, or their admissions counselors, even their parents so that they can stay on track to earn a degree like JR did, and have that backup plan for when they do finish with their career. From a professional standpoint, they do have something that they can fall back on that degree, that entrepreneurial mind ship, or just a skill set that allows them to find opportunities with organizations across the world that will find them as a valuable commodity from an employment standpoint. Athletes make some of the best employees out there period just because of the go getter mentality, that driven mentality. You know, sticking to a a regimented schedule. Accountability is another big one. We're all we all hold ourselves very accountable to making that play on the field. It's the same thing, you know, making that presentation in the office, making that correct hire. You know, so there's so many traits

that can be transferred from the field, the court, the pool, whatever their their particular habitat might be, to an office space, that the sooner you start putting together that plan, the sooner you can make that transition, and you can see your career blossom outside of your professional, you know, your professional aspirations from from a sports perspective.

De la Torre: So JR, I want to shift to you with a similar question because, as a university president, I want all my students to get their degrees and always have, even if they become, you know, incredible stars in the field, or on the basketball court. I want them to have that degree. And that's my aspiration, because I do think wherever you go, that's something can that can never be taken from you. So what is your advice? In that, again, looking at all the wonderful skills that our students come in our student athletes, and recognizing that plan A may not happen, but Plan B might be even a better path.

JR: You know, I would say whether Plan A happens or whether Plan B happens, you're still the boss. You know, you're still the CEO of your vision. And it's still up to you to make your journey go the way that you want. Now, there's an old African proverb that says, "if you want to go fast, go alone. But if you want to go far go together." And I think that in this transition mode, as you're making plans, do not feel like you have to do it yourself. Matter of fact, be open to getting the information that you need to bring other people in to help you get to where you want to go. And as the President you probably see that on a daily basis. You know, you're the one who's out in front. But at the end of the day without your staff, put into the places to do the jobs that need to be done to make the university go, then your presidency, your vision, is never going to come to life. So for people who are transitioning, whether it's an athlete, whether it's a business owner, whether it's an employee, it starts with that vision. And if your vision A turns into vision B, your position remains exactly the same. You're the bus driver, you're going to be the one that drives the bus down the road to those goals. Now, that doesn't mean that you don't need a co pilot, or you don't need a coach or you don't need a mentor. Somebody can help be your eyes outside of your eyes and take you where you need to go. So that's the other thing that I would say. Is if you are unsure what to do, find somebody that can help you, find a financial coach, find a family coach, find somebody who cares just as much about your success as you do. Put them in a position to help you and continue to drive the bus.

De la Torre: You know, JR and Justin it all your comments really remind me of how we oftentimes don't realize and when Plan A fails, it's always much better for us in the long run. I remember when I was graduating from college, I thought to myself, I really wanted

to be a lawyer. And I realized, gee, I didn't make time to and didn't know the ropes that I had to take certain tests like the LSAT, because nobody in my family hadn't become a lawyer. And I didn't know that path. And then I had, I had time just by chance to talk to one of my faculty, who said to me, why don't you think about going into economics and get a master's degree and you know what? I'm a president because that president just stopped that faculty member just stopped me out of Plan A, which I wasn't going to make, because I didn't know what to do, and then pointed me in the right direction to plan B. And that was a far better outcome. But I think the other thing that you shared is, I don't care if you're the president of a university or the coach of a major team, you need to have a team, a team behind you to help you through that, through those successes, as well as those those challenges. So I think you're absolutely on target on the advice. I wanted to end with asking you to maybe provide some brief words of wisdom to our graduating seniors. Again, recognizing that this is a historical moment. You know, they're not going to have the normal graduation. They're going to have the virtual graduation and they're walking into a world that none of us who are alive today have ever lived in, in post pandemic society. So I want to start with Justin. And then end with JR. So could you share some some words of wisdom to our students?

Justin: Absolutely. You know, just kind of piggybacking off of your story. I remember when I graduated from San Diego State I, I mean, I wanted to go pro football as well. That was that was my goal. But I came to the realization quick that I just didn't have what it takes to make it to the league, unfortunately. But I also didn't have a Plan B. I knew I didn't want to stay at home, I knew I didn't want to move back home, I know I didn't want my dad to help me find a job. I wanted to be my own independent, my own man, like JR said I wanted to be my own CEO. So I just went on to the work road with no plan and just was kind of throwing resumes out and just apply for this apply for that. And I found a lot of struggle and challenge in trying to find an opportunity and I was very frustrated because I just didn't have a plan. I didn't have direction. I finally turned to as JR pointed out, I turned to a mentor and I asked for help, which was my father. My dad is or former was formerly the director of budget and reimbursement for Cedar Cedars Sinai Medical Center. So he knew his stuff extremely well. But from a pride perspective, I wanted to do it myself. So one of the things that I would say to students is don't be afraid to ask for help. Don't be afraid to say can you help me build out this plan? Because I know you've been in this situation before. It will alleviate a lot of headache, frustration, it'll give you direction. You will it will give you purpose as well, because you can turn to somebody who's been there before. That will help out dramatically. You know, by turning to my dad, he he encouraged me he helped with my resume. He also helped me identify what I what I really like to do which is connect with people. Long story short, my first job I landed just on a whim at the end of the day, and I got I got

lucky without a plan, really lucky and I walked into the job, I didn't know anything from a 401k, from filing my taxes to fill out an I-9, I didn't know any of that stuff. But I was just going willy nilly. And I didn't have a mentor at the time to turn to until I really reached out to my father and I asked him for help. So the thing that I was saying is, don't be afraid to ask for help, ask for guidance. Ask for help to build up that plan. You're not in this alone. You have to have your team as you as you mentioned earlier, that can really help put together a great plan for success.

De la Torre: Okay, thank you so much. JR, could you answer words of wisdom to our listeners and particularly to our students who are graduating in this environment?

JR: Yes, ma'am. I would say there's a there's a quote that I love. And it says "how you do one thing is how you do everything." And I love that quote, because it tells us that we're all uniquely made. We all have internal things inside of us that, that make us tick, that trigger us to, to want to do more, to want to be less, to want to be successful, to be fearful. We're all uniquely wired. And so the first thing I would say is, if you have the ability to go out and do some sort of assessment on yourself, who you are what makes you tick what you care about, please do it. There are so many assessments out there that will give you great insight into who you are as a person, and therefore what type of opportunities you should be pursuing. There's disc assessments. There's enneagram assessments. There's just a lot of different assessments that if you sit down, take 20 minutes, answer 100 questions, you can kind of start frame working, your production around your purpose and your passion. And I think that's so important. I think that's a step that that we often skip over in transition. We don't take the deep breath and decide who we are, what we care about, what are the things that we can do to put ourselves in position to be the happiest and to be the most productive? We just go out and start applying for jobs and sending out resumes, and asking to get a job. And we find ourselves in a position where we very quickly realized that when our passion and our purpose aren't aligned with what we're doing productively on a day to day basis, we get burned out. So my first piece of advice is to know yourself. Figure out and do everything that you possibly can talk to the people around you. Ask them about you. Ask them what makes you great, what makes you weak. Take that feedback, take some assessments, understand who you are. And don't ignore it. Be intentional about taking that feedback and applying it to a discipline that you're truly going to care about and you're going to bust your butt for because it's passion and purpose driven, not production driven.

De la Torre: So I want to thank both JR Toliver and Justin Steward. For this wonderful

Charla for our graduating seniors and our athletes who will be going into the new world and going pro. We're so fortunate to have you today, Aztecs for life, and look forward to seeing you in the future. In other Aztec activities, go Aztecs. Thank you so much.

Justin: Go Aztecs

JR: Go Aztecs.

De la Torre: I want to close today's Charla with asking James Tarbox who oversees San Diego State University's career and internship center, so that he can share his words of wisdom about ways to help our students transition into their new professional careers, which also include many of the ideas that we have discussed today, including assessments that will help them find their passion and their future careers.