

# Athlete to Executive: Translating Leadership Off the Field



**Tom Brady**

Partner, Consello & 7x Super Bowl Champion

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As an athlete, when I woke up each morning, I would take a moment to reflect on my upcoming day and try to prepare myself for whatever might lie ahead. This daily ritual helped me to settle into a frame of mind that allowed me to be at my best, both mentally and emotionally. I would look at the person in the mirror and remind myself of what I wanted that reflection to reveal: someone living with integrity and doing the best they could with the opportunities they had. As I've transitioned to my career beyond football, that credo remains the same, even as I've had to learn to play again and lead teams in new arenas.

Throughout this journey – from athlete to businessperson – I've had to be strategic about balancing new opportunities that are in line with my experience versus those where I've had to embrace new skills. A lot of this shift comes down to a willingness to greet new situations with humility and an open mind. That approach always includes asking questions, pushing myself out of my comfort zone and relying on the people around me to challenge me to be better every day and to grow at a faster pace.

What defines success is rarely black and white, because achievement can be measured in a lot of different ways,

but throughout my life, my personal success metric has always boiled down to Me versus Me: Did I give my very best? Did I treat people the right way? Have I been a great teammate, parent, son, brother and friend? What can I do to be better? You see, success is not always measured financially or with a championship ring.

My journey beyond the playing field has meant translating the leadership skills I learned as a football captain and seasoned athlete to lead new kinds of teams working toward different goals. Fortunately, the core skills required to succeed in this new arena remain largely the same, and the leaders who are effective in capitalizing on these skills can bring a winning mentality to any organization (or team).

#### — *Navigating Personal Growth* —

I readily acknowledge that my journey has been an unconventional one. There are not that many people who have had an opportunity to play in the NFL, win championships and have a decades-long career as a professional athlete. But the skills it took to get to this place – discipline, determination, curiosity, resilience, caring, teamwork and humility – are consistent with the qualities I see in the best leaders in the business world. They are also the skills that have enabled a successful off-ramp from football and transition into a new phase of my career.

One thing that has been clear throughout this pivot is that I need to be comfortable being uncomfortable because many of the situations I have faced in the past few years during this transition have been new to me. Learning is a real-time process.

So much of life is making mistakes even when we are trying our best to do things the right way. Having humility in these situations – whether it's battling for a starting role as the rookie on a team or figuring out how to pivot your business in a new direction in the face of headwinds – means that you can achieve continuous improvement. Among the greatest leaders I have observed, they all embody a similar mindset: relentless curiosity and an unquenchable desire to learn – because what we know is very limited and what we don't know is limitless. Great leaders understand that the learning never stops, and that with each situation and each person we encounter (whether positive or not), there is a lesson to be learned and wisdom to be gained.

Human beings are often motivated by two dominant emotions – fear and desire. When you are driven by an intense desire to achieve, failure becomes your worst nightmare. But failure is often the best teacher, providing the most valuable lessons. I always had the desire to succeed, and I learned how to deal with the fear of failure. These two emotions have been paramount in helping me to grow and find success in mastering my life's greatest priorities.

In football, successful players need to think strategically and evaluate large amounts of information quickly. Finding success in those few minutes and seconds on the field means committing to a thorough preparation process, including lots of due diligence, and then synthesizing the data in order to analyze evolving situations in real time. Coincidentally, these are tactics that have been important as I've transitioned into business, including being able to pivot Autograph from an NFT platform



to one that supports fans embracing their love of sports or merging the TB12 and Brady brand with NOBULL. Being strategic about when and how to act, especially in rapidly changing environments, has been a consistent theme in both my football and business careers. There is no greater mistake than to double down on a bad decision. If you feel like it's time to pivot, because it's the right thing to do, do it immediately and don't let your ego get in the way of changing direction in order to achieve success.

Growth doesn't happen overnight – it takes work. In "Outliers", Malcolm Gladwell asserted that it takes roughly 10,000 hours of thoughtful practice to achieve mastery of a skill. I tend to agree: It has always been consistency, repetition and doggedness that have allowed me to achieve on the football field, and it's a formula I continue to utilize as I build my post-football career.

There are also a lot of people I've taken inspiration from as I've moved off the football field, and I look to them for different reasons. There are

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former athletes like Roger Staubach, Steve Young, Peyton Manning and Michael Jordan – many of whom have become personal friends – who each have shown me different paths for what life can be like after sports. I’ve also had the opportunity to meet lots of different CEOs and founders who have deep expertise in different business sectors. Regardless of who it is, I try to go into conversations with my ears open and learn as much as I can.

— ***Building Trust and Establishing —  
a Team-Centric Approach*** —

When you have been at an organization for a long time, you become one of the drivers of that culture and are foundational to the success of the business. The requirements for success shift because not only are you doing your job, but you are also trying to help others succeed. That means showing up with humility, a team-focused mentality and a strong work ethic to support those around you.

When you’re the example, you want others to look at you and be able to

say that you were there early and stayed late, that you cared about your teammates, and that you worked toward the team’s mission every day. When you gain that trust, people will instinctually start to follow your lead, because they believe in your ability to help guide them and the whole organization in the right direction.

There is an evolution to this kind of leadership. Young professionals start their careers by doing their jobs the best way they possibly can. Then, when people see that they are doing well, they want to give that person more responsibility and see how they handle it. Finally, you get to a point where you develop enough trust in that person that they get elevated to an even bigger leadership role. There comes a point where there’s implicit trust that this person can do their job and you can give them a lot of freedom to be a leader in their own way. Everybody has their own unique process toward achieving success, however, universal values like determination and resilience really matter. Things don’t always come easily, and you’re not always given the most until you earn it. That’s the point – you have to earn it.

When I first started playing professionally, I had to gain the trust of my teammates through my work and through my ability to perform when it mattered. I had to say what I meant and do what I said to gain trust from people. When I did that, my teammates jumped on board because they could clearly see the direction they were going and could play their roles to support the journey toward success.

We don't operate alone, especially in times of transition, and that's why I've always been about teamwork. The camaraderie was why I fell in love with football at a young age. I worked hard to be the best where I had certain strengths, but I could also count on others to be the best in positions where they could thrive.

One of the things that I love about business is that I get to be part of a team of driven individuals working toward a goal. Developing these relationships so that we all work better together means we can grow our skills as individuals and our prowess as a team – and improve faster to achieve our goals. We all have our blind spots. We all have our quirks. We all have our flaws. But we also all have our strengths and the ability to contribute. We must surround ourselves with people who are smart, hardworking and who hold us accountable in areas where we are not as strong.

———— *Helping Others Grow* ————

I think it's easy to get trapped by the mentality that if people work hard and hit a ceiling, then that's the limit of their abilities. Unless we hold them accountable, a lot of people get stuck in this purgatory of mediocrity, never

able to reach their full potential. The middle is a very comfortable place for people to stay, but it's important as a leader to push those we lead out of their comfort zone, because that zone is only the lower limit of a person's true potential and hidden greatness. The funny thing is, most people don't know how far they can push themselves. And that's the best part about team sports – finding people to push you to points you didn't think you could reach. That is the true joy of teamwork.

I believe that every strong leader must be comfortable with providing honest and constructive feedback to those they lead in order to unlock the best performance. They have to work to understand the people they are leading and identify how to communicate effectively to best relate to them and build camaraderie. For example, I found the best time to share feedback with many of my teammates was after a win when their emotions were in a good place, and they could be receptive to comments on how they could improve.

If you are a leader, you need to be able to relate to those you're working with and they need to be able to relate to you. You need to understand exactly what their motivations, fears and desires are to help them achieve their maximum potential. I've worked with a lot of different people over the course of my career, and I've learned that I need to vary my style of leadership depending on the circumstance. As the years have gone by, I've realized caring is one of the great aspects of leadership. Even when you have these big companies with thousands of employees, simple acts of kindness can help people understand that you really care. Don't just say it, do it; it's a

cliché, but actions speak louder than words, especially in these sorts of situations.

— *Navigating New Challenges* —

I like to remind myself, especially when I am venturing into a new area, that I am going through life for the first time and there is a first time for many of these experiences, especially now that I am pivoting into business full-time. Coming from playing at such a high level where I not only expected so much from myself, but was also familiar with the system around me, means that when I'm entering new spaces where I will face new challenges, I bring the same level of preparation and commitment I did on the football field.

As I'm preparing, for example, for my new role as an NFL analyst on FOX, I've spent the last 12 months working to get a handle on the expectations for the position, especially from the viewpoint of the audience. I know my perspective and knowledge are unique from having played the game for so long, but there is also an art and science to using my voice to educate and entertain in the broadcast booth to keep the game enjoyable for viewers. I want fans to feel like the football is in their hands and their feet are on the grass, but that means I need to articulate what I say in a way that is enjoyable and informative for them. I need to have empathy to see what they see and add what I see to make it more interesting.

As a leader, navigating transition goes beyond personal preparation. Everyone wants to be on the bandwagon when things are good, but what does it look like when things aren't going well, when you're down, when you've had a bad quarter or a bad year? Nitin Nohria, the former dean of Harvard Business School, said,



**ENDURING SETBACKS WHILE MAINTAINING THE ABILITY TO SHOW OTHERS THE WAY TO GO FORWARD IS A TRUE TEST OF LEADERSHIP.**

“Enduring setbacks while maintaining the ability to show others the way to go forward is a true test of leadership.” We gain confidence from working toward success, even in the face of adversity.

Honesty, transparency and credibility are

what people are always going to seek during difficult times. When we face tough situations in business, we ask how are we going to find our way through this, and who are the people that we can count on? There's nothing easy or simple about these challenges.

Great leaders understand that adversity is part of the job, and they see the importance of needing to be consistent every day and act as a rock for their team. That way, when their teammates look to them in times of crisis, they feel confident that they have things under control. People want to feel like their leader has a solution and a plan.

— *Embracing New Opportunities* —

As I've worked to grow beyond the football field, I've had a lot of opportunities come my way – and all of these have involved the chance to flex the elements of the

leadership skills that I developed as a quarterback and team captain. They've also been tremendous learning opportunities that have helped me to develop the new skills that will be crucial to finding success in future ventures.

For example, I've been able to join Delta Air Lines as a strategic advisor, a new kind of corporate partnership with a community-centric focus. In this role, I work with the CEO, Ed Bastian, and CMO, Alicia Tillman, to connect with leaders in the company and bring experience from my career on how I have achieved success. This role also provides the opportunity to create an impact for Delta's customers, as well as internally with its 100,000+ employees. I've learned a lot from Ed, who is a tremendous CEO leading a truly incredible brand. It's such an impressive organization – the technology, coordination and communication required to engage with such a large base of employees is impressive.

———— *Bringing a Winning  
Mentality – Wherever You Go* ————

I feel fortunate to be able to bring a unique leadership perspective to my business portfolio. The skills I honed as a professional athlete that served me during a long NFL career have helped me to continue to identify and pursue my goals and dreams post-football. And many of my proudest recent career moments have been about being able to share these learnings with others.

There is value in being able to pivot. Learning to play again – whether that's in a new career, industry or venture – will feel like an uphill battle where you will make mistakes, but these hard lessons are the best teachers. Maintaining humility and an open mind are important, and I try to never miss an opportunity to learn from those moments so I can be a better businessperson and leader tomorrow than I am today.

As the famous Ralph Waldo Emerson quote goes, "It's not the destination, it's the journey." As I leave one world behind and embark on this new journey, I'm excited to continue to grow and bring others along with me.

