



All the Best Podcast

Episode 57: "Team Above Self"

Featuring Former New York Giants Head Coach Tom Coughlin and Kansas City Chiefs Defensive Coordinator Steve Spagnuolo

Sam: May 15th, 1968, I sent this telegram to my Yale baseball coach, Ethan Allen, the day he announced his retirement. All of us 300 hitters read today's "Times" with mixed emotions. I regret that Yale will be losing a great coach but happiness is knowing that you will continue to make a significant contribution to American sports, in whatever you decide to do. One of the great experiences of my own was playing at Yale during your first three years. I will never forget the spirit we had, the pure enjoyment of it all, and the great benefits I felt that I got as a person playing for a wonderful coach, a real gentleman, and most importantly, a warm and close friend. Bar joins me in sending our love to Doris, on this significant occasion, my thanks to you for everything you did for me and for Yale baseball. Congratulations, and warmest regards, George H. W. 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."

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 through it.

Barbara: You are a human being first and those human connections with children, with friends are the most important investments 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."

Today we are joined by two Super Bowl champion football coaches, Tom Coughlin and Steve Spagnuolo. Coach Coughlin spent 31 years in the NFL, with 21 of them serving as a Head Coach. He ranks as the 12th winningest coach in NFL history, and led the New York Giants to victory in Super Bowl 42 and 49, and is one of the 20 head coaches with a perfect record in Super Bowl games. Coach Spagnuolo is currently the Defensive Coordinator for the reigning Super Bowl champion, Kansas City Chiefs. Prior to the Chiefs, Coach Spagnuolo was the Defensive Coordinator under Coach Coughlin, with the New York Giants. He also spent three seasons as the Head Coach of the then St. Louis Rams, and eight seasons with the Philadelphia Eagles. There, he helped coach the Eagles to four consecutive NFC East titles.

Coach Coughlin and Coach Spagnuolo also make an impact off the field. Coach Coughlin created The Tom Coughlin Jay Fund Foundation in 1996, after Jay McGillis, a player he coached at Boston College, was diagnosed and lost his battle to cancer. The foundation seeks to help families facing financial and emotional challenges when tackling pediatric cancer. Coach Spagnuolo's foundation also aims at giving back by helping others achieve their dreams. Coach Coughlin, Coach Spagnuolo, welcome to "All the Best."

Coach Coughlin: Thank you very much.

Coach Spagnuolo: My pleasure, Sam.

Sam: Well, gentlemen, I'd like to start with this. They say a coach can inspire his players. What's the key to motivating the people around you? What goes into a great motivational speech? Coach Coughlin, let's start with you.

Coach Coughlin: You know, motivation is not just a onetime thing. It's not standing up the night before the game and making some type of a presentation. It's an extended period of time, working with people. But the most important thing is singleness of purpose. Everybody has to be on the same page. You know, it's always been said, it's great to be at the top of the mountain, but the joy is in the journey. And that's the way this is as well, with motivation. I think you have to understand that people have to know the challenge. They have to come together and be willing to pay a price to get to a position where you can make a difference in your life and those around you. So, for me, it was always

the length of the season and the buildup, establishing trust, caring, believing in each other.

As I said, singleness of purpose. If you have people that are focused on the job at hand, if they are thinking as you are thinking about, you know, where we're trying to get to, and how we have to go about it, and the price we have to pay. There will be ways in which you can work with the challenge, whether it be the knowledge of the opponent, the statistical evaluation, and all those things. But you also, because of what you believe in and the fire in your belly, it's extended over a period of time, and people will react in a positive way.

Sam: And Coach Spagnuolo, your team's coming off a Super Bowl. How do you inspire a team like that?

Coach Spagnuolo: I've always felt that motivating people came back to, first of all, gaining their trust and respect. I mean, coach and I both know, if you don't have that first, you're really not going to motivate anybody. Being upfront and honest with them helps. And I do think along the way, in that long journey the coach is talking about, I do think it's important that you let people know that you're leading, that you, A, do respect them, and B, you value them. And I do think you have to show visual actions, showing them that you do value them, that you do respect them. I think it can't be just words, it has to be actions. And, you know, you also asked, I think, Sam, in the question about motivational speeches and what makes a great one. And I will tell you this, the person that we have the privilege of being on with, Coach Coughlin, I have listened to him give some of the greatest.

And to me, when somebody is going to give a motivational speech. It's the passion and conviction that the speaker has, that really kind of resonates and makes a good speech really good. I listened to the best one in my life, when Coach Coughlin got up in front of the team, before Super Bowl 42. He had been there before, he knew exactly what it was all about, talked about family. And just the passion and conviction that he had in that speech was one that I'll never forget. And so, again, when you ask about what it takes to give a great motivational speech, I believe that passion and conviction are the two things that are most important.

Sam: Well, I would like to stick with the topic of inspiration. Have either of you gentlemen ever been inspired by your players? And if so, who and how? Coach Spags, why don't you kick this one off?

Coach Spagnuolo: In our business, that Coach Coughlin and I are involved in, I think there are inspirational stories all over. And they're not necessarily the big

name people that everybody hears on TV. I mean, sometimes it's the unknown inspirational stories. What inspires me is sometimes listening, reading, learning about the stories of some of these players and what they've been through in their youths, in their childhoods, in their upbringing, in their struggle to become an NFL football player, to achieve their dream. Tyrann Mathieu, Anthony Hitchens, Frank Clark, three guys in particular, I know their stories. All three of them did not have a father figure. And going through life today, in this world that we live in without that is a struggle. And for these three guys to have come through that and to be where they are right now, I think is an inspiration in itself.

The other stories that inspire me are the stories of the unknown guys, the undrafted, the unheralded players that grind their way through and make it to the top. And Coach Coughlin, the one that stands out to me is Chase Blackburn. He came to you in 2005, as an undrafted, free agent out of Akron. He plays in Super Bowl 42, I think, in 2010. He's released from the team, you bring him back in 2011, and he makes a huge interception in the Super Bowl 46. And here's a guy that people don't hear a lot of, that inspires me. Guys that persevere, guys that overcome their obstacles along the way in life. And we've got a lot of them that we've been around in the years in coaching.

Sam: Coach Coughlin, how about you?

Coach Coughlin: I would say this to you. You know, when you start out in professional football as an assistant coach, and you come into the league, and I came into the league with the Philadelphia Eagles, and we had a player by the name of Mike Quick, who was an outstanding football player. And, you know, you're young and they like to play games with you and call you rookie and all that stuff. But the one thing you have to understand is that when a player realizes that you can help him be a better football player, then he all of a sudden starts to fall in line and become the kind of player that you want him to be. And that really inspires me. The challenges inspire me, but also the ability to take a player who's been renowned for his ability and make him better. And every place that I've gone as an assistant coach, I've had that opportunity.

I'll add one more story, the story of Mark Herzlich. Mark Herzlich was an all American at Boston College, had cancer in his, I think it was his junior year. And here's a guy who was headed right for the first round, became an undrafted football player. And we, as the New York Giants, brought Mark in. And I was worried the very first summer, whether or not Mark was going to be able to withstand the physical nature of the game, the practice schedules, the twice a day, and that type of thing. I was really worried about that. But Mark proved something to me. He loved football. He came in ready to go. He overcame, not

fully, his ability to run wasn't as good as it was when he was a college player. But he never complained about that. He never used that as a crutch, if you will. He made our football team and he played on World Championship teams, was an outstanding special teamer, a backup, very, very smart, always willing to do everything that he possibly could.

But there's also a handful of guys who come out of nowhere, who you may not even count on at the beginning of training camp, that are there for you. And it is inspirational as a coach to see the commitment that these young men have toward the game, regardless of the difficulty, regardless of who's around them. It's the idea that they're going to accept any challenge, and to be the best that you possibly can be. When you talk about the foxhole, you want those guys in there with you when the going gets tough. From the standpoint of picking players at the end of camp, when it's the difficult time, you have to choose, you know, you come down to arguments about this guy's ability, that guy's ability. I want those guys with great character, passion, and want it more than the other guy.

Sam: Well, gentlemen, the core of this podcast is the legacy left behind of service of my grandparents, George and Barbara Bush. And I know each of you champion a cause that provides invaluable help to those in need, but in very different ways. Coach Coughlin, what led you to launch Jay Fund Foundation? What does it do and who does it reach?

Coach Coughlin: The Jay Fund Foundation, Sam, is in our 25th year. We've had 25 years of service. And this is how it came about. Steve knows the story very well. And he has been excellent, he and Maria both, in helping us continue to serve those that need us most, that is, families who have a child with cancer. In 1991, I was the Head Coach at Boston College. I had a strong safety by the name of Jay McGillis, who was...obviously was an overachiever. He gave it all he had. He was a tough son of a gun. I can still see him running around the track in the offseason program, pulling over to the side, and losing his lunch, and then get back on the track and going. One of those kinds of guys. He was loved by all, loved by his teammates, his classmates. I had a deal where if a guy missed a class, he owed me three runs at six in the morning. I never could catch Jay McGillis. He never had to do that.

So we played, that first year was a difficult year for us, no doubt, and we come back from our 10th game of the year in Syracuse. The trainers came to me and said, "Jay will not be able to play next week." I said, "Why won't he be able to play?" And they said, "He's sick, his glands, running a temperature, etc., etc." And I said, "Well, why can't we just, you know, get the doctors in here, get them fixed up, and he'll go?" Well, it wasn't swollen glands, it was leukemia, a

ravishing form of leukemia. And what we experienced as a Boston College family, and watching the McGillis family and Jay go through what he went through. Jay would die on July 3rd, 1992. One of our linebackers, Mike Panos, came to me in the spring of the year, and he said, "Coach, we've got to help the McGillis family." And I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, the expenses are building up and they're quite frankly, too much. They need help." So I said, "Okay, come on in here, Mike, sit down and we'll talk about it." We came up with what we called a Lift-a-Thon.

In those days in college football, you used to have a max lift in the spring before they went home. And they would power clean, bench squat, you name it. Well, the guys decided we would have a Lift-a-Thon. They went out into the community and got pledges for how much someone would pay depending on the amount of weight they lifted. And so we raised \$50,000, and we gave the \$50,000 to the McGillis family at halftime in the spring game. But that put in the back of my mind, the idea that if I ever had the chance to give back, it would be in the spirit of Jay McGillis and it would be the most practical sense you could possibly think of, a way in which we could help families right now. I believe in research, I believe in all those things. But the thing that I believe in most passionately and the way that I want to serve, is I want to take a family that's teetering on not being able to stay in their home, for example, wondering whether they have enough money to drive their child to treatment, or feed the other siblings in the house. Those are the kinds of things that we do.

So we come in, and we help families pay for mortgages, we make car payments, we pay for electric bills, we pay for food, we get people, transport them to the hospitals and back. We do everything that we can to take the pressure off the family, and the child doesn't sense the stress that the family is under, in trying to make ends meet, but still treat their child and give their child every chance to recover. So that's how the Jay Fund developed. When I got to Jacksonville, we decided this would be the place we started. And in 1996, we launched our first, it was a golf tournament, and we raised \$36,000. I thought we were doing a great job. But nevertheless, it was a starting point. And from that point on, we've grown and we've developed. A few years later, my daughter, Kelly Coughlin, became the Executive Director. And in this year's board of directors meeting, we voted to have her assume the title of CEO. She has been the reason, along with a great staff and a tremendous board. And the key being everybody on the same page, with the same passion, recognizing what we had to do, just so that these families could take a deep breath.

We also have all kinds of events and things for the kids and their families to do. But that's how this all started. And now today, 25 years later, we've helped over 5,000 families with over \$12 million in aid. And we continue even in this

COVID. What we've done is gone into the virtual world. And we've had a golf tournament that was virtual, we had a Champions for Children event that was virtual. And we give ourselves the opportunity to continue to help these families that way. And we've also built up, over the years, reserves, and we will use reserves in the most difficult of times to continue to be there for families. We have one branch of the Jay Fund in New York, New Jersey, and the other branch in the greater Jacksonville area.

Sam: Well, same question to you, Coach Spagnuolo. I saw that your Spagnuolo Foundation helps others who might need help pursuing and achieving their dreams. Can you tell us more about it?

Coach Spagnuolo: Absolutely. But let me preface it first by saying that nobody does it as good as Coach Coughlin. That foundation, the Jay Fund, the reason Maria and I stay involved in it is because we believe in it and what they do. And I think what Tom's done for a lot of people is outstanding. So we focus more, Sam, on children. Maria and I both have hearts for children, especially foster children. We've often reached out in the teams and the cities that I've coached at. It began in New York when I was with Coach in 2007. It was geared then, through the Salvation Army to group homes. There was a group home in the Bronx that we tied into. And they were older kids, you know, in their teens, that typically don't get adopted and struggling. So, we gave as much time, and effort, and money, built them a basketball court to help them have something to do.

Then when we went to St. Louis, we hooked up with the St. Louis Dream Center. It's Joyce Meyers Ministry, and did the same thing. We're still presently involved with a northern children's home in the city of Philadelphia. We still have a home there. And certainly, we're doing the same thing here in Kansas City. But it is geared mostly toward children, helping them achieve a dream, making their journey a little bit easier, if we can, both financially and then support with time and effort and things that we can do. We often do things like motivate them to do well in school by bringing them to the football games, whether it's here in Kansas City, or in St. Louis, and New York, and Maria would take them on the sideline, which they enjoyed. So, that's basically where we're focused on. My wife has a heart for it, I do too. And we're happy as always to help young children that don't have parents to help them along the way.

Sam: Both very worthy causes. Now, Coach Coughlin, you mentioned the foxhole, the other guy over here, Coach Spagnuolo, you and him have spent plenty of times in the foxhole together on the gridiron, and even won the Super

Bowl together. How do the lessons of winning at the highest level of your profession translate to the work you do off the field?

Coach Coughlin: Well, to me, you have an obligation. If you're blessed the way we have been blessed, if you're given the opportunities that we've been given in life, it's only right that we would give back. So, all the attention, all the work that we put into our profession, allows us to be in position where we can affect people in the right way. And the way I'm talking about is to rally, or to point attention towards, or to be there for. We simply believe it's our obligation. And we really do believe that at some point in time, I hope in the long distant future though, when you're sitting in front of the big guy, he's going to say to you a lot of things, but one of which is going to be what have you done for your fellow man. And so, what we try to do is take the same energy and go forth into the community to help in ways that we can, to make sure that the less fortunate have some opportunities in life that they might not have ordinarily had.

Sam: Well, my grandparents are remembered for their legacies of helping others. And they really ingrain the value of service into their children and grandchildren like me. How have the lessons of giving back manifested themselves in each of your families? Coach Spags, I understand your wife, Maria, is very involved in helping to run your foundation. Can you expand on that?

Coach Spagnuolo: Yeah, Sam, I'm glad you brought that up. She's the best. She's the backbone of the foundation that we have. Her smile, her passion for what she's doing, I think blesses everybody she comes in contact with. And the thing I love about my wife and what she does behind the scenes with the foundation is, it's not just money, it's time. She told the story once and I think this really hits home about how important it is not only for us to give our finances, but our time is well. The group home that we dealt with in the Bronx, New York, Maria and I visited I think in the summer of 2008. We met all these young boys, spent the day there. We showed them the Super Bowl ring and had a great time. And months following, we certainly gave financial assistance. But Maria would venture over there in the Bronx, on her own, to visit these young boys.

The second time she went back there, one of the boys said to her as she walked through the door, "You came back." And it struck Maria that, you know, a lot of people will help and they'll help one time or give their financial assistance. But she was so taken by the fact that this young boy is inspired by the fact that she returned. And we think we made a difference in that young boy's life. So I do think that it's important that you spend time with people that you care for, that you're trying to help. And my wife does that better than anybody. She

continues to do it in Philadelphia. When she's here in Kansas City, she does the same thing. So truly, Sam, she is the backbone of the foundation. Without her, there really wouldn't be one.

Sam: Well, it's not just families, though, right? Because more players and sports stars in general recognize the obligation they have to help others. Is that something you guys are seeing?

Coach Coughlin: I mentioned the virtual Champions for Children we had this past spring. One of our honorees was Eli Manning. And the way this thing was put together was, the Jonas Brothers, they had a song out, and the song had the word cool in it. So what we did is we made a parody to recognize Eli Manning. And it was all his teammates singing parts of this song, dancing around. And the thing went on for like 25 minutes. And I mean, I could still see Shaun O'Hara backpedaling across the stage. I could still see Victor Cruz dancing around. I can see David Tyree singing. One of the funniest ones of all is John Mara ends up with a stoic face just saying, "Eli's cool. Eli's cool." And it was really...it was hilarious.

But it pointed out the fact that the way people bond in that locker room, when we talk about motivation, when you sit down at night before a championship game or Super Bowl, and you tell those young men, this game will bond them together for forever. And their whole lives will be spent not only enjoying the discussions about the game, but also the people they did it with. And that's what's really most important. So they did it and they had fun with it. And we showed it the night of champions and for the first time Eli got to see it, he was blown away by what his teammates would do for him.

Sam: Yeah. And Coach Spagnuolo, I know you have players who are socially conscious. Do you have any examples of that from your team?

Coach Spagnuolo: Yeah, no question. And I think a lot of it stems from the leadership of people that are inspiring these young guys to do it. And I think that this league is flooded with good people. The guys in this league, the guys that I have the privilege of coaching, do really good things for the community, they embrace it, it's important to them. Tyrann Mathieu does a great job, Patrick Mahomes. I was very proud of the guys here as a group, as a team, in what they did for social injustice, for what they did with the voter registration. There was a lot of those causes going on. And listen, we live in a world today where it's very volatile and there's a lot of things going on. And I think that the players have a great platform, and the guys of great character that step up and make a difference like Patrick and Tyrann, I think make all the difference in the world. So I'm really proud of them.

Coach, when you tell that story about the song and Eli, I think that speaks volumes about what guys are willing to do and what they're made of. For a big offensive lineman to get on there, Coach, and do whether it's dance, you're talking about humility and being humble for cause. I think that says all you really need to know about the guys in this room and what they're willing to do.

Sam: Well, gentlemen, I got to talk about football before we go because you both have forgotten more in a day than I've ever learned about the game. So, how is the game of football changed over the last two decades? And what do you see as being the big or necessary changes that are coming ahead? Coach Spagnuolo, let's start with you.

Coach Coughlin: You know, it's funny, Sam, you asked that question about the way the game has changed. Now, look, I don't want to get myself in trouble here, I'm a defensive coach. So as soon as that question comes out, I sit there and go, yeah, and a lot has changed. And it's all been for the offense, you know, and that's how the defensive guys think. Listen, there has been changes in the game. It's been good for the game. Scoring in the league is way up. I think that's pretty well noted. I think we're on the right track in player safety. I know Coach Coughlin's been involved in that a lot. It is a physical game. I just hope that we never lose the preparation part of it. Because I think to play this game of football, you do need to prepare. And my concern's only that we don't do enough of that. And some of the things that league has done this year to change, Coach Coughlin and I were talking about the other day, I think have been good, I think you'll see them stay in the game. And anything that can improve the game that we love, I'm all for.

Coach mentioned this a little while ago, we're blessed to be involved in it. There are a lot of coaches I came up through the ranks with, coaching in college football when I was a younger coach, and some of them still in college football, at smaller places. And I was just very fortunate and the right place at the right time. God blessed me to have an opportunity to do this. And so, the game, I love, I'm appreciative that I'm still involved in it. And I think the game is headed in the right direction in what we're doing right now.

Coach Coughlin: I think the technical aspects of the game have really improved. You might disagree with some of it and you might wonder about the execution of play reviews, and camera angles, and all of that type of thing. But what has happened in the game is, they've ground it down to a much sharper magnifying glass. And everybody's aware of that. I think without a doubt, the players, the athletes, the size, all of those things. And the emphasis on safety that Steve mentioned, is a huge thing. Because I really do believe that the

mothers are now starting to understand the way in which the rules are being enforced, and the way in which we are teaching the fundamentals of the game make it much more safer for their sons, even at a young age, to come into this sport and play again.

Let's face it, football is the greatest of all teachers. And there's no game which melds people from all different facets of life together, all different colors, all different creeds, that when they've gone through the struggles together, don't come out the other end as brothers, and they stay that way forever. Because they were teammates and they did it together.

Sam: Well, I'd like to end with this, guys, and we'll let Coach Spagnuolo go first and give you, Coach Coughlin, the last word. Every coach has a mantra, is there one that you live by?

Coach Spagnuolo: Two I'd really throw out that I've tried to carry always is, the first one is based on Proverbs 27:17, which states, "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another." I think that's important in the game that we're in. I think guys have to challenge each other, not just coach to player, but player to player. I think our guys do a terrific job in that. And the one thing that we always preach as a mantra is, "let's be better today than we were yesterday." And I think that's just good advice in anything in life, constant improvement, chasing improvement, trusting that improvement's going to get to there. So if I had to really hone in on two, Sam, it would be Proverbs 27:17. You know, kind of enforcing to the guys that, look, we got to challenge each other to get better every day. And "let's try to be better today than we were yesterday." Those would be the two.

Sam: And Coach Coughlin, the final word.

Coach Coughlin: The things that kind of stick with me, team above self and don't let the other guys down. Team above self, have enough pride in yourself, have enough pride in your teammates, have enough pride in your organization, that you're not going to let the other guys down.

Sam: That's great. Well, thank you guys so much for spending some time with me today and sharing on "All the Best."

Coach Coughlin: Thank you, Sam.

Coach Spagnuolo: My pleasure, Sam.

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.

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.