



All the Best Podcast
Episode 72: “Together Everyone Achieves More”
Featuring Former Hall of Fame Texas A&M Football Coach, R.C. Slocum

R.C.: March 20, 2013. Dear R.C., The Horatio Alger Award is prestigious recognition of a life well lived, and you are a truly deserving recipient. As you gather with your friends and supporters, and fans, for this special salute to Slocum and scholarship for kids, Barbara and I join in congratulating you. Your accomplishments as a coach are well-known, but what may not be as well-known is that you have made it your life's mission to make a difference both on and off the field. You are an inspiration, R.C., and you epitomize what is best with our great country: serving others. Congratulations again on this well-deserved tribute. We Bushes are proud to call you and Nel our friends. With warmest best 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 told 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."

R.C. Slocum was the architect of the most successful decade in the history of Texas A&M football. Under Slocum, the Aggies finished with 94 victories, the most by any Division 1 Football program in the state of Texas in any decade. Slocum's last season at A&M was 2002. And at that time, he was the sixth winningest active coach in the nation, with a career record of 123, 47, and 2. During his time at Texas, Slocum won six championships, three Southwest Conference championships, two Big 12 South championships, and the 1998 Big 12 championship. Since 2002, Slocum has served as special advisor to the president of Texas A&M. He also is still involved with college football through his position as president of the American Football Coaches Foundation. R.C. is also a member of the Texas A&M Athletic Hall Of Fame, the Texas Sports Hall of Fame, the Museum of the Gulf Coast Hall of Fame, and the Southeast Texas Coaches Hall of Fame. In 2012, R.C. was also inducted into the National Football Foundation College Football Hall of Fame. Above it all, R.C. is a dear family friend, who shares the same passion and commitment to Texas A&M as my grandparents did. Coach Slocum, thank you so much for being here today.

R.C.: Thank you, Sam. Great to see you again, son.

Sam: You've got some serious background. I wish everybody could see all the accolades and pictures, and you're in your office, I'm assuming, there in Texas?

R.C.: I am. My wife now calls it my "I love me room." Because it's got a whole lot of me in this room. But a whole lot of special friends and people in my life are in this room, too.

Sam: Coach, I'd like to start with your story, because I think it's so fascinating. You had such a long road, from Orange, Texas all the way to head coach of Texas A&M. For those who haven't heard, can you talk about your journey, from working as a shoeshine, to a paperboy, to a sacker at a local supermarket, to now being the all-time winningest coach in Texas A&M history?

R.C.: Yeah, I'd be glad to, Sam. It's something that I'm proud of, I'm thankful for. I started off, like a lot in this country, started off in a poor family. We were poor because there was no education. Neither parent had finished high school. Good people, hard-working people, just uneducated, and because of that, we lived a part of my childhood in a place called Riverside Addition, which was a housing project. At the time, it was the largest government housing project in the country. And it had been built for World War II, and then afterwards, they just turned it, a private investor bought it, turned it into low-rent housing, rows

of duplexes. So I lived there, and started out early, shining shoes in a barber shop, and I still have my shoeshine box. I kept it in my office the whole time I coached. I had it in there to show the players I would bring in, recruits, that, I may look like I have a big office here, a big-time guy, but that's where I started, right there, shining shoes.

I threw newspapers, had a paper route, then I got a job in a supermarket at first, but I did that job well enough that I got promoted to being able to stock the shelves, so it just kept going up, doing those kind of things, and I think it's a great story. I talked with your grandfather on several occasions about this. It's part of the beauty of America, in this country, that someone from that background could be going on vacation with someone of his background, and that happens in America, and it's special, I think, and pretty much unique to this country, that the opportunities here, when I was inducted in Horatio Alger, in my acceptance speech in Washington, D.C., I said that evening, "I'm so thankful that no one told me as a child that it was someone else's fault that we were poor. My family acknowledged the reason why is we're uneducated, and son, you've gotta get an education. You've gotta learn how to work hard, do a good job. You can work your way out of this thing. You can live across town in one of those big, nice houses."

And so, I told them that night, I was so thankful that no one told me it was someone else's fault, or that someone else would come get me out of it, or even should come get me out of it. So, hey, you're blessed because you're in America. You were born in America, a place where you can kind of make your go, if you're willing to sacrifice, and work, and get an education. And so, those values, over the years, have been so important to me, and I've tried to pass them on to other people. Over the years, as a football coach, going into homes, recruiting, I took great pride in going to homes. Many of those homes, some of them Black homes, some of them Hispanic homes. I actually, I had one Vietnamese player, Dat Nguyen, who was a great all-American player here, and played for the Dallas Cowboys. But I'd go in those homes, and they would remind me of my home. There were people there, many of those, who were really wonderful people, but they were there and they lived in the neighborhoods they lived in because of the lack of education.

And I would pledge to them that I'll do everything I can to take your son, I'm taking him to a great university, Texas A&M, and I'll do everything I can, and put education right at the top. Education would be the first priority. And the first priority, I wanted to be a good person. Second thing, I wanted him to realize and be willing to work to get an education. Number three, I want him to be burning up with being a great football player, and that's the order.

So anyway, that story, I've kind of re-lived my story many times, and I'd say, after finishing my coaching career, the most meaningful thing, it's not all the wins and awards. To me, the most rewarding thing is the ongoing contact I have with those players, and to see them and see the success, and see their lives, see their families, I got several of them right now have kids at A&M, to see that transition, the same kind of transition that happened in my family. I've got three Aggie granddaughters now, both my sons are A&M graduates, I've got a stepson who's an A&M graduate, a stepdaughter-in-law is an A&M graduate, I've got nephews and nieces, and we look like a pretty smart family now.

Sam: Well, that's great, coach. Well, it seems like all of these character-building jobs that you had as a young child, shoe shining, and throwing papers, certainly has made an impact on you, but another thing that got your attention was sports. What was it about football, coach, that grabbed you in the seventh grade?

R.C.: I've often wondered, Sam, what my life would have been like without football. I would have hoped I would have figured out another route, because I was bound to get out of that project. But in the seventh grade, I had something fortuitous happen to me. A coach called me over to PE class. We were playing football in the class, touch football. Put his arm around me, Coach Frank Moach, and said, "How come you're not out for football?" And I said, "Well, look, coach, I just never played, I've stayed busy, I've been shining shoes, I've been throwing papers." He said, "Well, you ought to come out for the team." He said, "I think you could play." So, I said, "Well, I have to talk to my family." And I went home, and, in all honesty, they didn't really encourage me. They almost, like, disencouraged me to do it, you know, and I said, "No, it's something I'd like to try."

So anyway, long story short, I went out for football, made the team, became a pretty good player, and at every step, I had wonderful men, all through junior high. I get to high school, got great coaches, and they polished on me, taught me football, but polished on me personally. I earned a scholarship, became the first in my family to go to college. When I got to college, and started thinking about what I wanted to do, I said, "You know, it would be so meaningful and rewarding if I could play the same role in some other young man's life as my coaches have played in my life. That'd be an awesome way to have a career."

And so, I went into coaching. People ask me, "Why did you go into coaching?" I said, "The answer to that's easy. My coaches had such an impact on my life, they were such great guys, I admired them, I just thought it'd be a great way, and I never regretted a minute of it." I had more fun coaching, and like I say, now, every Father's Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, I get cards and letters and phone calls. I had many of those young men, and this is a sad thing, several of

them tell me, said, they call me "Dad." And they say, "You're really the only father I ever had." And I say, "You know, that is so sad. You're such a wonderful person." I think that's a sad thing. We have so many young people in America grow up without a father figure in their lives.

Sam: Well, it seems like the rewards keep coming back to you now, even though you're retired, it seems like that family atmosphere continues.

R.C.: I go play golf with them, and we'll have a letterman's tournament in April, and we'll have guys come in from everywhere, and I've already got my team put together.

Sam: Coach, I wanna talk about your relationship with George and Barbara Bush, because this is the George and Barbara Bush Foundation's podcast, "All the Best." You and your wife, Nel, became very close friends with them during your time at Texas A&M. Can you talk about the inception of that long-lasting friendship?

R.C.: Well, because of his background in Texas, I had known of him and admired him for a long time. I'd say in the early '90s, somewhere along that timeframe, at functions here in Texas, he was at a lot of functions, so we ended up running into each other, and then they started coming up for some games. So, at one point in there, my wife had a suite in the stadium, for game day, and I said, "In light of what all you've done for our country," I said, "any time you want to come for a game, if you want to bring your grandkids, if you want to bring...whoever you want to bring, if you'll tell me a little ahead of time, there won't be anybody in that box but my wife and you and your guests." And so, we started doing that. Then we started doing other things together, and we had so much fun, and he was so gracious. He took me quail hunting in south Texas, and I said, you know, talking about a pretty good clearance now, to be walking next to the former President of the United States with a loaded shotgun, about three or four feet, the two of us walking along out in a field together. I had the Secret Service guys behind us, but I took that as a great honor, that I would be trusted enough as a hunter, that I wouldn't accidentally shoot him, you know.

But we went up to Pine Valley, New Jersey, took me up there, and I think one of the things, and I think of this often, it speaks so highly of him as a person. Two of his other friends met us there. We spent the night. He and I played the par 3 course on Friday afternoon. That night, we stayed in the cottages there on premise, and the next day, got up and went over to have breakfast at the club. So, we're sitting at a breakfast, our foursome, and we're talking about the match and the whole thing, and this, the lady that was gonna serve us, I would say elderly, in my mind, I'm not sure what that actually means, but she came over to

wait on us. She walked over to the table, and so, right, immediately, the President stopped the conversation, turned, and faced her, looked her right in the eyes, and said, "Good morning. How you doing?" You know, and the lady, "I'm doing fine."

And the lady, I'm guessing, was pretty anxious or nervous about coming over to serve the President breakfast. And he put her at ease the second he turned to her, he engaged her directly, and then later on, at the end of our meal, she came back, and he said, "Do you have a son or grandson that would like an autographed golf ball?" And she said, "Oh, yes. I've got a grandson would love..." So, he very graciously took one of his golf balls and had a pen there and autographed it, and to this day, that lady, wherever she is, she'll say, "That man was really a nice man." I thought it was just a little small, nobody saw it, it wasn't in the press. He didn't do it for anything except he did it because that's the way he did things.

Sam: Coach, during the '90s, you and your wife had a front row seat to watch the relationship between Texas A&M and George and Barbara Bush grow. Why do you think it was such a great fit?

R.C.: Obviously, he loved Yale, where he went to school, but he lived in Texas, and he really liked Texas A&M. Here at A&M, we have a set of core values that every Aggie learns and tries to live by. It's a very prominent thing. Respect, excellence, loyalty, leadership, and selfless service. And if you think about George Bush, that's what he was. President George Bush, all of those qualities, respect, excellence, loyalty, leadership, selfless service, excellence. So it was just a natural fit. He loved the Corps Cadets here. We've got a very large, over 2000-member Corps Cadets. The band is a military marching band, the Fighting Texas Aggie Band, and he just loved that band and loved the kids, so he, after he got the library here, he would just go walk around campus sometime. He would just go and he'd say, "I just want to say hello to some of the kids," you know, and he would just, he'd go walking around, and it was a special place, you see, how many campuses can you go to and just walk around, you might just run into former President of the United States just walking across campus, and he'll stop and talk to you? I think it was just a natural fit.

After he got here, I think he was even more pleased that it was his selection to put his library on campus here. I've told Aggies it's the second best thing I think probably happened in the school's history. The number one, when they let girls in. That was pretty significant.

Sam: I'd say so.

R.C.: We went from being a all-male military school to all of a sudden, we have as many or more women than we have men. So that was in important deal, but other than that, putting that Bush Presidential Library here, he brought in people from all over the world to come speak here on campus. He had events from time to time, where he'd bring in people from all over the world, and it just elevated the stature of Texas A&M, and he was so gracious about supporting A&M events.

Sam: Coach, we've had other coaches, like Mack Brown, and players like Jonathan Stewart on "All the Best," and I'm fascinated to hear how coaches motivate their players. You had 85 young men on your team, all with different personalities, all with different backgrounds. How did you connect with them, and inspire them to work together?

R.C.: So, you know, each year, when I started a season, we'd go in the room, big auditorium, would have 85 scholarship players, which is the maximum you could have, and then we had quite a number of walk-on players, non-scholarship players, who were on the team. Walk in there and look around the room, and see, you know, we've got people in this room with all different levels of ability. We got former returning all-Americans, we got some guys who were really good players last year, we've got other aspiring freshmen coming in, who've never played, and then we got all of these walk-ons that come out. That being said, there's not a single one of you in this room that can win a championship. At the end of this season, they're gon' come take us all, and we'll all go to a bowl game, or we'll all stay at home. What will determine that is how we work together, how we come together as a team. And so, it's going to take each of you.

You look around, we got all different backgrounds, this room. We've got people from poor environments, we got people who middle class, maybe, and a few maybe from, that you'd call affluent backgrounds. We've got White kids, Black kids, Hispanic kids, Vietnamese kids, people from all different backgrounds, and it's so important that we all find a way to pull together, that we're team, T-E-A-M, is really an acronym for "Together, Each Achieves More." The only way we'll get anything done this year is we've gotta learn how that we can all pull together for a common goal, and work together. That's what will determine the success that we have this season.

I did a deal about three years ago, I think, for ESPN, on the 150th anniversary of college football. I was in New York, and they asked me to do an interview about football. So, at one point, they asked me about some of the moments, and I told them one of the big ones, and I have a picture of it right here in my office, after winning the 1998 Big 12 championship in double overtime, they brought

in a big huge bowl trophy into the locker room. And so I got all the players, said, "Y'all get up here. Get up. I want everybody get a hand up on this trophy, holding it," held it up in the air, and I had mine on it. And I said, "Now, I want you to look at what we got up there. We got some Black hands in there. We got some hands that are Black but not quite as Black, we got some White hands," I had Dat Nguyen on that team, "we got some Vietnamese hands," I had Semisi Heimuli, who is Tongan, "we got some Tongan hands on there. I want you to all look and remember this. This is what happens when a group gets together and all work together for a common goal." I said, "That's how you become a champion."

So, ESPN says, "Can you get us that picture?" I said, "Yeah, I can get it for you." So they showed that, and I told them, I said, "Our country needs more of that. We need all those hands working together, is what we need." And so, they showed it two years ago on Thanksgiving weekend, celebrating 150 anniversary of college football.

Sam: Coach, all of your challenges weren't on the field during your time at Texas A&M. Specifically, I'm talking about November 18th, 1999, the bonfire tragedy, which took 12 lives. Can you talk about that harrowing week, and the amazing resolve that Texas A&M families showed, culminating in an upset win over number seven Texas?

R.C.: It was just hard to describe the emotion surrounding that. Some that, for over 90 years, we had had that bonfire on campus, built by the students, and it was a wonderful thing. They would work for months, actually, cutting logs, hauling the logs to campus, and then tying each log together. In some cases, the wire cutters and pliers had been handed down for 20 or 30 years, from one generation to the next to the next. So, I got a call at six o'clock in the morning, told me the bonfire had fallen, and that there was some bad injuries and probably some deaths, and it wasn't too long after it had happened. So, I was already up, getting ready for a early staff meeting, so I went up and met with my coaches, and we started getting the word out that we would not practice, but I wanted to have a meeting with the team. Some of them came, and we went over to the bonfire site. They were still pulling logs off the pile. This was a huge pile of logs had fallen, there were students underneath those logs.

So I took the team over. They began helping the regular students move those logs, and I had some big, strong guys that could really help. There are some great pictures out there that people took of the student body, with the football team, removing these logs to assist the emergency personnel there. So anyway, the question of the game was so far removed. Everyone was concerned about how many people are hurt, how badly they're hurt, how many did not survive,

those were the primary questions, but someone had to address the issue of the game coming, what are we gonna do about that? And so, there was some sentiment to just cancel the game and forget that. And so, I weighed in heavily. I called our president, Ray Bowen, and I said, "I want to voice my opinion." And I said, "I really believe that we would be better served, for our student body drawing strength from each other." And I said "You know, in times of tragedy, that's when people pull together and draw from each other. This is Thanksgiving weekend coming up. Instead of us scattering all over everywhere, and those kids being off by themselves, I think we'd be better served to go ahead and plan on having the game, and let's all come together, and draw strength from each other, and figure out a way to try to get through this."

So, I was so thankful, and today, I'm still so thankful that we chose to go ahead and play the game. We practiced. I told the team I don't expect, once the decision was made to play the game, I said, "I don't expect to have a bunch of hoorah and jump up, down, and the typical kind of emotion that you'd have for a typical A&M/Texas preparation. But," I said, "we need to come out here and quietly go about our business, we need to get our work done, because we owe it to these young people, who were killed building the bonfire, we owe them, if we're going to have the game, which we've decided we are, to be well-prepared and to go out and give our best to that game." And I didn't put any pressure on them about winning the game, or "We gotta do it for these kids," but I said, "We owe it to them to be as best prepared as we can be."

Sam: Well, coach, I know you probably won't take credit, but I know how much of an integral part you were to bringing that community together and rallying, so thank you for that, and coach, this could be tough for someone as modest as you, but for all the coaching accolades and honors you have earned, which one stands out the most, and why?

R.C.: You know, if I had to pick one, and, it's really when it happened, since then, I've told everyone that I've seen, I was selected to be a member of the College Football Coaches Hall of Fame, and at the time I was elected in the class with Jimmy Johnson, the former Cowboy coach, Phillip Fulmer, the former Tennessee coach, we were in the same class, and at that time, it was number 199, 200, and 201 in the history of college football. It's one of those that you can't put yourself into. You have to earn your way into it, so it's really a recognition for not just me, I was the benefactor, I got to go to the banquet in New York, but the players and coaches and managers and trainers, and all the people that worked together over the years to help the team that I was coaching, to help us win games, it's really a recognition of all those people. I had some great assistant coaches, we had great young men and young women in our

managers, trainers, team doctors. And so, it's a team effort, and I get to wear the ring, but there are a whole bunch of people should be wearing this ring, too.

Sam: Coach, I'd like to transition to something a little bit lighter. You and your wife, Nel, were a fixture on our yearly trip to the Greek isles, where you led physical training in the mornings, you marched us through the ruins, and even sang a little karaoke at night. Coach, did you have any takeaways or favorite memories from these amazing trips with my grandparents?

R.C.: In my whole life, I'll say that I've never done anything as spectacular as those trips. It's really hard to describe those trips. The people on the trips, where we went, everything, was just beyond comprehension, really, you know, but great people, they were hand-picked people by your grandparents. Just a wonderful collection. One of his dear friends was a Democratic congressman from Ohio, named Lud Ashley, and Lud went on all those trips. See, he couldn't have had someone that two guys that admired each other more. Just all the different things we did, and of course, around nine o'clock at night, as he traditionally did, your grandfather would say, "Well, you know, Barbara and I have enjoyed the day, enjoyed the meal this evening, and we're going to retire to our room." So, when he retired, that's when guys like you started acting up.

And I do recall one evening standing at the piano with Reba McEntire playing the piano and me singing. She and I singing a duo, I guess you'd say, and the most impressive thing of all that we saw, and we went to some great ruins, we went to monasteries, we did all these things, people say, "god, that's just awesome." And I'd say, "Well, I'll tell you the most impressive thing I saw." "What was that?" I'd say, "Well, our boat would be tied at quite a ways offshore. And we'd take these little tenders, these 29-foot tenders to shore when we'd go in. But the most impressive thing I saw is on several occasions, Barbara Bush and two Navy SEALs, after everybody else got in the tenders, going back to the boat, she would swim back to the boat." And I'm talking about it'd be from here to Kyle Field. You know, I can barely see Kyle Field over there. She would swim that far. One day, my wife and I went in, took showers, got dressed, and we walked out of our little room to get ready for lunch, and somebody said, "What's going on?" They were looking out at the water like they seeing something go. They said, "No, Barbara's coming in." I actually heard one of the SEALs one day say, "Oh, god, I think she wants to go again today." She was wearing out the Navy SEALs now, swimming across that ocean. It's unbelievable.

Sam: They're unbelievable. They were like the Energizer bunnies. It was unbelievable. But you and your wife did a good job trying to keep us fit,

because I know we had buffets, and all kinds of stuff that was, kind of worked against us...

R.C.: Oh, lord.

Sam: ...but that was such a fun time, and I had to bring it up, because I know that was a special time for you as it was for us.

R.C.: Yeah, it was amazing. Jim Nance was on there with us, so Nance and I, and Larry Gatlin are walking along, taking a pretty good hike, you know, and just talking a little bit of everything, you know, and just so many great experiences. Brian Mulroney, the former Prime Minister of Canada and some of his stories, General Scowcroft, getting to sit on the back of the boat with him, listening to his stories, just phenomenal. Not to mention all the Bush family, you know?

Sam: Yeah, we weren't that bad, but Gampy and Ganny had a real knack to bring amazing people together, and you were certainly one of those, coach, and before I wrap it up, I'd like to say thank you so much for sharing your time and stories with us today. It's so great to always have a long-time friend of my grandparents share amazing stories. So, thank you for that. But before we go, I would like to ask if you have any other memories of George and Barbara Bush you can share with us today?

R.C.: Another one of the exciting things, I've got pictures up here. So, they invited us to come up to Kennebunkport, and we went up there, he and I played golf, and his brother Bucky was there. I think we played in 2 hours and 22 minutes or something like that, some unbelievable deal. Well, it was a threesome, walking, and we weren't on carts, we were walking, and the Secret Service was kind of clearing the way ahead of us. But we went through there and did that, and then, at one point, I'm not sure if it was that day or the next day, President says, "Come on, let's go for a boat ride. I'm gonna go Gigi's." And this was the Fourth of July. Gigi was in a little camp over in Kennebunkport. So we go out and get in his boat, go out, get on the boat, and then, there was also a Navy ship out there for the holidays, kind of offshore, keeping people away from the compound. He said, "Hey, I want you to meet the boys. I want you to meet the boys." So we go out, Al, Rick, and I pull up on this boat, they all recognize his boat, you know, and we pull up alongside, and they all came alongside the ship, said, "Hey, guys, I got my coach up here with me." You know, and then he started going.

So then, we take off in the boat. We got the Secret Service boats following us. So we go down the Kennebunk River, and go down, and it's Fourth of July, so

there's a whole bunch of boats there, and everybody flying the American flags. And as we went back, of course, we slowed way down to go down the river there, everybody knew his boat. All these people standing on decks out front, waving American flags and saluting him. He loved it, and we all loved it. You know, it was the neatest deal, and we went and picked up Gigi, his granddaughter. I've got a picture of that trip up on the wall here, of the boat, taken from the front, with us in the boat, and the Secret Service boat behind us, and Secret Service with us, but all those people there, with American flags everywhere, and people coming out and waving and saluting to the former Commander in Chief going by was a special moment. I'll never forget it.

Sam: Thanks, coach. You sure they weren't Texas A&M Aggie fans, just coming out to say hi to the coach?

R.C.: No, don't think so.

Sam: No? Well, coach, hopefully you're being safe in College Station. I cannot wait to get down there soon to visit the library.

R.C.: Come see us.

Sam: I will, coach. Thank you so much.

R.C.: Thank you.

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 face of the Earth.