



**All the Best Podcast**  
**Episode 34: “Unlocking the Future Through Literacy”**  
*Featuring NFL Vet and Pro Bowler, Wade Smith*

Wade: A letter to the NFL Commissioner, Paul Tagliabue. April 20th, 2005, Dear Paul, With Houston now bidding to host the 2009 Superbowl, I wanted to express my complete support of our bid. From economic summits to national political conventions to Super Bowls, Houston has a great and proven track record when it comes to hosting worldwide events. This was proven once again when the Super Bowl was here in 2004, when the city proudly rolled out the red carpet and put on quite a party. I hope you, members of the NFL staffs, and the owners of the NFL franchises feel the same way. Despite that big success, I know the people of Houston will try to outdo even themselves if the Super Bowl comes back in 2009. As you know, Paul, I've been personally involved with three of the last four Super Bowls. Those have been wonderful experiences. But nothing would make Barbara and me happier than to be part of another Super Bowl in our hometown. All the best, George Bush

George: In the first place, I believe that character is a part of being president.

Barbara: And life really must have joy.

Sam: This is "All the Best," the official podcast of the George and Barbara Bush Foundation. I'm your host, Sam LeBlond, one of their many grandchildren. Here, we celebrate the legacy of these two incredible Americans through friends, family, and the foundation. This is "All the Best."

We're Mountaineers, volunteers.

We're the tide that rolls, we're Seminoles.

Yeah, we're one big country nation, that's right.

George: I remember something my dad taught me. He said, "Write your mother, serve your country." And he said, "Tell the truth." And I've tried to do that in public life all though it.

And we're one big country nation, that's right.

Barbara: You are a human being first and those human connections with children, with friends, are the most important investment you will ever make.

George: We stand tonight before a new world of hope and possibilities for our children, a world we could not have contemplated a few years ago.

Sam: On behalf of our family and the George and Barbara Bush Foundation, this is "All the Best."

Yeah, we're one big country nation, that's right.

Sam: Wade Smith is an NFL veteran and Pro Bowler from Dallas, Texas. After receiving his BA in Finance at the University of Memphis, he was drafted by the Miami Dolphins in the third round of the 2003 NFL Draft. In 2010, he joined the Houston Texans where he started 64 games. Wade was voted to the NFL Pro Bowl in 2012, and that year, he established The Wade Smith Foundation. The foundation supports community youth programs in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex and Greater Houston areas and focuses on literacy and education, a cause near and dear to my grandmother's heart. Smith feels strongly about giving back to the communities that helped him succeed. He believes that the best way to do this is by encouraging kids to expand their minds by becoming avid readers and to also make obtaining a college degree a realistic goal in mind.

Wade, welcome to "All the Best."

Wade: Appreciate you having me, Sam.

Sam: There were plenty of times in my life when I knew for a fact that I'd done something to disappoint my grandmother. One, because she would tell me in very clear terms. But today, I also know she's smiling down on us having this conversation. Before we get into your incredible charitable work, let's start with your NFL career. There's an old saying that the NFL stands for "not for long," but you had a 12-year career. What's the key to getting to the NFL and what's the key to lasting so long?

Wade: For one, you have to work extremely hard and make great decisions. I think that's the biggest thing. If you make great decisions, on and off the field, it'll allow you to be someone that can last for a really long time. That's taking out of the equation, talent and ability. What keeps you there is how hard you work and being a good decision-maker. And good decision could be staying

after practice and watching a little extra film or staying after practice and taking care of your body so that you're ready to go the next day. All of those good decisions that you make are the ways that you can stay and prolong your career in the NFL.

Sam: Yeah, because there's a lot of guys with talent who don't even make it to the NFL. I'm sure you had a lot of teammates who were huge talents and they just didn't make that step. You know, it's a great tribute to you and your hard work. So what's your best guess right now? Do you think the NFL season starts on time or how's it gonna go?

Wade: I don't think there's any way they're going to not play games. Now, will they stay on time? I'm gonna say there'll probably end up being a delay, maybe by a week or two. There's so many logistics going on with the different states and who can do things, who's allowed to be open and who's not allowed to be open. And NFL came out and said that all the teams have to be on equal footing as far as you can open your facilities when everybody else in the country can open the facilities and so, them starting on time, I think there's a good chance that they might be delayed but there's no way possible that they will miss games. They will play a full season. The thirst for the game is so high. There's too much money involved for them to not play the games and so, I fully expect them to play the games. But I wouldn't be surprised one bit if it's delayed by a couple of weeks.

Sam: Could you imagine playing in a stadium with no fans?

Wade: It would be like a glorified scrimmage, man. You know, it's like a scrimmage that you know is actually real and counts. But you practice sometimes in the stadium when there's no fans there because you're preparing to get ready for a game that week and so, there's NFL guys that are used to playing in empty stadiums per se. But it definitely will be nowhere near the same type of intensity coming up into the game, like the buildup, the coming out of the locker room, coming out of the tunnel, all those different things to go along with you getting excited and geeked up for the game, that stuff wouldn't be there without the fans. But I tell you what, the alternative is not playing at all. And right now, the ways things are going, anything's better than nothing. And right now, there's a lot of nothing going on in the sports world. People want to see it. I know television stations are gonna want to see the games out there because their ratings are gonna be ridiculously high because it's looking like the chances of them being sold-out crowds in NFL, it's slim to none. Like if they're gonna have crowds, it's gonna be 25% capacity, so that 75% of people that would be at the game but are gonna be watching it on TV now, that makes your ratings go up, so I'm sure the TV stations are gonna be looking forward to that

Sam: Well, Wade, in October of 2011, you recovered a fumble against the Baltimore Ravens and scored the first touchdown by an offensive lineman in Houston, Texas's history. Is that the most memorable play from your career or does another one stand out?

Wade: That was a very memorable play just because as offensive lineman, you never expect to score. The way the play went down, it wasn't something that was designed for me to score. It was just one of those deals where I was blocking my man and all of a sudden, I see the ball pop out, falling in the end zone. And I dive on it, and I beat Ed Reed for the ball. And to beat out a first battle, Hall of Famer, that's pretty big deal. And he was my teammate two seasons later and so I ribbed him about that a little bit.

But I would say the most memorable experience in the NFL was when I played for the Texans. We played against the Jacksonville Jaguars, and NFL just replayed this game on Gamepass last night. But it was a game, Andre Johnson had 273 yards receiving and then he won the game on a strength pass that he took, like 40, 50 yards to the house for a touchdown to win the game in overtime. But it was the most memorable game for me because I broke my ribs in the first quarter of that game, and so, it was the most painful experience I've ever dealt with in my life. So playing football with broken ribs, in a game that basically was five quarters because it went all the way into overtime. It was one of those deals where I did not want to leave the game because I felt like my team needed me and I didn't want to let them down, and so, I pushed through the pain. And so that experience was, to me, my favorite experience, even though it was the most painful because I worked that hard and I dealt through so much adversity in that ballgame. And my teammates picked me up and we actually came out with the W. So that was my favorite experience as NFL player.

Sam: Wade, let's pivot to your incredible work with The Wade Smith Foundation. You've picked a very specific focus on literacy, education, and scholarships. Why did you pick this specific focus?

Wade: When I started my foundation, I wanted to start it with something that I was passionate about myself. And so, when I signed my contract here in Houston back in 2010, I was set up in a position to where I could actually focus a lot of attention on it and make it happen, invest my time and money into making it grow to what it needed to get to. And so, I wanted to do something that I was passionate about myself. I love reading books so I wanted to share that passion with kids. I also had friends of mine at a young age that struggled with reading and I didn't know it at the time. You know, we'd be in a classroom

and when it came time to read in class, the teacher would say, "Hey, somebody want to read, you know, page 23 in the textbook." And I'd raise my hand all the time because I love to read. Well, I had friends of mine, when they got called on to read, they would avoid it at all cost. They might make jokes to get in trouble or they might act out so that they would get out of class. And at the time, I just thought they were being class clowns. When you find out later, they struggled reading. They didn't wanna get embarrassed in front of everybody because somebody might make fun of them because they might stutter through it or because they couldn't do it well at all.

The reason why I wrote my children's books and the reason why I focused on literacy at a young age is because I wanted to empower kids and let them know that if you struggle with reading, it's okay to be that way. But it's not okay to stay that way. You're literally fighting with one hand tied behind your back. If you struggle with reading, you don't have a solid foundation. So, you know, we get into the elementary schools with the kids at kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, 3rd grade to where we're focusing on making reading fun and making them enjoy it. And us celebrities sharing with them how much we love reading and so it gets them excited about it and gets them reading because they want to, not because they have to. If you read because you want to about subjects and topics that you're interested in, first of all, you're spending time enjoying yourself, right. But then you're also broadening your horizons. You're also getting practice and repetition at reading so that when you go to school, you're reading things, stuff that you have to do, but you've gotten the practice on your own. Now, it's easier for you to assimilate and pick up on those different things. And so, that's the main reason why, because I just want to share my love and passion for reading with kids and give them opportunity to succeed.

And the scholarship deal came from me personally. If I didn't have the athletic scholarship, it would have been tough for me to go to college and to get my degree. And I know that there are kids out there that are similar to me, that they're intelligent but they might not have the money to go to school. And so, we just wanted to bridge that gap. We've been doing scholarships since 2012, and we actually have another 25 going out this year so we're really excited about that.

Sam: So do you recruit a lot of your friends and people, you know, you played with to kinda help with the foundation? Is that part of the draw that get these kids excited about reading?

Wade: One of my major programs is called Reading with the Pros. And so, Reading with the Pros is something where I'll get myself and current and former NFL players, I might get a radio disk jockey, I might get a police officer,

firefighter, a doctor, lawyer, just professionals in all different fields, and we go to elementary schools and we talk to them about the importance of reading. They look at us and they see, "Oh, this is a chef on the stage. I wanna be a chef when I grow up. But this chef loves to read and they're telling me how reading helps them become a better chef," or "This is a DJ and I wanna be a DJ when I grow up. And this DJ is telling me about how reading helps them with deciding the type of music that they're gonna use when they're performing." And so, when you get to them on the eye to eye level, they kind of have that Aha! moment and they buy-in.

Ninety-nine percent of the schools that I go to are title 1 schools so these kids are in lower socio-economic situations already. And so, we just try to bridge the gap by using celebrities, former Pro Bowlers and TV personalities, people that they see and recognize on a day-to-day basis, telling them how important and how cool reading is. It lends them to buying in. And the fact that I have so many men and women that volunteer their time for this program and the other programs I have with The Wade Smith Foundation, they're exceptional. And it kind of goes to the heart of the city of Houston in looking out for one another and giving back and just having a heart for giving. The volunteers that I have are amazing.

Sam: That's great and that's a great credit to you because I don't think all these people will be coming out of the woodwork if it wasn't for you leading the charge there, so kudos to you. And I know you've done so much work being a champion for literacy in Houston, so I think it was only a matter of time before you and the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation joined forces. And I know you've done an event, or two, or even more, with my Uncle Neil and my Aunt Maria who head the foundation there, what's that been like?

Wade: It's been awesome, man. The Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation does an excellent job just throughout the city of Houston. And you're right, we've done multiple events over the years. We did a fundraiser during Super Bowls, of course the Super Bowl there in 2017. And so, we did a fundraiser and that went awesome. And Neil and Maria came out there, and it was great to have them there. And at 10, there was a casino night-type of event. And so we've done that. We've done different reading events at elementary schools throughout Houston. Julie Baker Finck is the executive director of the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation. And she does an excellent job. We see each other all the time. Any time that I can lend my name or lend my talents to help them out, I do so and they do the same for us at The Wade Smith Foundation.

Sam: Well, Wade, as you mentioned before, you launched your foundation in 2012, and in 8 short years have already served over 60,00 kids in Houston and Dallas. What's next for you and your team? And how can people help?

Wade: I'll say right now, it's about adapting. It's adapting to the environment right now. With my Reading program, it's all about going to various elementary schools. And right now, the schools are all closed so that we're doing virtual readings on Zoom and I'm recording content and gonna be putting it out through our website, [wadesmithfoundation.org](http://wadesmithfoundation.org), like that's what we're gonna be doing, and then figuring it out how to operate going forward because a lot of the stuff that I do is face to face. You know, as far as volunteering, you can go to [wadesmithfoundation.org](http://wadesmithfoundation.org) and you can fill out volunteer forms, you get screened, of course. If you go to the website and do that there, we have various events going up that we do every year, whether it might be Smitty's Day at the Park where it's a football, music, art, cheer, and literacy camp. We have a reading contest, Read all the Wade contest, where we have elementary schools compete with each other to win prizes at the end of the year. So it's just getting kids excited about reading. The whole time while they're reading books and trying to read as many books as possible, they're actually expanding their minds and expanding their horizons. And so it pays dividends over the long haul but that's kinda where we're at with the foundation right now. We'll just kinda continue to grow our programs that we already have and adapt with what's going on with COVID-19.

Sam: Well, Wade, let's have some fun here. I want to ask you if you could have absolute authority to wave a magic wand and change one thing in society, what would it be?

Wade: I would wave a wand to where you would not be allowed to put misinformation out there. Like there's so much misinformation out there when you're trying to find out what's actually true and untrue, whether it's mainstream media, Twitter, wherever you digest news that you bring in, give people information, legitimate, truthful, factual information so that they can make a sound decision, It's very, very, very difficult to do right now. It's very difficult to know what's what when it comes to the coronavirus because there's too many people with agendas and there's things getting politicized. It's like I'm just trying to figure out a way to protect my family and my kids. You know, I mean, there's so much misinformation out there. If I could just eliminate that to where I could read something and actually feel like it's real, it would take a lot of stress off of me and, I think, a lot of people in the world.

Sam: Wade, we'll end on this, a lighter note but maybe a tough question, we started with football so I gotta end with football. Do you have any Super Bowl predictions for this year?

Wade: So I do sports star radio down here in Houston and so, in the AFC, you've got the Houston, you've got the Ravens. And those two teams and what they did last year and the improvements that they've made over the offseason, to me, those are the two frontrunners. And in the NFC, there's a bunch of good teams in them, like the 49ers are gonna be good again. The NFC West, in general, is really good. You got...Seattle's out there, 49ers are out there, the Rams are still out there. They should have improved a little bit over last year. And then the Cardinals have made some really, really good moves in the offseason. They got DeAndre Hopkins now. Kyler's gonna be going into his second year so I feel like they're gonna be the 7th seed in the NFC this year since they added the extra seed because of the new CBA. If I had to pick a Super Bowl champion right now, I would say the 49ers beat the cheese. It would be a rematch of last year and the 49ers win.

Sam: Well, Wade, thank you so much for joining us in "All the Best." As I said before, thank you for everything that you're doing to help make sure everyone reads.

Wade: I appreciate that, Sam. And if anybody needs to learn more about The Wade Smith Foundation, just go to [wadesmithfoundation.org](http://wadesmithfoundation.org). You can kind of see all the stuff that we've talked about on this podcast there and you can see the pictures and bring it to life. And just look forward to continue to work with the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation and continue to make a positive change in kids' lives around the city of Houston and in the great state of Texas.

Sam: I'm Sam LeBlond, reminding you to listen, share, and subscribe to "All the Best" on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and everywhere great podcasts are found. Thank you for joining me as we celebrate "All the Best."

Yeah, we're one big country nation, that's right.

Barbara: Both George and I believe that while the White House is important, the country's future is in your house, every house, all over America.

George: Preparedness, strength, decency, and honor, courage, sacrifice, the willingness to fight, even die for one's country. America, the land of the free and the brave. And God bless the United States of America, the greatest country on the face of the Earth.



