

FEATURE ARTICLE

# Leadership & Culture

Jason Garrett, NBC Sports & Jason Garrett Starfish Charities

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**Interviewed By:** Douglas Lindsay

**Lindsay:** Do you mind starting off by talking about your journey and how you got to where you are today?

**Garrett:** Absolutely. I grew up in a family of eight. My dad, Jim was a football coach and a scout at the college and National Football League (NFL) level. My mom, Jane, is a saint. I have seven brothers and sisters. We are all 1 year apart. I'm seventh out of eight. Football was a big part of our lives because of what my dad did. As a result, we moved around the country a lot. I was born in Pennsylvania, but I don't really remember being there. We lived in Florida, Texas, and when I was 4 years old, we moved to New Jersey. My dad was coaching for the New York Giants. When I was in second grade, we moved back to Texas, and then eventually we moved to New Orleans, Louisiana where he was coaching for the Saints. When I was in seventh grade, we moved again, this time to Cleveland, Ohio where he was coaching for the Browns. That's where I went to junior high and high school, then I went to Princeton for college. After college, I was an aspiring football player but was not drafted in the NFL. I was signed by the New Orleans Saints and was on their practice roster for my first year. I got released and the next year played in the World League of American Football in San Antonio for a year. Following that, I went to Canada for a stint with the Ottawa Rough Riders. Then, I got a chance to sign with the Cowboys and ended up playing there for 8 years. After leaving Dallas, I played for the New York Giants for 4 years and I played for the Tampa Bay Bucs and the Miami Dolphins in my last year.

Two weeks after retiring from playing, at 38 years old, I became a coach for the Miami Dolphins. Nick Saban was our head coach. I worked for him as his quarterback coach for 2 years. Then, I came back to the Dallas Cowboys as the offensive coordinator for 4 years. After that, I became the head coach of the Cowboys for 9 years. When I left there, I was the offensive coordinator for the New York Giants. Right now, I'm doing TV. I work for National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and I am part of the Sunday Night Football studio show, Football Night in America, with Coach Tony Dungy, Chris Simms and Maria Taylor. I am also the analyst for the Notre Dame games on NBC.

My wife's name is Brill. We met at Princeton. She's been with me for this whole journey. We also have two dogs, Baci and Bella, a chocolate lab and a black lab.

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**Lindsay:** I appreciate you sharing that because I think it really speaks to the breadth of experience you have had. There's the moving around aspect, there's the player aspect, the coach aspect, and now doing other things like TV. I believe there is real value in the journey. You've obviously had success as a leader, but you have also been around a lot of other great leaders in terms of some of the names that you mentioned. I want to dive into that idea of leadership a little more.

Our mission at the Air Force Academy is to develop leaders of character. It's not just about developing leaders and their capacity, but really working on how to develop leaders of character. Leaders that live honorably, lift others, and elevate performance. We see character and leadership connected. Would you mind talking a little bit about your experience and how you see character and leadership connecting to one another?

**Garrett:** Well, you said it. I've had great experiences being around some amazing leaders. I start with my parents. My mom and my dad, they raised eight kids. Like I said, we moved all over the country, and they were just sterling examples of leadership to me. How to lead a family. How to lead a household. My dad had a very strong personality. He had tremendous enthusiasm for life and was such a positive person. He always conveyed an amazing spirit that allowed us to overcome any adversities. He always gave great wisdom and advice. So, I think that goes to the kind of person he was and it helped him immensely as a leader. I would say the same thing about my mom. My mom was a selfless leader. As my dad was coaching and spending so much time at work, as coaches do, she was the one raising eight kids and moving us from house to house all over the country. She just had a selflessness about her. That was a great example to me as well because I believe the best leaders are selfless. So, I would start with them.

I was also so fortunate to have amazing coaches all throughout my life. I went to a school outside of Cleve-

land, Ohio, called University School. It was an all boys prep school. A very academic school, but we had some fantastic coaches in all sports. Some of the coaches who had been in the public school system in the Cleveland area for years. When they retired from there as the football coach or the baseball coach, they came and coached at our school. Cliff Foust was our football coach. He spent 33 years at Garfield Heights High School and then came and coached us. We had this wealth of experience. This wealth of knowledge. Fred Heinlen was at Shaker Heights High School where he was a legendary baseball coach and he came over to our school to coach as well.

So as a young kid, when you're 14, 15 years old and you're playing sports and you have the opportunity to be around these people who were just amazing coaches. But more than that, they were amazing people and leaders. When you are in the formative years of your life and to be around these people, my parents, coaches such as Coach Foust and Coach Heinlen, they are very impactful. In many ways, they were examples and they were models for how you wanted to live your life. Oftentimes you don't really fully understand the messages they are sharing with you when you're at that age. But, when you reflect back on them later and you say, "Ah, that's what they were talking about, you know?" You just don't fully understand why certain things are being emphasized by those in leadership roles in your life. I reflect back with immense gratitude for having those influences in my life.

That continued in college and I had great coaches there as well. Then, into the NFL, I was fortunate to play for Jimmy Johnson in Dallas my first couple years. He was an amazing leader, leading the whole organization. Other coaches who I worked more directly with were Norv Turner and Sean Payton, and guys like that who were my coordinator or position coach. Ernie Zampese was an amazing coach. They all had different personalities, but I would describe each of them as really

impressive leaders as well. Each of them brought different things to the table.

It wasn't only coaches though. It was also the players. Many of my teammates were people I looked up to as incredible leaders. I do think the kind of people they are allows them to be that much more of an effective leader. Whether it's work ethic or the examples they set or the things they believed in, I think all those things contribute to their ability to be strong and impactful leaders. At the end of the day, when you are a leader, you have to be who you are. But I don't think there's any question that you are impacted and influenced by the people you're associated with along the way. You can always learn from them, and that's what I've tried to do.

**Lindsay:** You hit on a couple of very important parts there because not only were you open to that example, teaching and the role modeling, but you also engaged in that and were part of that process, right? Because we see a lot of people, I think, that have talent and ability but they don't engage in the moment or understand or appreciate the moment. There's an engagement in that process as well and being open to that teaching and that learning and that leading, right?

**Garrett:** No doubt. I remember having a conversation with my dad when I first went to Dallas. We were talking about the dynamic between ownership, Jerry Jones and the head coach, Jimmy Johnson. Then, Barry Switzer became the coach. I can remember my dad saying, "Hey. Just watch. This is a valuable time for you as someone who at some point might get into coaching down the road. Just watch and observe these guys. How they interact with each other. How they interact with the team beyond just the Xs and Os." So, I always pride myself on being perceptive of relationship dynamics and people in these roles and to try to learn from them.

As a backup quarterback, you have more of an opportunity to do that because you're able to observe more

than if you were playing. Troy Aikman was our starting quarterback, and what an amazing leader. I can remember a number of times in my head coaching career talking about the impact that he had on me as a leader of an organization because of how he handled himself as the quarterback. So, I definitely think being open, being someone who has their eyes open and their ears open, having some awareness about dynamics in an organization, and how the leadership interacts with everybody else, those are valuable things.

At the end of it though, you have to be yourself. I said that earlier because I've seen a lot of people try to be someone else as a leader. They get the promotion and they get a chance to be the coordinator, the head coach or whatever they are in any walk of life, and they try to copy this person who was very successful. I used to always say this when I was playing quarterback, if I got in the huddle and tried to be like Troy Aikman, the guys would've laughed me out of the huddle, you know? I mean, authenticity is so important. Just being who you are and knowing that you belong in that role...you are there for a reason. I think that's a big part of leadership. But having said that, you need to be aware, watch, learn, and ask questions. I think purposefully growing as a leader is an important part of it because you don't have all the answers, nobody does. Trying to benefit from your surroundings and learning from other great leaders, I think, can certainly help you grow in that leadership role.

**Lindsay:** That is such an important point you just said. We don't have all the answers. It's that humility, that genuineness to admit that fact that is important to our development. As the backup quarterback and you can approach that several different ways, right? You can choose to be able to learn and listen in that moment, even though you still want to be out there and play. To prepare and be ready when you needed to step in and make the most of the situation. You were ready and you were present to do that. Being transparent and humble and open to the experience.

You mentioned that you shifted quickly from being a player to being a coach. How did you prepare for that? How was that to make that shift and step into that leadership role that way? To play for the Dallas Cowboys and within a relatively short amount of time, be the head coach.

**Garrett:** Well, let me hit on the humility piece a little bit first. What I've found is that might be the single most important part of leadership for me, the understanding that you don't know everything. We have a leadership forum that we do in conjunction with our football camp at Princeton every summer. And this has been a topic that's been of interest to me for a long time, since I was in junior high when I first became a quarterback. The leadership part of the quarterback position is something that I've been drawn to, and always loved, as much as anything else. How can you get a group of guys, when you get them in the huddle, 10 other guys, to believe that what we're doing is so important? That their job is so important to get this done so we can drive down the field and score a touchdown. I mean, I love that. I loved that part of playing quarterback.

This idea has obviously been on my mind a lot as a coach in the roles that I've been in. At our leadership forum every summer, we have a number of different people in leadership roles who come to be part of it. And they are from all walks of life. Last summer, Jackie Joyner-Kersey was our keynote speaker. Before that we had Admiral Bill McRaven. We've had Roger Goodell, Troy Aikman, and others. Amazing leaders. Again, not only from sports but from all walks of life. One of the themes of this is, we say, there are doctors in the audience, lawyers, people who work on Wall Street. There are football people and there are academics. We talk about the commonality and the common traits of leadership and how they apply. Do they always apply directly? No. But there are so many things that apply in so many different areas, and that's what we discuss. That's what we talk about.

And that one piece, humility, is the one that continues to show up as being so important because regardless of what role you're in. It is critical. For you, to be the one who steps into that position, you know you have to grasp the mantle of leadership. That's a huge part of it when you're in those positions. If you go in the huddle as a quarterback and you are shy and you don't take command and take charge of the situation, nobody's going to respond to you. So, that's a big piece of it. Balancing that with, I'm grasping the mantle, but I'm also open to know that I don't have all the answers to everything. So, how do you balance those things?

I was always compelled by the idea that if you think you know everything, the whole organization's potential is connected to your individual potential instead of trying to empower other people and letting them grow. By letting them grow and reach their potential individually, then we all grow together, and it's then that we have a chance to reach our potential as a team and as an organization. That's something that I think is so important to understand.

For example, if I was an offensive coach with an offensive background—someone who played quarterback and coached quarterbacks—and, all of a sudden, when I become the head coach, I try to be this defensive expert, that is problematic. Am I going to tell the defensive coordinator, who spent his entire life in defensive meetings, that, all of a sudden, I think I'm the expert on defense just because I'm the head coach? Well, the organization's going to go south if I take that approach. I have to try to empower the defensive coordinator. That's not to say I don't try to understand and ask questions, but I have to bolster him, learn from him, and then hopefully create an environment for him to be his best. I need to do the same thing with special teams coach, with the trainers, with the equipment people, etc. So, that's the idea. And if you don't have enough humility to understand that, to try to step back and empower people and take on a role of trying to create great environments for

them to be their best, I think you're missing it. That's not always easy to do, but I think that's when leaders are at their best, and when organizations are at their best.

Now for your other question about the Cowboys. I do think it helped me playing for the Cowboys for 8 years. It helped me immensely as a coach in being able to understand the dynamics of the organization. There were a number of the people who worked there when I was a player and continued to work there when I became the head coach. I had relationships with them and could speak honestly with them about the things we were trying to achieve. I also understood the high-profile nature of the Dallas Cowboys organization. You are always going to play five primetime games, the maximum you can play in the NFL, and you're going to play on Thanksgiving and Christmas. You are going to have a schedule that isn't always easy because the Cowboys are going to be in the national spotlight.

You understand that when you have success, it might be exaggerated. And on the flip side, when you have adversity, it's also going to be exaggerated. Being even-keeled and trying to keep everyone balanced in the organization is an important role for a leader. There's a lot of distraction or potential distraction. Being someone who doesn't contribute to that distraction and someone who finds ways to keep everybody focused on what we need to do each day is important as well. That's big for any leader, but in a high-profile position like being the head coach of the Cowboys, it's even more exaggerated. So, there's no doubt that having played there, having seen that dynamic up close, helped me as a head coach.

**Lindsay:** You mentioned so many important leadership components there. The power of relationships. The importance of understanding the culture and what the culture was all about. Respecting that each person has their role to play. All of those are so important to leadership.

I wanted to touch on something that you just mentioned with respect to humility and understanding that we all have a role. That makes me think of the upcoming NFL draft. Certainly, the physical potential of individuals is pretty obvious and important. There is the NFL Combine process where you can really see how they perform on the physical side. But what about the who they were as a person? How do you assess that component of it? They have the skillset and they might be the best receiver on the market, but what about the person component to understand that, "This is Dallas and that's not how we do things in Dallas. Or how they will fit into the culture?" What role did that fit into thinking about the team that you were trying to develop or how you had to invest into maybe some people more than others if they didn't quite understand that notion of the team?

**Garrett:** Great question. That was a huge part of it, for me and for us. We used to have a grade sheet for every player we evaluated. On top of it we had this category called "makeup" or "character specifics." It was all about evaluating the player's character—personal character, football character, work ethic, passion for the game, toughness, accountability, etc. It's about evaluating all those different things that we believed were so important for players to succeed. We certainly tried to evaluate that. I always thought it was symbolic that we put that at the top of the grade sheet. Now you and I both know, the player has to be talented. He has to have talent enough to play, and the best players are immensely talented. But I've also seen a lot of really talented players who didn't have some of the other intangible qualities and they couldn't survive. Not just in Dallas, but all across the league. So, that part of it, who the player is as a person was always so important for me and to us.

Now the next question is, "Okay. I get that. I understand that. But how do you evaluate that?" Those are intangibles, right? By definition, you can't see them. I certainly recognize that and don't claim to be an expert on this in any way. They are intangibles, but I've

always argued that there was evidence of intangibles, you know? You go talk to the linebacker coach at the school of a player that you're thinking about drafting, and he says, "Oh, he loves football. He really does." Then you put the tape on and he doesn't sprint to the football. He doesn't finish the plays. He's always tapping out. You ask, "How is he in the weight room?" You hear, "Well, he misses sometimes or he's not one of the strongest guys or hasn't improved that much." There is all this evidence of him not loving football. He might love the idea of football and putting the sweatshirt on and wearing it around campus and being Mr. Football player, but does he really love it? What's the evidence of that love?

When we were at the NFL combine, we interviewed the players. They call them "The Big Room" interviews and you get a chance to interview 60 guys. It's a 15-minute interview. It starts with a horn and ends on a horn. Players come in, and it's like speed dating. We always had our position coaches and coordinators ask questions as well as people from our personnel department. I would always ask two questions. The questions I asked were, "What's the biggest challenge or adversity you've had in your life, and how'd you get through it?"

My other question was like this. I would ask, "Let's say there are a 100 football players at Ohio State (or wherever the player was from) and we are going to ask everyone connected with the program to rank the players based on one criteria, 'how much you love football?' Where do they rank you and what is their evidence? We are talking about your teammates, your coaches, the staff members, anybody connected with the program who see you and interact with you on a daily basis. Where do they rank you and what's the evidence of how much you love football?" To me, sharing the evidence was always the most important piece because oftentimes the player would say, "Oh. They would rank me number 1. I love ball. I'm just so passionate about it. I just love it." I'm like, "Great. What's the evidence? What would they say about you that they see every day that says you love it?"

I might hear, "Hey. I'm in the weight room early. I stay late. No one knows the stuff better than I do. In terms of being a teammate, I'm always spending extra time." Whatever it is, let's look for the evidence of those intangibles. That's the love that's so important to us. Do you love ball? Because you've got to love it. It's hard. It's hard to play in the NFL. So, you better love it. You better have a passion for it. Or, are you just in love with the idea of playing in the NFL? I used to always say, "He's the guy wearing the sweatshirt at the mall. He's the guy sending the box of hats home," right? "Hey. I'm with the Kansas City Chiefs. I'm with the Dallas Cowboys. Isn't that great?" Well, do you love it? Do you love it like Patrick Mahomes loves it?

To me, that was big. So, as you're trying to figure out who you want to have on your team, talent matters. You have to know how fast they are, how big they are, can they throw it, can they run, can they tackle? All the things that you need to do physically. You have to look for talent, but having those other intangible qualities is huge. Then trying to be an active observer, someone who's an active evaluator of what those intangibles are, looking for evidence of them, I think is another big part of it.

**Lindsay:** All of those intangibles really do speak to that character. You talked about, "Do you love the game?" It's passion. Am I there early? Am I the one in the playbook? Am I the one working in the off-season before we get to camp? What am I doing to help the team be better with that? So those intangibles are really related to character. What does my practice look like or my workout regime look like when no one else is in the weight room? So, ability is important because you've got to have that baseline performance. It is about winning games. There is that component that you need, but the sum of the talent on the team doesn't just have to be additive. It becomes exponential when you start having people together who love the game, understand the team, are willing to work, are taking care of one another, policing

each other, doing those important things. That's not additive, that's exponential. And that's where you have probably had your more successful teams, right?

**Garrett:** No doubt. I was fortunate to be on three Super Bowl championship teams and one team that went to the Super Bowl. When you reflect back on those teams and think, "What were they all about?" They were talented, sure, but they were guys who loved the game, guys who wanted to be part of a team, guys who were willing to sacrifice their individual success to be part of the team and the team's success. That's ultimately what you are trying to build. It's hard to do. To get the right collection together of players and coaches where everybody is pulling in the same direction. And again, you need talented guys physically, but that other part is huge. I would always argue that there are plenty of guys who have a lot of talent who don't have those intangible qualities and they don't have the success. It's the guys that have both. They are the ones that have Hall of Fame jackets and play on Super Bowl teams. If you're fortunate enough to have been around those types of people, I think you have to use your experience as a leader to try to recreate those environments.

**Lindsay:** With that idea of wanting to recreate the environment, that means you have an idea of what you want to have as a culture for your team. How did you accomplish that? What did that look like for you in terms of how to set that culture? Obviously, you're messaging what you want, you get in front of the team and you set the example. How did you really solidify that culture in camp or when you brought new people in to the team? What was it that you leaned on to say, "This is how we do things in Dallas," or, "This is how we do things in whatever organization you are leading?"

**Garrett:** Well, it starts with what we just were talking about, people. I have countless stories about this. I'll tell you one of them, if you have a little time?

**Lindsay:** Absolutely!

**Garrett:** When I was a senior in high school, I had to take wood shop my last trimester of school as a requirement. I go to the class and Mr. Howarth was the teacher. He was straight out of central casting for what you would think a wood shop teacher would be. He was so enthusiastic about it. He met me at the door and he said, "Hey. I'm so excited you're here. What do you want to make?" I said, "My buddy was in the class last trimester and he built a wooden NERF hoop that was just great. Like a fan backboard. We can paint it up and I could have it in my room. It'd be great. I'd love to do that." He said, "Fantastic., Go over there and pick out some wood." In the corner there was some different kinds of wood. I didn't know one wood from another, to be honest.

So, I grabbed a piece, picked it up and went over to the teacher. He said, "Okay. Now draw it." I was like only 3 minutes into class, but I drew it on the piece of wood I picked out. He then said, "Okay. Let's go over to the saw." And so, we go over with this piece of wood with the drawing on it and we are going to cut it. As I cut it, I'm obviously not very good at it. It's a little lumpy on the right-hand side. We look at it, he says, "We've got to file this down. Go over to that part of the room. There's a file over there, a sander, you can sand this thing down." I go over there and I spend the rest of that class sanding it down.

The next day I'm sanding it and then I sand it too much. So now I've got to sand the other side down to balance it out, right? I do this for a couple weeks. Then, he meets me at the door coming in that third week, and he says, "Mr. Garrett, you are a really nice guy. I really like having you in class, but you've been working on that thing for a while and we've got a lot of serious wood shop people in here. Here's what we're going to do, you don't have to come to class anymore. I know you're taking this pass fail, so I'll give you a passing grade, but you

don't have to be here anymore because the room's a little small." I was like, "Okay." It was last period of the day. My initial reaction was, "I get that last period free," but then as I'm walking away, I'm like, "I just got cut from wood shop!," right?

I've reflected on that many times through the years. What happened was, I went over and picked out some wood that I didn't know what kind of wood I was picking out. Then, I didn't cut it right from the start. I spent every day trying to shape it, trying to shape it, trying to shape it, and trying to shape it. After a couple weeks later, some guy tapped me on the shoulder and said, "You're a really nice guy, but we're going to ask you to leave," you know?

That's always been symbolic for me of making sure you pick out the right wood and making sure right at the outset you get everything as squared away as possible. Because if you don't do that, you're going to spend a lot of time playing catch-up, playing whack-a-mole, trying to get it right, and then they're going to ask you to leave. I bring that up to answer your question, to say, picking out the people, getting the right people in there and then laying out the standards and expectations from the start on day one will get everybody on the right path to what we are doing. We won't be spending all of our time working with the wrong guys because we didn't pick out the right wood, and then not really making it abundantly clear what we need to do at the outset. If we do that, then we're just playing catch up and are never going to be able to get it right.

The idea is, let's get the right ones on day one. Let's be crystal clear as to what the standards and expectations are for everybody. When you have your first team meeting, I always believed it was important to say, "These are the standards and expectations. This is what you as the player can expect from us as coaches." And so, we would go through that. Then we would turn around and say, "You can expect that from us, but, here's what we expect

from you. And let's try to live that way each and every day." You try to keep the rules to a minimum as much as you can, but you also want to be crystal clear about what you want. The most challenging piece of it is, we'll have to hold ourselves and each other accountable to that. I've said a number of times that, "Good teams have coaches who will hold players accountable. Great teams, championship teams, have players, coaches and staff members hold themselves and each other accountable to the highest standards." I believe that.

That is what some of those championship teams that I was on were able to do. Everybody was holding each other accountable to what we're trying to get accomplished. That's what the best ones do. However, if you don't know what those standards and expectations are, again, you're playing whack-a-mole, and you're playing from behind. So, get the right people, be crystal clear at the outset, and then the daily grind is, "We are all holding ourselves to this, and we are all holding each other to that." If we do that, we give ourselves the best chance to succeed.

**Lindsay:** And that creates an identity, right? It's not just you as a coach trying to keep everything together. You are not having to police everything, because everybody else is already organically doing that. And so, you get to leverage all that. With that in mind, looking back on all your teams, what are you most proud of?

**Garrett:** I think when we were at our best, we did exactly what we were talking about. We got the right people together, we did things the right way, and we played the right way. We didn't win a championship and that's certainly disappointing, but the team was playing the right way. To your point about identity, we wanted to be a team that would fight. We wanted to be tough, physical, and relentless, and play like a team who loves playing ball and have our passion for the game show up. We didn't win all of our games, but I think if people watched us play, I think they would like how we played.



It wasn't perfect, but we worked hard collectively to do things the right way, coach the right way, and play the right way. Hopefully that reflected on Sunday afternoons. Rarely were we totally out of it. We always battled back. We always fought.

Day one the message that we gave, we talked about standards and expectations. Every year our players and coaches got to their room at training camp and everybody had a blue or a gray or a white hooded sweatshirt waiting for them on their bed. It had the word "FIGHT" on the front of it. Fight. They had their name on the back. Fight to us meant fight to be your best, fight to live up to the highest standards, fight to get the job done, and fight for each other. So, hopefully if you watched us through the years, you saw a group of people who were fighting, fighting for all those things. That's something we tried to pride ourselves on.

**Lindsay:** That is exactly who I saw show up on the field on Sunday afternoons. Shifting gears a little bit, I would like to hear about the great work you are doing with the Starfish Foundation. It really speaks, I think, to the responsibility of leadership that we have to help and develop leaders and impact our communities. Would you mind sharing a little bit about that vision and how that came to be?

**Garrett:** Absolutely. My wife Brill and I first heard The Starfish Story at my graduation from Princeton. The valedictorian spoke and he finished his talk with this story. It's a story about a young boy on a beach who's throwing starfish into the water. A woman comes upon him and asks him what he's doing. He said, "There was a big storm last night and all these starfish washed up on the beach, and if the afternoon sun hits them, they're going to dry up and die." She said, "There was a big storm. The beach goes on for miles. There are millions of starfish, your efforts are not going to make any difference." With that, the young wise boy reaches down, picks up a starfish and says, "I'll make a difference to this

one," and he throws it into the ocean. My wife had graduated the year before, but she was there for my graduation. I was sitting with my friends, and afterward, that's the first thing we said to each other like, "Wow! What a great story?"

What struck both of us is that there are so many big problems in this world. Hard problems. Whether it's the education system, poverty, clean water in Africa, etc. There are a lot of things to do. Oftentimes, we have this feeling in our hearts to go do something to make an impact. And then we get close to one of these big problems and we say, "Wow. I can't make any difference here. That problem is too big." So even though we have good intentions and want to help, we turn and walk away. To us, the Starfish Story has been encouragement just to say, "The beach does go out for miles and there are millions of starfish. Well, it'll make a difference to this one. So, let's reach down and try to make a difference to one of them and know that, if we do, our efforts will be worthwhile." With that in mind, we started our foundation, Jason Garrett Starfish Charities. The first idea was to do a football camp. We did one for 5 years in Dallas when I was playing there. Then, when we moved up to New York to play for the Giants, we started doing the camp at Princeton. Being in football, you are going to move around. So, we said, "Princeton will always be near and dear to us, why don't we do it there?" It's been 21 years this June up at Princeton.

The biggest part of what we do with our foundation is our football camp. It's a 1-day camp for roughly 325 kids from the New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania areas and the majority of the kids are from disadvantaged backgrounds. They come there and we always say it's a football camp, but it's really a life skills camp disguised as a football camp. We play for the championship of the world and we have seven-on-seven games. We try to put amazing people from all walks of life in front of them, share inspirational messages with them, get great mentors for them to help them be their

best and to get them on a path where they can live out their dreams. The night before the camp, we have a dinner and leadership forum for all of our volunteer staff and coaches and we try to put great people in front of them as well – people from all walks of life to talk about leadership and how it applies to whatever you're doing. We can all benefit from that and the impact of that can be exponential. That's always been what we've tried to do.

Some of the other things we've done with our foundation is we've started a reading program in West Dallas, spearheaded by my wife Brill. And we also just started The Starfish Leadership Academy this past year. The idea behind that was, 4 or 5 years ago we said, "Hey. The camp is great, but let's try to have more touch points throughout the year with a group of these kids." So, we started doing that. We took them to the Princeton-Harvard game, we took them to West Point. Now, with Covid behind us, we reimagined the program and chose 40 student-athletes to be part of our Leadership Academy. We have group activities together throughout the year where we can keep a consistent curriculum and some common themes in front of them. One of the real positive aspects of The Academy has been the opportunity to work with is Freddie Santana and Jared Gourrier. Freddie was one of our best campers in the early years of doing the camp at Princeton. He was there for 3 years and always got an award. He ended up going to Holy Cross, was a very good player there, graduated with honors, did Teach for America, and he always came back and coached. Now, he's spearheading this Leadership Academy. He and his good friend Jared, who he met at Teach For America, are in charge of the curriculum and they've done a fantastic job.

That's what we're trying to do. We're trying to empower them to take charge of it. We try to provide consistent messaging for the kids, just like you would with a football team. A lot of it has to do with their academics and their character development so they can achieve as much as they can. For a lot of them, it's about

overcoming adversity, overcoming some challenges in their environment. That's the idea. It's been something we really enjoy doing. Like a lot of things, many of the adults will say the same thing, "You're involved in this, you're trying to help the kids, but you as an adult benefit just as much." It's been something that we've really enjoyed doing and a lot of people in our lives have embraced it with us. It's been fun.

**Lindsay:** 21 years is a long time to do that. It has got to be neat to see that impact. Because it's not about necessarily saying, "Hey, all of these kids are going to go and play in the NFL," right? Because we know that's not realistic just from a number standpoint. But to go on and be successful in life, like you said, the life skills, teach them how to overcome adversity, be in their communities, what they can do, how to be leaders of their family and their communities and that they can be successful and have impact, right?

**Garrett:** It's so interesting to say that because we have this program called the Make a Difference Challenge. We've been doing it for probably 10 years. That came from our desire to create a scholarship within all of this. We did some essays, and we did some different things but we were kind of missing a little bit. So, we went to Freddie, this guy who was a camper who now was working with us, and said, "Freddie, what do you think about this? What do you think is a better vehicle for us to create a scholarship for some of the kids?" He said, "Give me 24 hours, I'll get back with you."

He calls us back the next night and he says, "Here's what I think we should do. We should have the kids create a policy that addresses a problem in their community. So many of these kids, because they're in this environment, have a lot of people who try to come in and help them." He's like, "We're trying to build leaders, aren't we?" So, he said, "Let's flip it around. Let's challenge them to say, 'Hey. In your community, what's a big issue? And identify it.' And that's what leaders do.

You identify an issue and you put a plan in place to solve it. Let's have them do that." Get them thinking about things like here's the issue and what is the mission statement. Who are you doing it with? What is your plan of attack? What are your strategies? What is your first action? How are you going to do it?

For us, it was eye-opening because we were those people who say, "Oh. We're trying to help them." He was able to flip it around and said, "No. No. No. You have to challenge them to be change agents and leaders in their community. That's what you need to do." We've done that. As a result, every year we get these amazing proposals. As an example, one person said, "Hey. The community that I live in is a food desert. There's no place to eat. So, this is our plan to put in place." Or, as another example, "There are no mentors here. We should have a mentoring system where the kids from the high school are mentoring the junior high kids." Or, "There's a drug issue here." "There's a homelessness issue here." They put these plans in place, and it's been amazing and eye-opening for us to watch this and to read these submissions year after year.

Now, what we're doing with the leadership academy is, collectively with that group of 40 kids, we're saying, "Okay. Let's attack an issue in this community of Staten Island that you guys identify and that we can actually make a tangible difference with." We can't go too big here. We can't say we're going to solve the public school system in New York City, right? We can't do that. But what can we do? Let's be real practical with trying to advance something. We also have a fun run that we do as part of our camp. So, we're going to take the money we raised from that to put it to addressing that problem. It's a fun thing for us to be a part of, to see the perspective that they bring, and then how we can collectively do something to have an impact.

**Lindsay:** I love that idea of flipping the script and letting them be the change agent. Because people might come in and try to help and go, "Oh. You need help with

X, Y, and Z." But in reality, they are thinking, "It's not X, Y, and Z, it is A, B, and C." Then, you're scaffolding their learning to be able to say, "Okay. What is the A, B, and C all about? Where do you want to get involved? What can you do?" Just helping them build agency in the whole process. What a great opportunity.

**Garrett:** It really is. You mentioned something before that connects to all of this. One of the things that I'm most proud of about coaching is, a number of our players, pro players from the Cowboys and elsewhere, have gotten into coaching, and many of them at the high school level. To me, that's always been something that for those guys to be drawn to it in a very positive way makes you feel like the environment we created was one that they want to replicate, you know? Hopefully they'll do it their own way, and they'll take from us and from other places to create their own culture. But that's something that, I don't want to use the word proud, but that's something that makes you feel really good as a coach. Hopefully, they feel empowered to do that. That's really kind of what you're trying to do with these kids too. You're trying to create an environment where they see it. Okay, now they want to do something. To me, that's what you aspire to as a leader. When you can empower people to blaze their own trail on the things that they think are important. I think that that's really a fun byproduct of all this.

**Lindsay:** It fits back to that whole idea of flipping the script. Some of these people have had a lot of opportunity, like being a professional athlete, and now, how can they use that as a platform to go and serve and help others to do that? When I think about the Dallas organization, it's a culture and it's a way of thinking, right? Jerry Jones is the owner, but he's not just a silent owner. He is involved, he is invested. It's just part of the identity of, "We're not just passive here, we're going to be involved, we're going to be active in that way." That's always been one of those things that's resonated about that organization. That goes from way back all the way up till now. If you look at one of the greats, Roger Staubach. Had success on the field, but then

turned that toward business afterward and became successful in that domain because he took what he learned as his time there and then utilized in another domain. For some people it's in broadcasting and for some it is in coaching. But I think if you look across, even within sports, Dallas seems to have a disproportionate number of folks that succeed in endeavors after football. That's not by accident, I don't think. I think it's part of that culture like you talked about. The culture you tried to set up, the engagement, the meeting people, meeting them at their need, and the development. It sets them up on a course that they can go out and be successful. You don't see that with a lot of organizations. It just seems a little bit different from Dallas.

**Garrett:** I think you just said it. It started a long time ago, way before I ever showed up. But I do think that's been part of the DNA of this place. A lot of it has to do with the high-profile nature of the organization. But I think there are opportunities, when you are playing, to be connected in the community, to serve in the community, and to get to know people in the community. Hopefully guys take advantage of that because when you're playing professional football, even if you have an incredibly successful career, there's a lot of life left once you stop playing football.

Take Troy Aikman, for example, he retired when he was 33 or 34, and you couldn't have had a much better career than that. For a guy like that to be able to transition like he has, and so many others, just being mindful and being aware of the opportunities that are around you and to take advantage of them. You mentioned Roger Staubach and he is probably the best example. The career that he had as a player and then to be able to transition to a businessman and what he's done in the community, those are great examples. Hopefully, guys have their eyes open and their ears open to those opportunities so they can take advantage of them.

**Lindsay:** It has got to feel good too to know that you contributed in a positive way to the longevity of that culture.

You had mentioned in a previous conversation that in the Dallas facility there is a statue that has the saying on it, "It's a privilege, not a right to play, coach and work for the Dallas Cowboys." That speaks to what you are talking about in appreciating the moment. I don't think everybody gets the significance of the moment and what that is, but what you are talking about is the impact. It's about the legacy. So, what's next for you then, as you look forward?

**Garrett:** I think right now it's continue doing what I'm doing. I really enjoy working for NBC and it's been a good opportunity for me doing Sunday Night Football, the Football Night in America show with Coach Dungy and everybody there. They are incredible. Also being able to be the analyst for the Notre Dame games. It's a great combination of NFL and college, and studio and game analyst. I'm learning a lot from really smart people. It gives me an opportunity to do some other things, and to dig into the foundation a little bit more. The coaching lifestyle is you get there early, you stay late, and you're there every day. When I stopped playing, I only took 2 weeks off and then I became a coach, and did that for a number of years. For now, this is a great opportunity to do something in broadcasting that I'm trying to get good at it, embrace it, and really live each day fully. It's been a fun transition for me and we'll see what the future holds.

**Lindsay:** You have certainly earned that pace and earned that time. Thank you for your time and sharing your thoughts.

**Garrett:** My pleasure. I'm so inspired by you guys. Being up at West Point this past weekend, it is just amazing. For years we always tried to use military examples, have different people speak to our team. I used to always say, "Hey. These guys are on a different planet than we are, but we can learn some things from them." I'd love to come up there and visit at some point.

**Lindsay:** Absolutely. The offer is always open. Best of luck in your endeavors.