



“From Athlete To Entrepreneur: 5 Work Ethic Lessons We Can Learn From Athletes”, with Steve Jones of Allied Universal



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Overcoming Adversity: Failure will be a part of your life. So will adversity. I don't care what your goal is, whether that's on the playing field



or in the boardroom. If your goal is big enough to sustain you for a lifetime, then there will certainly be times when you fall short. It's unavoidable. Don't blame others about your circumstances. Just get back to work.

As a part of our series about the work ethic lessons we can learn from professional athletes, I had the pleasure of interviewing Steve Jones. Steve achieved the American Dream through perseverance, hard work, and adaptability. A tenacious businessman, Steve is the current CEO of [Allied Universal](#), one of the world's top security and facility services companies. Under his leadership, Allied Universal grew from \$12 million to over \$8.2 billion in revenue in 20 years. Steve Jones is the author of [No Off Season: The Constant Pursuit of More](#) which follows Steve's journey from an aspirin NFL player to the CEO of the largest security and facility services corporation in North America. Steve began his security career with Universal Protection Service in 1996, after holding executive level and management positions within two Fortune 500 companies. Jones' vision for Allied Universal is to be the leader in integrated security solutions, offering clients manned guarding and systems technology to create the best possible security solution. Over the years, he has received numerous honors and awards including being named the top job creator for two consecutive years by Inc. Magazine, winning the Vistage International Leadership Award,



and earning the prestigious Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award. Additionally, he is a member of the Young Presidents' Organization and serves on various boards, including that of Allied Universal. Steve holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, and an MBA from the University of Redlands.

Thank you so much for doing this with us! It is a great honor. Our readers would love to learn more about your personal background. Can you tell us the story of how you grew up?

Participating in sports was the foundation of my childhood growing up in Livermore, California. I played them all. And, I must admit, I was good at all of them too but football was more than just a sport to me. Football was my love. I played it every chance I got. I was very lucky that my elementary school had its own football team, a real team that was part of a real conference with scheduled games and everything. As a fifth grader, I saw the Livermore Middle School football league as a feeder straight into the NFL.

Then one day the unthinkable happened: they cancelled football. There was something about “budgetary cuts”- this or “fiscal austerity”- that, but none of that adult nonsense meant anything to a ten-year-old who just wanted to get out on the field and play. Or, at least, none of it mattered to me. The only thing I knew for certain was that our season was cancelled, and we weren't going to be playing football any more. That just didn't sit well with me.



I got my friends together and we made up our own team. Then I put some other guys together and led them through the process of building their own roster. Then some more guys and some more teams.

Before anyone knew what was happening, I had put together a whole league. I scheduled the games and a post-season, too. The adults could take the funding out of the youth football program, but they couldn't keep the youth out of the football program — at least, not while I was in the mix.

What or who inspired you to pursue your career as a varsity athlete?

My greatest riches have come in the form of all the amazing people who have shaped my life in more ways than I could ever fully address. My father, Steve Jones, was my coach, hardest critic, confidant, life-guide, and best friend. He instilled in me a burning need to demand the best of myself, a ferocious work ethic, and an unshakable confidence in my ability to realize whatever dream I set my mind to. My mother, Gail Jones, was my greatest supporter, whether that was sitting in the stands on all those Friday nights and Saturday afternoons or whether it was the quiet moments we shared in which she offered me her unconditional love and unwavering faith. It would be no exaggeration to say that I simply would not be the man that I am today without her presence in my life.

None of us can achieve success without some help along the way. Was there a particular person who you feel gave you the most help or encouragement to be who you are today? Can you share a story about that?



Football has played an enormous role in shaping my life and I feel the need to thank all of my friends and teammates, my brothers-in-arms, who have put on pads and helmets and taken the field with me from elementary school right through college ball. In that same way, I am grateful to all of the coaches who led me out onto those fields and taught me the life lessons that the game offers.

I have had the great fortune of finding mentorship in a number of individuals who were generous enough to share their knowledge and experience with me, but I need to make special mention here of Dave Roberson, my high school friend's father, for always being there for me in extraordinary ways. In the same spirit as Richard Kiyosaki's best-seller Rich Dad, Poor Dad, I saw my own father as my "Hard Working Dad" and Mr. Roberson as my "Smart Working Dad."

While so many of the adults whom I encountered were inclined to interact with me solely on the basis of my role on the football team, Mr. Roberson seemed to take an almost immediate interest in me as the man he seemed confident I could become. From that first meeting, he was intent on grooming me to be prepared for taking on that future. For Mr. Roberson, this included always making sure that I always had enough cash in my pocket to hold my own with the other kids whose allowances and trust funds kept them consistently well-funded. Somehow, he understood that while my father had a good job and was an excellent provider, there wasn't a household income there that could give me the free-spending cash that all of my other peers took for granted.

With Mr. Roberson very much in mind, I have tried to incorporate his kind nature and anonymous acts of altruism into my management style.



Can you share the funniest or most interesting mistake that occurred to you in the course of your sports career? What lesson or take away did you learn from that?

It was 110 degrees, high sun, and a strong Santa Ana blowing. We were playing football versus Mount San Antonio College and they featured a running back named Leonard Russell, who would later go in the first round of the 1991 NFL Draft to the New England Patriots and would then run straight through pro defense after pro defense until he was named Offensive Rookie of the Year.

On that day, however, he ran straight into me. Over and over again. I'd no sooner get done with my defensive duties of trying to contain Leonard, then I was out on special teams. And then right back out on the offensive line. Then special teams. And then back to trying to stop the unstoppable Leonard Russell.

At the end of the first quarter, I was tired. During the half, I was exhausted. And by the time the clock had run on the third quarter, I was more like the walking dead ... with a full quarter still left to play.

Somewhere on that dizzying day, I missed a tackle on Russell. My coach was furious. He hollered at me to come to him at the sidelines, grabbed my face mask, and proceeded to chew me out for having let Russell get past me. I was beyond exhausted. Dehydrated and completely depleted. My head spun. The ground beneath me spun, too. And then I vomited. All over the coach's shoes.

When I was done retching, I just turned right around and went back out to my position as outside linebacker and doubled-down on my efforts to stop Russell.



What I didn't do was complain or offer excuses. The fact of the matter was that I had missed the tackle. There were reasons for it — excellent reasons and plenty of them — but I never offered one of them. Not to the coach. My teammates. Or myself.

There may have been excellent reasons, but not one of them mattered. The end result was the same. I had given up yards. End of story. Period.

In this world, you're going to face difficulties. Everyone does. And that's why no one is particularly interested in yours. Each of us already has plenty of our own.

OK, thank you for all of that. Let's now shift to the core focus of our interview. Can you tell us the story of your transition from an athlete to a successful business person?

My decision to attend Cal Poly, a serious academic institution attended by 20,000 young adults, marked the beginning of my transition to a business career. The vast majority of my Cal Poly peers were laser-focused on their studies and a future beyond the classroom. And suddenly I was one of them.

I was so far out of my element that I turned out for registration and class selection without any independent idea about what courses I should take or what major I should pursue. Not knowing exactly what to do, I called up my father and asked what he thought I should do.

Needing some sense of direction, I called my mentor, Dave Roberson, and asked him what he thought I should do.



He didn't hesitate either. "I was a political science major and I think that would be a good fit for you. Whatever you want to do afterward — law school, business, whatever — you'll be able to put your poly-sci degree to work."

It was an important moment. In a way, the doors of the world came open. My father had laid out one path to a very definite future and I understood that, but my mentor had sketched out another, more promising possibility.

Sports had always come easily to me. There had never been any real struggle for me there. Intellectually, I had always understood what I was supposed to do, and physically I had always possessed the skills necessary to get that done.

I considered them both and I saw both versions of my life, but in the end only one seemed like my life. I entered Cal Poly as a political science major.

Of course, declaring the major was the easiest part of getting the degree. Up to this point, I had never really applied the same merciless and methodical work process that I brought to football to my studies. Cal Poly demanded that I change that.

At the same time, however, I soon discovered that applying those same fundamental principles I'd learned on the practice and playing fields to my work in the classroom produced very similar success. It was simple. Show up prepared. Never accept less than your maximum effort. Be the hardest worker. Whatever the task may be, keep doing that until it becomes second nature. And then do it some more.



Through football, I accrued countless lessons that translated into some of my greatest business tactics. My credo is never give up, work harder — and longer — than anyone else, and you'll come out on top.



What are some of the most interesting or exciting projects you are working on now?

The industry is changing dramatically. The evolution I see in the security industry is the combination of security, technology and manned guarding. After the acquisition of AlliedBarton in 2016, we completed our strategic goal of becoming the #1 U.S. provider in manned guarding services. Now, our focus is to become a top integrated security systems provider by offering highly advanced technology services to our clients. We have been spending a lot of time talking about the future of security and have come to the conclusion that, over time, the lines between physical security and cyber security will begin to blur. Technology will unquestionably play a huge role going forward. This is why this year, we launched HELIAUS® — an all-encompassing adaptable workforce management solution. With prescriptive analytics tracking action,



HELIAUS transforms insight into safety and security ROI by utilizing artificial intelligence. With HELIAUS, our security professionals are always connected and engaged, situationally informed and armed with the right recommendations to effectively create safer, more secure environments.

Today and into the future, Allied Universal is continuing its commitment to security excellence and is focused on raising standards in the security industry.

Do you think your experience as a varsity athlete gave you skills that make you a better entrepreneur? Can you give a story or example about what you mean?

Failure will be part of your career and personal life. But you should never give up. Never accept less than your maximum effort. Whatever the task may be, keep doing that until it becomes second nature. And then do it some more. Be the hardest worker and you will eventually succeed.

During my football career in high school, giving up was never an option. I knew college scouts were looking at me to see what I could do on the football field. It was the second play of the game — the last play of my senior year — I felt a specific pain that I have become accustomed to and knew immediately that I separated my shoulder. There was no time for the now-all-too-familiar pattern of triage-rehab-return.

It was my senior year and I knew that everything was on the line, it was now or never. I decided to play through the excruciating pain and resulting limitations. Our team was having a good year and we had a shot to make the playoffs. I wasn't about to miss the opportunity or let my team or my dad down by not playing. I



wasn't about to let a little thing like my shoulder popping out of the socket every game hold me back.

Since there wasn't an opportunity for the surgery and rehab I needed, the trainers turned to what they thought was the next best solution: tape. Not quite duct tape, but the philosophy was basically the same. When the tape failed and my shoulder popped out of its socket, the trainers would pop it back in and put me back on the field. If it popped out again, they just popped it right back in.

Although I never stopped fighting — and I'm proud to say I more than held my own for a one-armed man — the injury was too much for me to put on the sort of season-long demonstration I knew I was capable of; the kind of show that would have drawn scholarship offers from Division I programs that I had wanted to be part of since the very first time I had ever put on pads.

The collegiate interest in me cooled. Despite all of my dedication hard work — and if I'm choosing honesty over modesty — all of my God-given talents, no one was interested. I was willing to make the necessary concessions that came in accepting that my plans of playing for a major Division I football powerhouse had been derailed, but I refused to accept that these results were final or to surrender my fate to any other force beyond my own determination.

I don't care what your goal is, whether that's on the playing field or in the boardroom. If your goal is big enough to sustain you for a lifetime, then there will certainly be times when you fall short. Never give up.



Ok. Here is the main question of our interview. Entrepreneurs and professional athletes share a common “hustle culture”. Can you share your “5 Work Ethic Lessons That Entrepreneurs Can Learn From Athletes”? Please share a story or an example for each.

- 1. Hard Work is Key:** The fundamental principle behind developing any skill is simply to put in the work, over and over again until it's perfect. Stay at it until you're absolutely certain you can't do anymore. And then work some more. Just like in sports, you have to put forth the effort, practice and prepare and then continue that cycle each and every day. As an athlete and now as a business leader, I came to every game and negotiation as a guy who worked the hardest to get himself ready for the action to begin.
- 2. Persistence:** Do not give up on your vision and goals. Stay focused and determined. Hardship is no excuse to give up. Success is no reason to let up. Every day, you have to make the most of what you got and then use that as a foundation to build on whether or not you arrived at this specific goal, you should always be working to better yourself. You should always be taking advantage of all the opportunities around you.
- 3. Setting Goals:** As an entrepreneur or a professional athlete, you should always set personal and business goals every year. Looking back now, I can see everything that I learned from my time playing football. It ingrained in me a certain work ethic and a determination to just keep grinding until I achieve my goals. It also taught me that you can pivot and change



directions and to adjust your game plan in order to come out a winner.

4. **Teamwork:** In today's business environment, most jobs involve being part of a team. A solid team can make or break a business. Be resilient — push your team members even further in order to achieve positive results. In sports, championships are not the result of one player's exceptional performance. They are earned by an entire team executing the roles they have been assigned in bringing their coaches game plan to fruition. Business is no different.
5. **Overcoming Adversity:** Failure will be a part of your life. So will adversity. I don't care what your goal is, whether that's on the playing field or in the boardroom. If your goal is big enough to sustain you for a lifetime, then there will certainly be times when you fall short. It's unavoidable. Don't blame others about your circumstances. Just get back to work.

What would you advise to a young person who aspires to follow your footsteps and emulate your career? What advice would you give?

Opportunities are not something that simply appear in your life by magic. And they're certainly not the product of waiting. Every opportunity is essentially a product of your own smarts, grit and willingness to work. As an athlete or in business, you need to learn to put the interests of your organization ahead of your own personal desires, especially those that are fueled and fed by nothing more substantial than the mere whims of ego. And I learned that sometimes in life you get dealt setbacks, put on a path other than the one you intended to walk and when that happens,



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the only thing you can do is put your head down and keep working. Never give up on your dreams.



You are by all accounts a very successful person. How have you used your success to bring goodness to the world?



Even though I have always been keenly focused on the success of my company, I have been equally committed to pushing every employee I have to realize their true potential as individuals. And rewards for this have been tremendous for all involved. At the end of the day, there is absolutely no question in my mind what a leader gets out of their team members is directly related to the investment that he/she is willing to make in them. That said, I have shared equity opportunities with hundreds of my executive leadership team so they feel invested in the business.

Throughout my quest for success, I have recruited, hired, mentored more than 1,000 students/eager up-and-coming entrepreneurs and athletes, not to mention coaching my son's football teams.

As the CEO, I made a commitment to employing men and women who have served in the military by helping advance their second career in the security industry. I am proud to say that we have hired over 33,000 veterans over the past five years. We connect veterans with military groups and offer training to ensure a smooth transition from the military to the business sector.

Can you share your favorite “Life Lesson Quote”? Why does that resonate with you so much?

“Success is not final; failure is not fatal: It is the courage to continue that counts.”

— Winston S. Churchill

We are very blessed that some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read



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this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this, especially if we both tag them :-)

Definitely Jeff Bezos! He set out with a massive vision to be highly disruptive and became extremely successful even after a series of trials and tribulations.

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