

the many distractions that could have taken me off course because I had this outstanding support system. I just had way too much fun to be distracted by a lot of the other things.

It wasn't until I got older that I realized that we had overcome a lot of financial challenges. I come from a single-parent home and you talk about making a dollar out of a dime. My mother was able to do that for a very, very long time for all of us. It wasn't until I got older that I realized that her portion of a meal was a lot smaller than ours. It wasn't until I got a-- [crosstalk]

[00:03:57] Nichols: That's a good mama.

[00:03:58] Freeman: Yes, an amazing mother. I love my mother, the epitome of the woman I strive to be today, very selfless in her approach and full of service, and just so much love regardless of the circumstances. I just wasn't aware of the challenges my father was having with drug addiction because I was surrounded by so much love and support. When I think of my upbringing, this little girl from Springfield, Illinois, man, she had it pretty doggone good.

[00:04:28] Nichols: Oh, I just love that. Well, where in the world did she get her energy? Where did she get her fortitude to show up that way every day? Because she could have gone the other way too.

[00:04:40] Freeman: Leaning on the Everlasting. Whenever things got challenging, it did not show. She, her faith and her strength was coming from something far bigger than any of us. Whenever things got challenging, she always reminded us where our power and our strength came from. My mother, to this day, is a woman of prayer, my mother to this day is still a woman of service and still a woman of giving. She will constantly remind me where I've come from and why I am who I am today. All of the greatness, all of the love, all of the appreciation definitely goes to our God.

[00:05:16] Nichols: That's amazing. Well, thank you so much for sharing that. You went to college, right?

[00:05:21] Freeman: Yes.

[00:05:22] Nichols: Where'd you go to university?

[00:05:23] Freeman: I went to Northern Illinois University. That's where I played basketball, but more importantly where I got my undergraduate degree and I did pretty okay there. I had a pretty good career there, athletically and academically, and so I was given an opportunity to play professionally, and it all started for me back at home. I was born on the east side of Springfield, Illinois, and again, there were many distractions out there and I was raised in a house full of boys.

[00:05:50] Nichols: I was going say I bet you had some brothers.

[00:05:53] Freeman: Torture. Tortured my entire life. No, we're all very close.

[00:05:56] Nichols: Did you have sisters? Did you have any sisters?

[00:05:57] Freeman: Yes, my older sister. I have a sister that's a bit older than me. She's actually about 18 years older than me. Once I came into the picture, she had had things pretty much figured out, but she still loved on me and really groomed me, and to this day makes sure that I am being challenged and I'm also being loved, so a huge part of my life as well.

[00:06:18] Nichols: But you grew up with brothers.

[00:06:19] Freeman: But I grew up with these brothers. I grew up with these brothers chasing them all around town, and I was very lucky as a younger sister, second to youngest, I have a younger brother, and they let me tag along. They made sure that I was taken care of, they made sure that I was safe. I can remember going to Cox Park in Springfield, Illinois, a well-known park on the east side of town. A lot of things go on at Cox Park but because I was so distracted by this basketball, I bypassed a lot of those distractions that I got to the court, and they took care of me, they groomed me. They allowed me to tag along. They taught me how to play.

[00:06:54] Nichols: Were they good basketball players?

[00:06:56] Freeman: They were good at everything. They were athletes. [crosstalk]

[00:06:58] Nichols: They were good at everything. They were athletes.

[00:07:01] Freeman: Yes, they were big-time athletes. There's one thing about being a girl. Once you get bumped around by a boy, a few times, you figure out how to hold your own. You

figure out how to dish a blow as well. They were the ones that put the basketball in my hands and because of that basketball, that 28.5 inches of circumference, this round thing, I wasn't distracted by a lot of the things that were going on around me. I can remember stepping over syringes and things of that nature, or hearing gunshots, or being surrounded by a lot of negative things, but because of them, I had this basketball. That's where it all started.

[00:07:39] Nichols: Well, what great brothers. What great brothers to let you tag along and I'm thinking the basketball, it's like it changed the trajectory of your life really.

[00:07:49] Freeman: It really did. Basketball taught me a lot of valuable lessons and it opened up a number of doors for me. I'm a kid from Springfield, Illinois. It has taken me to five of the seven continents. It has given me opportunities-- [crosstalk]

[00:08:03] Nichols: Which ones have you not been to? Antarctica and-- [laughs]

[00:08:06] Freeman: I'll let you guess that, but it's South America and Antarctica, yes. It's taken me all over the world. It's gotten me my education paid for, it's introduced me to some of the most amazing people in the world. It gave me my first heartbreak, not getting the results I felt like I deserved. It gave me my first set of stitches. I can remember playing in the backyard of my house and chasing down a loose basketball and running it into the house. It gave me my first, life's not fair experience when I felt like I should have been in a better position on the team that I was on and I wasn't given that opportunity.

It taught me all these viable life lessons and it taught me how to, "Hey, lace up your boots and keep moving. Maybe you're not good enough. Go and get better." Many, many valuable lessons that have definitely shaped my character, so I'm very grateful, grateful.

[00:08:54] Nichols: Grateful for that. How long did you play professional?

[00:08:57] Freeman: I played until I was ready to move on. I was fortunate to play as long as I wanted to. I wasn't, my career didn't end because of injury, or being cut from a team, or not being good enough--

[00:09:08] Nichols: You made that conscious decision to--

[00:09:10] Freeman: I was able to make that decision, and so I played for two years professionally and then I came back over to the States and I had a passion for serving and connecting and I was given that opportunity so I jumped on it.

[00:09:21] Nichols: Yes, and was that when you went to Wash Uor?

[00:09:24] Freeman: That was actually when I came back-

[00:09:25] Nichols: When you came back?

[00:09:26] Freeman: -and I went to University of Missouri in Kansas City. I was on the staff there and I was given an opportunity to get my graduate degree as well. That allowed me to develop as a coach, that allowed me to develop as a mentor, as well as extend my education. Again, basketball was paying for-

[00:09:47] Nichols: This graduate degree.

[00:09:47] Freeman: -my education, so I jumped on it.

[00:09:48] Nichols: Amazing. Amazing.

[00:09:49] Freeman: Yes.

[00:09:50] Nichols: You were the Assistant Basketball Coach for WashU's women's basketball, which is a very good team, right?

[00:09:58] Freeman: Well known nationally, yes.

[00:09:59] Nichols: Well known nationally. How long did you do that?

[00:10:03] Freeman: I was at WashU from 2013 to 2015, an amazing program with an amazing history. This program has won five national championships. They've been to the NCAA Tournament over 20 times consecutively, just an amazing program. There can be a lot of pressure when you're filling those shoes. Going to that program and continuing that tradition was an awesome experience. Just this past year, we were given an opportunity to make a big

run in the NCAA Tournament, and we ended up losing to the National Champions at their place in the Elite Eight, so I like to say we're the second-best team in the country.

I had great experience with administration there, the athletes, the players, just connecting with them and helping them develop as young women, learning more about who they are, their whys. They're doing some extraordinary things right now, and the people I was able to coach with as well, it was just an all-around cool experience.

[00:11:07] Nichols: Great experience. In May 2019, you really had a lot of courage and you just said, okay, I'm doing something different. I feel like I need to go to my next assignment, my next calling. You decided to leave WashU and tell us what you are doing now. Then you founded a Foundation, right?

[00:11:29] Freeman: Totally stepping out on faith. Lisa, you and I connected and I was able to share this with you and totally stepping out on faith and just trying to do more and be more. I hadn't quite figured out what that was going to look like just yet. It took a lot of prayer, it took a lot of meditation as well. We know there's a big difference between the two so I had to actually listen. I now have clarity and direction.

I have recently dived more into our Foundation, the Max-OUT Foundation. We founded it back in 2013 and it is community and youth-driven. Max-OUT stands for Maximizing Opportunity, Unity, and Training. Our goal is simply to empower, to educate, and equip our youth of today and our leaders of tomorrow. We do it with sports or do it with educational programs. We have a STEM program. We have a number of events each year.

We've had a back-to-school bash where we've given out over 100 stuffed backpacks. We've connected with barbers in our area, we've done free haircuts. We've done a number of things and it's rewarding to be able to go back to our communities and other communities that really could use or benefit from this service and lend a hand because we have the resources to.

[00:12:49] Nichols: There is a saying, "To whom much is given, much is required."

[00:12:53] Freeman: Amen.

[00:12:53] Nichols: Right?

[00:12:54] Freeman: Yes.

[00:12:54] Nichols: I think about that, and I just think about you and just the amazing opportunities that you've been given. Like you said, you just wanted to come back and you want to start serving more. That is precisely the spot that you're in right now is where you're serving and you're building into the next generation. We're going to take a quick break and we'll be back with Marke Freeman.

[music]

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[00:13:49] Nichols: Welcome back. I want to start out, you wrote something and you said, "The off-season is the most important time of the year. This is the time where players with goals strengthen their weaknesses, sharpen their strengths to improve their skills for the upcoming season." How does that translate into the rest of life? The off-season because you think really it's the season. It's when you're playing the game and when you're winning games and that sort of thing, but you're saying it's the off-season is the most important time.

[00:14:20] Freeman: Yes. There's a common phrase that we use in the sports world, "The biggest games are played in March. You win today in practice, today in February. You win today in July to play in March." Those games are won in the off-season through your preparation and how you show up. how you prepare for those moments. That's what separates the good from the great, and many people wait. I love to say that the best time is now. For those who actually seek high levels of greatness, there is no off-season. That is a time where you put in the most work to sharpen- I don't like to-

[00:14:58] Nichols: The weaknesses.

[00:14:58] Freeman: -call them weaknesses.

[00:14:59] Nichols: You're right. I don't either.

[00:15:00] Freeman: I like to call them stretches or opportunities. The off-season is the perfect time to strengthen or sharpen those stretches and opportunities.

[00:15:08] Nichols: Such great advice. I heard something a long time ago that said, really, success is when preparation and opportunity intersect. You've seen it before where maybe opportunities are there but the person did not take the time that they needed to take to prepare for that opportunity, and then they may not even recognize it.

[00:15:27] Freeman: Yes. You either don't recognize it or once given that opportunity, you fail because you weren't prepared for it. The main thing is being prepared for it. There's another equation that I like to use as well. A championship performance equals advanced preparation plus opportunity.

[00:15:46] Nichols: I know your passion is the next generation and I love that, that you are pouring into the next generation. You go into schools, you talk to kids. There's so much wisdom that you download to these kids when you go in to speak. I could regurgitate all of those things but I want you to talk about like if you were just pretend like I'm a young person, what would you tell me?

[00:16:09] Freeman: There's a number of amazing life lessons that I took from the game of basketball. I think one great lesson that I took is how to deal with adversity. There is a way to prepare children to deal with adversity. Adversity is inevitable.

[00:16:23] Nichols: It's going to happen.

[00:16:24] Freeman: It comes in many forms.

[00:16:25] Nichols: Sure.

[00:16:26] Freeman: It comes in many forms and that's something we understand as adults, but that's something that not all young people understand. It could come in the form of failing a test. It could come in the form of maybe not getting into a school that you want to get into. Maybe you don't make a team. Maybe you lose a loved one. It can come in so many forms. We discuss how we deal with adversity, and how we show up in those moments. Now, the one thing

that's for sure is it's coming, but how we deal with those moments. Those are great conversations I love to have with young people.

I also like to talk about how we show up, who we want to be. Who do you want to be? Being the best version of yourself even when it's challenging. We talk about who we surround ourselves with. Studies show that you are the average of the five people that you connect with the most. You'll be the average of them financially, socially, health-wise because you're going to adapt to their eating habits. If we can get them to connect with like-minded individuals, I think we're going to set them up to be great citizens.

[00:17:26] Nichols: Right. Watch who you choose to be in your inner circle. You don't want to choose friends that are making poor choices.

[00:17:33] Freeman: Contributing or contaminating. You can think of it in the workspace. We're all contributing or you're contaminating, there's no gray area. I think of it this way, I travel a lot. I travel for a living. If there are people that come with a lot of luggage, and if I go to the airport and I walk up to the counter, and the first thing they're going to ask me for is my ID. The second thing they're going to ask me for is to weigh my luggage. If that luggage is too heavy, they're going to say, "Something's got to give."

That's the way I think about life and my circle and those I'm in contact with. If that luggage is too heavy, if there's too many things going on, if you're not bringing positive things into my life, if we're not trying to serve a greater good, then that's contaminating, and we're looking for contributors. The more we can build ourselves around contributors, I think, the better off we'll be individually, and we'll be able to move in a common direction.

[00:18:28] Nichols: Yes. Okay. Let's talk a little bit more about Max-OUT. You're going into these communities. How do you decide where you go? What are those factors that you use when you're making that decision?

[00:18:42] Freeman: It's all based on need. We get a phone call, we make phone calls and just try to figure out spaces, facilities, communities, cities, whoever we can help. If we're in a position to do that, we try to make that happen. If there ever is a need, please feel free to contact us and we'll be happy to try to make something happen.

[00:19:02] Nichols: Very good. Are you going all over the country?

[00:19:05] Freeman: We have traveled throughout the country and even beyond. Max-OUT has been in Poland. Max-OUT has been in Chicago. Max-OUT has been in Springfield, Illinois. Max-OUT has done some things here in St. Louis. Yes, we have done some traveling.

[00:19:19] Nichols: Well, I want to get into something extra. What is it something extra that you've seen, a team member, a mentor, a coach?

[00:19:26] Freeman: When I think of something extra, I think of an individual that is willing to go above and beyond. There's two individuals that come to mind. It's our Executive Secretary Racine Freeman, who happens to be my mother. [chuckles] It's also our Chief Financial Officer Kenneth Foreman. We are so blessed to have them on our team. The way they show up each day, their excitement to serve, their magnanimous leadership, it is absolutely amazing to be around and see firsthand. They are willing to go well beyond the expectation for anybody, for anyone or anything.

Actually, a story comes to mind. We had a youth event this past summer, and we had plans to feed 130 youth as well as their families and so we were prepared to feed well over 200 people. Our plans had actually fell through, miscommunication, and we were trying to figure out how we were going to make this happen. Without hesitation, Racine Freeman, Kenneth Foreman, they both stopped everything and they prepared a meal-

[00:20:38] Nichols: For 200 people.

[00:20:39] Freeman: -to feed 200 people. They were up into the wee hours of the morning preparing this meal. The thing that I thought was most amazing was as I sat and watched everyone eat this meal the following day, they stood back and smiled, and laughed, and just enjoyed and just soak up the moment.

[00:21:02] Nichols: With no sleep.

[00:21:03] Freeman: With no sleep. That speaks to who they are. I can tell dozens of stories like that. They've been with us since the very beginning, but amazing humans and we're blessed to have them on our team.

[00:21:15] Nichols: Well, I love that. Is there a time where something extra was missing in you or a leadership misstep that you had?

[00:21:22] Freeman: Yes. There was an opportunity for me. I think as leaders something that we have to recognize is that we all have our blind spots and so there has to be an open line of communication to share those blind spots. I think a opportunity for me was facilitation. When we first started Max-OUT Foundation is my baby. I struggled delegating tasks because I said, yes, someone else could do this, but can anyone do it as well as I can? Though I thought I was loving the organization, I realized I was, I could have been better as a leader.

Because it's one thing for a leader to get others to follow them, that's a good leader. A great leader can develop other leaders, and I realized I wasn't developing other leaders. It was an opportunity for me to really grow and develop our staff and our team and it's turned out to be amazing. It's an area that I've grown in a ton and that's allowed everybody on our team to grow as well.

[00:22:22] Nichols: To flourish, right?

[00:22:23] Freeman: Yes, yes. That's what it's about.

[00:22:24] Nichols: Well, and I think that was Coach Wooden then. Do you agree with that, Marke?

[00:22:29] Freeman: Oh yes.

[00:22:29] Nichols: It was like he was grooming. He was making other leaders, right?

[00:22:35] Freeman: An outstanding leader. One thing that he said many are familiar with his pyramid of success, but it was something he created and is well known for. At the top of the pyramid of success, under competitive greatness, he says, " Be at your best when your best is needed." The more that we can be at our best as leaders, the more we can demand of others to be at their best as well.

John Wooden, an amazing leader. I mean, his track record speaks for itself. He's coached for 12 seasons, won 10 National Championships, seven of them consecutively. Has really developed some amazing men of character, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bill Walton. Coach of the

Century, ESPN Coach of the Century, a great mind, and many lessons that we can take from him on how to show up as a leader and how to build and sustain a winning culture.

[00:23:28] Nichols: Right. That's a perfect segue into my last question. What is this something extra that every leader needs?

[00:23:35] Freeman: The first thing I would say is love. That's a word we don't use often in the workspace. Is it appropriate to love those that we work with? Yes, it is. Love is simply just caring about the need or what is best for someone else. As a leader, it's extremely important to really be invested in your team. What is best for them? What are their goals? What are their aspirations? What are their needs? How's their family doing?

I think that when you make those deposits, and you don't make those deposits because you want to withdraw, you make those deposits because that's who you are as a leader. When you make those deposits, they know that you're coming from a place of love and grace and service. That's what leadership is. It's not dictatorship, it's service, it's wanting what's best for someone else. Just simply wanting to take care of those, and I've heard you say it multiple times on your podcast. If you take care of your team, they'll take care of the customers or your clients, so love would be the number one thing.

The second thing would be accountability. Again, it's not a dictatorship. When you're in leadership, yes, you have to hold others accountable and you have to make decisions. One thing that I'm very proud of at the Max-OUT Foundation is something I actually adapted from another organization that I'm a part of, Point Guard College, is we're a commitment-based organization. We're not result-driven. Here's the difference. We're not seeking numbers or quota. We are commitment based in how we show up. If we show up the correct way across the board, the way that we should as leaders, the results will come.

Our commitment is basically a statement that we write about how we're going to show up. That commitment consists of our strengths, the things that we do really well, and also opportunities. We have to really grow in the areas that we could grow in. Then the third thing that I would add about our commitment statements is it's an, 'I am' statement. We know the power in words. Whether it's a strength or a stretch, you're still speaking it as if it's who you are. We have consistent conversations about how I can help you stretch into that area so that we're constantly growing.

I was listening, I don't know many might not have the same appreciation for sports that I share, but regardless of the appreciation you have for sports, I think our entire world was rocked when a giant, Kobe Bryant passed here recently. I was watching a ceremony, Shaquille O'Neal, a former teammate of his was telling a story about Kobe Bryant and he goes up to Kobe Bryant, and he says, "Hey, Kobe, there's no, I in team," and Kobe turns around to Shaquille O'Neal and he says, "But there's an M-E," and when I think about team, it starts with me.

A conversation that we've had consistently at the Max-OUT Foundation, and in fact, just yesterday, when we met as a team is me, you, we. If I develop, and I grow, and I hold myself accountable, if I get better and you do the same, ultimately, we will all get better. The organization will get better. If I'm getting better and you're not getting better, we're not getting better. Vice versa. If you're getting better and I'm not getting better, ultimately, our organization is not getting better.

Then the third and final is presence. It's how we show up. I've used a number of basketball references, my basketball background, but Larry Bird is a Hall of Famer, a legend in the game of basketball. One of his teammates, Kevin McHale said something amazing about him in an interview. He said, "Because our leader was the first to the gym, the last to leave, the first one to die on the floor for a loose basketball, he always gave his best because he showed up that way, it took away everyone else's excuse not to."

[00:27:39] Nichols: How inspiring is that.

[00:27:40] Freeman: As leaders, I think there's a common misconception that a leader is a boss. There's a difference. A boss leads from behind, a leader leads from the front. How we show up each day. The three things that I think each leader should have in order to build and sustain a winning culture and elevate an organization are love, accountability, and presence.

[00:28:03] Nichols: Love that. Oh gosh. What great advice. Marke, I want to give you the opportunity to talk about Max-OUT, and you've got something coming up in the summer, and then tell our listeners if they're interested or they know a child that needs to be involved, how they can get involved. How do they connect?

[00:28:24] Freeman: Yes. Max-OUTFoundation.com my greatest passion. We do have some things coming up this summer. We have our summer basketball program, which is a five-day leadership experience. We basically use basketball to get youth into a gym to teach them some

valuable lessons. We've also connected our STEM program. We have a number of professionals come out and share their stories and introduce them to their careers. We broaden their horizon. You can only be what you know, and so we try to introduce them to various careers.

An awesome opportunity to play some basketball as well. We have an outstanding staff that travels from all over the Midwest and they come and really pour into the youth as well. That's something we have coming up and we would love to have any children that would be interested, are interested in sports and would really benefit from that experience.

[00:29:17] Nichols: That's in June, that's right, June 8th through 12th,

[00:29:23] Freeman: June 8th through 12th. If there's ever a need, if there's anything that we could do in the community, please contact us. That is what we're here for. That's our mission.

[00:29:31] Nichols: Very good. Well, this has just been so much fun. Thank you so much for being here. I'm so excited for our listeners to hear your story, to hear more about Max-OUT. We have a lot of sports fans here at Technology Partners too, so I know they're going to be very interested in listening. Thank you so much for being here.

[00:29:48] Freeman: Lisa, thank you for having me. This is absolutely amazing. I'm so happy that we can make this happen.