



All the Best Podcast

Episode 97. Band of Brothers

97. Featuring Don J. Snyder, founder of the Caddie School for Soldiers

Sam LeBlond: [00:00:01] September 7th, 1981, my first day back in Washington after a fantastic time in Maine, it's a great joy being there with the sea pounding into the rocks, the boat, the new tennis court being with mother, seeing the walkers and the kids and our own grandchildren running around the place. It was supreme joy, a physical lift. I ran comfortable and fast, played reasonable tennis, took up golf again, learn to putt, and had two birdies on the front nine against Ed Muskie and the Pro from Kennebunk Beach, only to clutch on the back nine. Minor interest. The job is totally fulfilling and I must say I got that feeling tonight, having gotten home after a light run. I'm ready to get back to work again. George H.W.Bush

President and Mrs. George H. W. Bush: [00:00:53] In the first place. I believe that character is a part of being president, and life really must have joy.

Sam LeBlond: [00:01:00] This is all the best. The official podcasts 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.

[00:01:27] We're one big country nation.

President and Mrs. George H. W. Bush: [00:01:30] 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. You are a human being first, and those human connections with children, with friends are the most important investment you will ever make. We stand tonight before a new world of hope and possibilities for our children. A world we could not have contemplated a few

Sam LeBlond: [00:01:59] Years ago on behalf of our family and the George and Barbara Bush Foundation. This is All the Best.

[00:02:05] We're one big country nation. That's right!

Sam LeBlond: [00:02:11] Don J. Snyder is an American author and screenwriter. He is the father of four children and a native of Maine. In 2019, Mr. Snyder established the world's only caddy school for soldiers to help soldiers suffering PTSD and other war wounds rise above the darkness that haunts them, with a new novel being published in London in July of 2022. Don has written 10 novels and the movie *Fallen Angel*, starring Gary Sinise and Joely Richardson. From there, Don began a friendship with Gary and now both of them have devoted their lives to helping soldiers. We are thrilled to have Don Snyder with us today, Don. Welcome to All the Best.

Don J. Snyder: [00:02:52] Thank you, Sam. It's great to be here.

Sam LeBlond: [00:02:55] Before we get into all of the amazing things you do with veterans through your Caddy school for soldiers, I want to start at the beginning. How did you develop your relationship with our veterans?

Don J. Snyder: [00:03:06] Oh, it's pretty simple, Sam. I mean, I grew up in the 1950s in the company of soldiers. Really, I was never a soldier myself, but it was those World War Two soldiers who were the fathers of my boyhood up and down all the streets, and I had such respect for them. I admired their humble nobility. You know, they'd come home from work and wash up and then walk up and down the streets and see if any of the old people in the neighborhood needed help doing anything. They instilled something in me that made President Bush's "Thousand Points of Light" really resonate. I remember I was about 38 years old when he spoke those words at the Republican convention, and then when he was inaugurated and they just rang true, they reminded me that it was the same spirit that these soldiers of my boyhood had carried with them all their lives. So I wanted to do something to honor their memory. You know, that generation of soldiers. And then I read about this new generation of soldiers,

their loneliness and that terrible statistic that 22 U.S. soldiers were taking their own lives every day in America. It tore me up inside. And it was just a question of trying to find something meaningful that would change that statistic. I guess I envisioned the school as a point of light for them. I have to say that, you know, from the beginning, the Kohler family and the Kohler company supported us right from the start. And this past October, they hosted us at Whistling Straits for a month. We had our soldiers come there from the UK and Canada and the U.S., and almost every day I walked past the photograph of the former president, your grandfather in the clubhouse there. And I thought about him and his generation of Americans who had inspired me as a boy. I guess that that's really the point of origin for all of it, Sam.

Sam LeBlond: [00:04:52] Don your book, *Walking with Jack* seemed to serve as a catalyst for your Caddy school for soldiers. Can you talk about your experience writing that book and did it open your eyes to the similarities between caddies and veterans?

Don J. Snyder: [00:05:06] It sure did. Well, you know, working as a caddy in Scotland, it was a rather dark time in my life. My four children had grown up and gone to college and left home, and I went over there to fulfill the promise I'd made to my son, Jack. If he ever got really good at golf and played on a pro tour, I'd be his caddy. So he was getting good. He was good and I had to learn how to be a caddy and when I was there, you know, it was a great healing for me each day out there doing two loops a day, 10 hours a day with these strangers and listening to their stories and earning their trust. It was a great healing for me when I began trying to figure out some way to help this new generation of soldiers. I thought, God, these guys are naturals to become caddies.

Don J. Snyder: [00:05:49] First of all, they're mission oriented, and each round of golf is a mission to shepherd your golfer across perilous ground. I knew that they were also intensely loyal. That's one of the great characteristics of soldiers. They would never give up on their golfer, no matter how bad things get out there. And believe me, they can get pretty bad, especially in the Scottish weather. And these soldiers have the hearts of sled dogs, you know? Nothing can stop them. And also, most caddies at places like the Old Course or any of the great golf courses in the world. Most caddies are refugees from some other life. They've all been something else, and then they found their way to this. So that's also like soldiers after their time in the military is up. And then, of course, caddies. The group of caddies you work with are brothers in arms, and I knew that soldiers would make fantastic Brothers. And the marvelous thing about being a caddy is you get to leave behind your own story for four or five hours

and be part of someone else's story. And I immediately thought that this would be a healing for these soldiers,

Sam LeBlond: [00:06:53] And all of this led to February 1st, 2019, the first day the caddies showed up for your Caddy School for Soldiers. Don, what was that day like for you? And can you paint a picture of what it was like for the veterans during their first Caddy school?

Don J. Snyder: [00:07:08] Sam it was amazing, I mean, first of all, they arrived from America, Canada and the UK. Four of them had flown across the Atlantic. They arrived there in the morning, February 1st, and they look like ghosts. You know, it was like, I'm on another deployment. Where am I now? I looked at them and I thought, Man, these guys have trusted me. You know, they've come all this way and they've trusted me. I was very nervous, very anxious about it. I didn't want to let them down in any way. We put them up in a big stone house at the edge of the North Sea with a beautiful golf course out the back door in Ely. We had a big dinner that first night and I just told them my father's story. My father came home from the war in the Pacific, and he married the only girl he ever loved. Her name was Peggy, and she was 19 years old and they had nine months together. And then she died after giving birth to my twin brother in me. And my father, of course, was shattered. He was 23, and he spent that autumn sleeping on her grave in the Lutheran cemetery. And it was his buddies from the war who came by the cemetery each morning and took him to the coffee shop to try to carry him through his grief and all his life, my father told me that it was those soldiers who had saved him; saved his life.

Don J. Snyder: [00:08:19] So there I am, that first night in Scotland with these six young men. And when I looked at them after I told them that story, I looked down the table at them and I realized and I told them, I said, "You are the soldiers who saved my father's life". You have the same nobility about you. You're motivated by the same self-sacrifice. So this is a great privilege for me. That's how it all started.

Sam LeBlond: [00:08:47] Don, many of the veterans who have and will join the Caddy School for Soldiers have returned from war with PTSD or other physical limitations due to their time in combat. What makes the Caddy school for soldiers a great place for those soldiers to go and heal?

Don J. Snyder: [00:09:03] Well, first of all, Sam, they're in a band of brothers again, living together side by side for a month outside all day, working together on a mission that's a healing for them. They form a family. There is also a healing that Scotland provides because it's a very spiritual place. You can be

alone and at peace walking this marvelous ground. And then there's also the healing that comes from learning a new profession. And these soldiers, many of them thought they would be soldiers for the long run, their whole career and injuries or something happened and it didn't work out. And now all of a sudden, they see a new way of earning a living for the people they've pledged themselves to. That is a big, big part of believing in yourself, and I watched them rise up every day, you know, a little bit higher each day from the darkness of war that haunts them. And then, you know, one night you walk past the house and you hear it filled with laughter and it's just brilliant.

Sam LeBlond: [00:10:02] Don, you've already discussed many of the benefits associated with your Caddy school for soldiers, for our veterans. I was wondering if you had a specific example about one of your graduates you'd like to highlight today.

Don J. Snyder: [00:10:14] They all stand out. I mean, it was your father who said to me, these soldiers will all be different in their own way, but they'll all be the same. You know, they're all hurting in the same way. I mean, I could talk about Mike Pappas, the army ranger from America, who was at our last session in Wisconsin. He's going to be the mentor in our next session in Scotland in March. I could talk about Scotty Hale, paratrooper from Edinburgh, who my gosh, he served in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan, Northern Ireland, everywhere the queen could send him, and he had just about given up on his life. He was brilliant in our first session and he's become a beloved caddy at the Old Course, and this March he's going to be our caddy master instructing these new soldiers who are going to be arriving from Northern Ireland and from America and Canada. I'm proud of each one of them. You know how they've used this opportunity to turn their lives around. All I ask of them is that they're willing to pour their heart and soul into this and that they are grateful for the chance. And so far we've been very, very fortunate that we've gotten these wonderful soldiers and they've done so well.

Sam LeBlond: [00:11:19] Don, as you continue to grow your caddie school for soldiers, what are some of the challenges you face? Are you able to take every single veteran who expresses interest?

Don J. Snyder: [00:11:29] We have a waiting list. I mean, we need to help more of these soldiers. And as I say to everybody, I need to find the ones who are hiding from us, the ones who are not part of the find veterans organizations who send us soldiers. I want the ones who are really hurting but trying to reach them is a challenge, but I know that that's part of our mission. We need to help more. Sam, I mean, we're helping 12, 14 soldiers a year.

Don J. Snyder: [00:11:53] If we're going to change that terrible statistic of the suicides. And believe me, it's bad in Canada and it's bad in the UK as well. I mean, my greatest challenge right now is to find the soldiers who are hurting, who are hiding from us and to somehow secure a house in Scotland, a permanent soldier's home, if you will, where we can bring these soldiers in year round, just a constant procession, bringing them in for a month at a time, never having to say 'no' to anyone being able to bring in female soldiers, for example, who we have not been able to reach. So, you know, we definitely have our challenges.

Sam LeBlond: [00:12:28] Don, you're serving as a voice for our veterans today, so I have to ask you, what are the most important things we should know about our veterans and how can we help them? More specifically, how can we help support your school?

Don J. Snyder: [00:12:42] Well, I think it comes back to those points of light that your grandfather spoke about, I think it's important for us to understand why these soldiers, this generation of soldiers have lost their way. So many of them have lost their way. So let's go back now and remember that those World War Two soldiers who were motivated by self-sacrifice at a time when self-sacrifice was the great virtue that everyone admired. But these soldiers who are motivated by the same self-sacrifice find themselves living in a world now where that virtue really no longer counts for much. It's been replaced, if you will, by a new virtue of personal gain. How much can I put in my pockets, which is really the exact opposite of self-sacrifice. The former president's thousand points of light in some ways have become just a quaint idea to most people now, and even, you know, the subject of some derision. And I think these soldiers feel lost because of that, because they're living in a land that they no longer understand. They feel like strangers in their own land. Sometimes when you're motivated by self-sacrifice and you're living in an age of personal gain, I think it's very tough, very tough.

Sam LeBlond: [00:13:54] Don, we're speaking today at the start of a new year, and I wanted to ask you about your goals for twenty-twenty-two as it pertains to the Caddy school for soldiers. What are some of the things you will be focused on and hope to achieve during this new year?

Don J. Snyder: [00:14:07] Well, we have our next session starting March 1st. I'll fly over to Scotland on February 2nd to have a month to prepare. We've got our six new soldiers coming in from America, Canada and UK. I have big dreams, you know, for the school. Of course I do. I want to get a house so we can

welcome these soldiers year-round. But basically, where my mind is right now is to do the best job we can possibly do with these six new soldiers to provide them with what will be one of the great experiences of their lives. Because if we fail at that, then the rest of it doesn't really matter. I'm already planning our session for October and talking with soldiers who will be coming to that session. But again, we need to try to do more. We need to help more soldiers. We can. It's like Gary Sinise, you know, Gary and I became friends because I wrote a movie that he starred in back in 2003. I mean, we were up on the set in Ontario, Canada, in 2002, and neither of us had any idea that we would reach a point in our lives where we would be devoting all of our energies to helping soldiers. But he always says we can never do enough, but we can always try to do more. And that's what I meant earlier when I said, I need to find those soldiers who are out there who are hurting and who are sort of hiding from the world. And so maybe someone listening to this podcast, you know, will know of a soldier who's hiding who just can't seem to get his feet underneath him or her and send them to us. That would be a great thing.

Sam LeBlond: [00:15:36] Well, for those listening, I think a great place, and hopefully, Don, this is OK to send people here is Caddy School for soldiers dot com.

Don J. Snyder: [00:15:43] Absolutely.

Sam LeBlond: [00:15:44] And find out on there how to get in touch with you or support your amazing cause. I think that's a great place to go to learn all about the great things that Mr. Don Snyder is doing for our veterans. And Don, thank you for being a part of All the Best. Thank you for all of the great things you're doing for our veterans, and I can't wait to see what twenty-twenty-two holds for this Caddy School for Soldiers.

Don J. Snyder: [00:16:04] Well, thank you, Sam. It's been an honor. I'm grateful.

Sam LeBlond: [00:16:08] 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.

[00:16:21] Yeah, we're one big country nation, that's right.

President and Mrs. George H. W. Bush: [00:16:25] 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, 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.