

An aerial view of a football stadium, tilted slightly. The field is green with white yard lines. The stands are filled with spectators, and a large amount of colorful confetti (red, yellow, green) is falling from the top of the frame, creating a celebratory atmosphere. The text is overlaid on this background.

FOREWORD BY ANDY ANDREWS
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HIGH-

A SPORTS AGENT'S SECRETS TO FINDING &

IMPACT

FULLFILLING A PURPOSE YOU CAN'T LOSE

LIFE

“Kelli Masters has an amazing story, and I’m so glad you all get to read about her commitment to her players and love for God. I promise this book will encourage you.”

JASON ROMANO, host of *Sports Spectrum* and author of *The Uniform of Leadership*

“Kelli’s story of sacrifice, humble beginnings, and laser focus is a true inspiration! In a culture where everyone is looking for a quick fix, *High Impact Life* reminds us how good old-fashioned hard work and determination pay off. Kelli’s passion is tangible. Her desire to shine a light on the God-given talent in each of us will undoubtedly motivate readers to reflect on their own journeys. This book will challenge you to create a purpose driven game plan for success . . . and a much more fulfilling life.”

ASHLEY BRATCHER, award winning actress, producer, and star of the box office hit *Unplanned*.

“Kelli Masters is one of top sports agents in the world, and I’ve been blessed to work with her and her athletes for over a decade. In this book, she shares her wisdom, insight, passion, and lessons on how to live a life worth telling a story about and ultimately create a High-IMPACT life. She’s a true pioneer, and this book will motivate and inspire you to live your deepest purpose and best life. It’s a MUST-read!”

TODD DURKIN, MA, CSCS; founder of Fitness Quest 10; author of *The IMPACT! Body Plan* and *Get Your Mind Right*; Lead Training Advisor & Ambassador of Under Armour

“*High-Impact Life* reads like an encouraging manual written by an old friend. Kelli effortlessly weaves the story of her life and faith, all while teaching you in the process. I have learned so much from her ground-breaking career that I can apply in my own life.”

RACHEL JOY BARIBEAU, founder of #ImChangingtheNarrative and former national sportscaster

“Kelli Masters is a trailblazer whose life story is one of defying the odds, of success, and of having an indelible impact on everyone she meets. *High Impact Life* is an authentic behind-the-scenes playbook that will take you on an invigorating, faith-filled journey of stepping out in faith and stepping into your divine destiny. This book will help you elevate your thinking and inspire you to make the most out of every opportunity.”

SCOTT WILLIAMS, CEO of Nxt Level Solutions, author, International Success Coach

HIGH-IMPACT LIFE



KELLI MASTERS

HIGH-

A SPORTS AGENT'S SECRETS TO FINDING &

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LIFE



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High-Impact Life: A Sports Agent's Secrets to Finding and Fulfilling a Purpose You Can't Lose

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FOREWORD

Have you ever seen the first official photograph taken of Margaret Thatcher and members of her Cabinet? At the moment the image was taken, Thatcher had just been sworn in as Prime Minister—the first woman to lead the government of England in the more than one thousand years of its history.

A casual glance at that captured moment reveals the Prime Minister seated in the center surrounded by twenty-four men, none of whom appear happy about the situation. Only a few of the men are attempting a smile and one—the third from Thatcher’s right in the first row—is actually scowling with his arms crossed.

Considering the monumental success Margaret Thatcher achieved for Great Britain and the free world, the photograph prompts me to laugh almost every time I see it. That image, frozen in time, also reminds me of my friend Kelli Masters.

Considering the monumental success Kelli has achieved for her clients and their families, plus her positive impact

on the NFL, Major League Baseball, the US Olympic Committee, and little girls everywhere . . . I can only wish there had been a snapshot taken that day in Washington, DC, when she took the exam for her sports agent license with three hundred men.

Better yet, I'd love to own a photograph of the moment six months later when Kelli walked into her first agent seminar at the NFL Combine. There, she was one of the only women among nine hundred men!

I first met Kelli a bit before she began the career transformation described in this book. Looking back now, knowing the pathway upon which she was about to embark, I can say with certainty that she was prepared—and not just intellectually. Kelli was ready in every way because she had so obviously worked on herself.

She had already completed a “life” transformation. By using every spare moment to read a wide variety of great books and by carefully seeking out wise mentors from whom she could learn, Kelli molded herself into the kind of person who succeeds in whatever he or she chooses to do.

As people read her “insider’s account” of breaking into a tough but fascinating industry, I know they will enjoy the details of Kelli’s story. It is my hope, however, that readers will also endeavor to mine these pages for the wisdom they contain and to understand what Kelli understands: She did not succeed because of who she was; she continues to succeed because of who she has become. And Kelli will be the first to tell you that she is still in the process of becoming!

FOREWORD

I have worked with many different kinds of people during the course of my career. Those like Kelli, who work to intentionally develop a high emotional IQ, consistently fare better in whatever career path they choose. Kelli has a fun, resourceful, and persistent leadership style that's both clear and effective. In fact, she has now become the greatest kind of leader—a person whom others naturally want to follow. In an industry where suspicion seems the norm, where people are never surprised by a dirty trick, Kelli has become loved and respected. What does that tell you?

So now . . . read the book. You'll soon see why those of us who have watched Kelli through the years are proud of her. No one will ever give you more cause for great hope than this fine woman.

I consider it a privilege to know Kelli Masters and call her my friend.

Andy Andrews

New York Times bestselling author
of *The Traveler's Gift* and *The Noticer*

INTRODUCTION

SO . . . WHAT DO *YOU* DO?

It's mid-August and my flight to Seattle is completely full. In less than twenty-four hours, the preseason will kick off, and one of my clients will play in his very first NFL game.

Recruiting him has been an exhausting exercise—the research, the road trips, the meetings, the joy-filled days of extreme confidence, and the agonizing nights of self-doubt—but it's been so worth the effort in the end. We're about to experience the moment we've talked about since day one. My client is finally going to fulfill his lifelong dream—and, for the first time in what feels like months, I can finally relax.

As the plane settles in at cruising altitude, I reach over and pull down the window shade, hoping to take advantage of the long flight to catch a little much-needed sleep. But before I can close my eyes, the gentleman sitting next to me glances my way, smiles politely, and asks, “Are you going to Seattle for business or pleasure?”

I smile back. “Business.”

He nods as he eyes my black ball cap, emblazoned with the “KMM Sports” logo. I know where this is going.

“So . . . ,” he continues, “what do you do?”

I pause for a second as the familiar debate ensues in my head: *Should I just tell him I’m a lawyer, or should I tell him the whole truth?* I decide to come clean.

“I’m a sports agent.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Seriously? Like Jerry Maguire?”

“Yep.”

“Wow. What sport?”

“Football, mostly,” I respond.

He shakes his head. “Man, talk about a dream job!”

If you only knew, I think.

Actually, the *Jerry Maguire* comparison isn’t that far off. In the movie, Jerry is an idealistic sports agent who ends up being fired from his large agency when he questions the dishonest way they do business. Down to two clients—one of whom coins the movie’s most famous phrase, “Show me the money!”—Jerry is devastated when an unscrupulous agent, Bob Sugar, swoops in and signs one of them the night before the NFL draft.¹ While the movie has a happy ending, I still have a hard time watching it because it hits so close to home. I guess I’ve been “Bob Sugared” one too many times.

In real life, there’s a lot more to my job than simply showing people the money, but like most people, my seatmate is more interested in the Hollywood angle: *What players do I represent? How many games do I get to go to every season? Do I stand on the sidelines, or do I get to sit in the owner’s box? Do*

I get free Super Bowl tickets? Have I ever met Peyton Manning or Tom Brady?

Honestly, none of his questions bother me. A lot of people make assumptions about my job based on what they see on television shows and in the movies. In their minds, it's all champagne, limousines, and private jets. But the reality looks a little different (think fast food, hotel shuttles, and sleeping in airport terminals). And contrary to popular belief, I don't only go to football games and negotiate contracts. Though I can and have gone toe-to-toe with some of the best negotiators in the business, that's *not* why I became a sports agent. It was never just about getting the most money for my clients. My role extends far beyond that.

Truth be told, it's the part of the job nobody ever asks about that gives me the most joy. What I am most passionate about is helping my clients discover their God-given potential and putting them on the path to becoming everything He made them to be—not just in football but in life.

Most of my clients are only twenty-one or twenty-two years old when we meet for the first time, and up until that point, their entire lives have revolved around football. I want them to understand that they are more than that—that their value as human beings is *not* defined by what they do on the field.

From the very beginning of our relationship, we discuss the big picture. Who do they want to become? What kind of impact do they want to make—at work, in their community, and in the world at large? What legacy do they want to leave?

We talk about all of the opportunities that lie ahead of them, both during their football careers and afterward. I help them identify potential pitfalls and learn from mistakes others have made over the years. Together, we pray for wisdom, and we map out a plan that will allow them to pursue greatness in every area of their lives.

Maybe some of you grew up knowing exactly what you wanted to be, and that's what you became. If that's the case, that's amazing. But for most of us, the trajectory looks a bit different. Perhaps you had ideas about what you wanted to accomplish, but due to life circumstances, you ended up settling on a job or career track because it pays the bills. Maybe you felt pressured to carry on a family business that isn't exactly in your sweet spot. Maybe you took a job you didn't really want, never intending to stay long, but then you

got comfortable. Now, years later, you're still there, feeling stuck. Or maybe you have specific passions or skills, but you have no idea how to channel them into a fulfilling career, ministry, or volunteer opportunity.

Regardless of where you are right now, please know this: You *do* have a calling, and that cannot

be taken away from you, regardless of your circumstances, past mistakes, or what anybody else may say or think. Your calling has nothing to do with being as good as or better than

Your calling has nothing to do with being as good as or better than anyone else. It is about finding and fulfilling the purpose you were meant to serve.

INTRODUCTION

anyone else. It is about finding and fulfilling the purpose you were meant to serve.

You are the first, last, and only you that has ever existed, and God gave you special gifts and talents for a reason. But *you* have to decide to walk out your divine calling and live out the mission you were born to fulfill. No one else on the planet can do what you were meant to do. It is up to you to take the necessary steps to become the very best version of yourself.

It is not going to be easy. In fact, when God calls you to do something, it may be harder than anything you would ever choose to do on your own. The only way you'll be able to accomplish it is with His help. But in the end, following God's call for your life is the only thing that lasts and the only thing that matters.

My goal is to do for you what I do with each of my athletes: to help you see who you truly are; to help you better understand the longings in your heart to accomplish more; to show you how to live a life that makes an impact; and to help you find fulfillment and purpose in your everyday life, starting right where you are.

So often we make inaccurate assumptions about ourselves. We beat ourselves up with negative self-talk. We compare ourselves to others and lose perspective. Sometimes we even lose hope. It's time to let go of all the things that keep us stuck in an unfulfilling place—fear, pride, confusion, weariness, and complacency. (Trust me, I've been there.)

You are fearfully and wonderfully made with unique gifts

HIGH-IMPACT LIFE

that, when deployed with passion and consistency, will allow you to flourish in ways you've never imagined possible. It is time to discover your true calling and fully become the person you were created to be. It is time for you to live a high-impact life.

Kelli Masters

Chapter 1

THREE HUNDRED MEN AND ME

FINDING YOUR CALLING

“Excuse me, where is the ballroom?”

The young bellhop glanced up at me and smiled. “Just down those stairs, ma’am.”

“Thank you!”

This was my first-ever stay at a five-star hotel (and, come to think of it, my *only*-ever stay at a five-star hotel), and my surroundings were both awe-inspiring and intimidating. I was at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Washington, DC, where approximately three hundred would-be agents would soon be put through a fast-paced review followed by a three-hour examination. I had studied and prepared for this moment for months. Well, I had prepared for the *test*. Nothing could have fully prepared me for the actual moment.

The stares.

The glares.

The whispers. “What is *she* doing here?”

A quick glance around the room confirmed I was the *only* woman taking the exam. Frankly, at that moment, I felt like the only woman for miles.

Most of the men looked to be around my age or younger, though there were a few “seasoned” individuals scattered throughout the room. I had purposely dressed professionally and conservatively because the last thing I wanted to do was draw attention to myself. But until that moment, the reality of the situation had escaped me. As a woman, I was alone in this quest. I was drawing unwanted attention to myself just by walking into the room.

As the stares and the whispers continued, I fought the urge to duck into the ladies’ room and never come out. Instead, I scanned the rows of long tables and chairs filling the cavernous ballroom. Finding an open spot midway toward the back, I quickly made my way there and slid quietly into my seat.

Even though I felt anxious and alone, I certainly wasn’t the only one feeling the heat. The pressure was on for all of us. We had already survived a months-long vetting process to get here. Once our applications had been approved by the NFL Players Association (NFLPA), we had each been sent a large stack of documents to study and an invitation to the “New Agent Seminar” (a misnomer since most applicants who attend the seminar *fail* the certification exam and

don't actually become agents). We were about to complete the seminar, which was really just a review of the materials they had sent to us, and soon it would be time for the exam, a three-hour, multiple-choice test over every conceivable issue we would face as agents for NFL players—everything from the rules of free agency to what to do when a player gets injured or fails a drug test. The agent exam is given just once a year, and applicants have only two chances to pass before they are forced to wait another five years to reapply. So to say the mood in the room was tense is definitely an understatement.

Just as the NFLPA's director of salary cap and agent administration stepped to the platform to give a final overview of the collective bargaining agreement (the labor agreement between the NFL and the Players Association), a handsome young man with blondish hair rushed into the room carrying a large briefcase. He was dressed in a sharp gray suit and looked as if he had just escaped from some fancy Washington, DC, law firm. As he took the seat right in front of me, he glanced back, and I realized that I knew him. He had been a law school classmate of mine at the University of Oklahoma (OU). We had lost touch after graduation, when he left to take a job with the Department of Justice.

"Hey!" he said, smiling widely. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, sports law is going to be a new practice area for me," I explained. "I didn't know *you* were going to be here!"

He went on to tell me how his brother, while in California

pursuing an acting career, had become friends with a number of high-profile college football players. That gave my former classmate the idea to branch out into agenting.

“We already have some clients lined up for when I pass this test,” he admitted.

I smiled, but inside I shuddered. Suddenly it dawned on me that I had no future clients in the pipeline, no connections, and no idea how to even go about *making* connections. My confidence began to plummet.

“By the way,” he asked casually, “did you study at all for this test? I haven’t really had time.”

“A little,” I said, nodding. Actually, for the past several months, I’d done nothing *but* study for this exam. I’d pored over everything from split contracts and salary cap allocations to restricted free agency and everything else an agent needed to know in this industry. In order to become an NFL agent, candidates must have earned either a law degree or another graduate degree, and my Juris Doctorate and several years of experience practicing law had certainly helped me grasp the materials.

I’d felt prepared, but now fear and doubt started to creep in. *Even if I do pass this test, then what? Who are my future clients? How will I find them? How will I know what to do between finding those future clients and negotiating their contracts? And what happens after that?* Anxiety and a sense of personal inadequacy overwhelmed me. I closed my eyes and fell back in my chair.

How did I even get here?

THE MAKING OF AN AGENT

As a little girl, my earliest memories always involved football. In my home state of Oklahoma, football is king. Oklahomans plan their schedules and important life events according to the University of Oklahoma (OU) football season. For example, it is *not* okay to get married on the second weekend in October. That is OU/Texas weekend. Everybody knows it, and no one will come to your wedding. End of story.

As I grew up, my Friday nights revolved around high school games. In fact, if I close my eyes, I can still feel the crisp autumn air and hear the high school band and cheerleaders filling the night with cheers and chants. Saturdays were spent watching either OU or Oklahoma State play on television or listening to the game on the radio. On Sundays, my father's entire family would gather for a delicious potluck lunch at my grandparents' house. After lunch, we would watch either the Dallas Cowboys or Pittsburgh Steelers game on TV while my dad and his brothers napped on couches and recliners around the house and the cousins played football in the front yard.

On special Saturday mornings, we would go to Morgan's Bakery for doughnuts and watch our hometown parades with the high school marching band, majorettes, floats, and fire trucks. But on *really* special Saturdays, we would drive to the OU campus in Norman, Oklahoma, dressed head to toe in crimson and cream to watch the Oklahoma Sooners play in person.

After parking behind a stranger's house on Lindsey Street—usually right on their lawn, alongside other Sooner fans willing to pay an unreasonable amount of cash for a spot in a makeshift parking lot—we would fast-walk toward the towering football stadium. The sound of the drumline warming up on the lawn outside the stadium still rings in my head, and the smell of hot dogs grilling in the tailgate area beside the Duck Pond is burned into my memory.

To me, football game day was magical. The fans cheering, the band playing “Boomer Sooner” (OU's fight song) over and over and over, and the team rushing onto the field before the game followed by the famous Sooner Schooner—a covered wagon pulled by two ponies that serves as OU's official mascot. The pageantry of it all made my heart leap with joy.

My dad, who had played quarterback in high school and had been a play-by-play radio announcer since college, was exceedingly patient with my incessant questions. He sat my twin sister and me down at age five and gave us our first “chalk talk,” explaining how the Xs and Os represented players and their movements on the field. From then on, I was hooked. I didn't want to be only an observer in the stands. I wanted to be out there on the field, involved in the action. I knew as a girl I couldn't actually play football, but still, the longing was there. I wanted to be part of the game, somehow, someday.



After I finished my bachelor's degree in journalism at OU, I decided to follow in my father's footsteps and go to law school. I absolutely fell in love with it. Understanding the judicial system at a deeper level made me realize the power we have as Americans to fight for what is right and make a real difference in others' lives. Don't get me wrong, law school was incredibly difficult, and every single day was a battle. Many, many days I was ready to quit, but my deep passion for seeking justice saw me through.

After I graduated from law school, I became an associate at one of the largest and most prestigious firms in Oklahoma. My primary focus was on civil litigation, tackling complex disputes such as shareholder derivative suits and bad faith insurance claims. My life was dedicated to my craft, and my number one goal became making partner in my law firm. But while I knew I was good at my job, the subject matter of my cases—insurance, bank law, and business disputes—did not ignite passion within me. Instead, my fulfillment came from another area: nonprofit organization law.

While my litigation practice paid the bills, it was the work I did for charities, ministries, and other service-oriented organizations that filled my soul. Clients would come to me with a vision for making a difference in the world—feeding the hungry, fighting injustice, providing opportunities to those who had lost hope—and it was my responsibility to help make their vision a reality. They knew what they wanted to accomplish in the world; I knew how to prepare and file organizing documents, applications, policies, and bylaws to

allow them to do it the right way. It was an honor to help others pursue their missions to impact lives around the globe, and my reputation as a skilled attorney who could help nonprofits grew. Still, I felt as if everything I was doing was leading to something else . . . something even bigger.

In 2004, that “something” started to become clear when I connected with Josh Heupel. Josh was the quarterback who brought the OU football program back to prominence by winning the national championship in 2000. After a short stint in the NFL, Josh wanted to use his notoriety and influence to leave a legacy by helping needy families across Oklahoma and by setting up athletic camps for kids. He decided to do so through his own nonprofit organization, and thus “The #14 Foundation” was born. But issues arose that Josh and his family weren’t quite sure how to handle, so they reached out to me for help.

So much of my career to that point had been consumed with trial law—civil lawsuits, fraud and defamation cases, contract disputes—in other words, people fighting with one another and relationships falling apart. Frankly, it was like a breath of fresh air to help someone whose dreams had come true with a foundation whose sole focus was helping others and building people up.

I met with Josh and his parents to discuss his goals for the foundation and get a clearer picture of the issues they were facing. From there, I helped them navigate all the necessary paperwork and legal red tape to ensure that both Josh and his foundation would be successful over the long haul.

In this role, I began to ask questions about other business and legal matters a professional athlete must handle—things like: “Who helps you set up your speaking engagements? Do you use a contract template? Who’s in charge of negotiating your fees and making sure you get paid? Do you have an accountant? Have you set up an LLC yet?” The more questions I asked, the more I realized that many professional athletes are in way over their heads, *even if they’ve hired agents*. While players may have supportive families, they need the right advisers to guide them with wisdom and expertise on a multitude of legal and financial issues.

I spent the next several weeks walking the family through the process of revising policies and procedures for Josh’s foundation, making sure that everything we did was in accordance not only with NCAA rules and regulations but with the state and the IRS as well.

At one point, Josh’s mother looked at me, glassy-eyed, and said, “Where were *you* in the beginning? If you’d been an agent, we would have signed with you in a heartbeat.”

I felt for her. Josh was still in his early twenties. He’d essentially gone from college student to CEO of his own company overnight. Sure, he had his parents to help guide him, but what he really needed was an attorney, an accountant, a financial adviser, and a business manager. A good agent would be able to fulfill those roles and help build a team of professionals around him. His situation made me think of all the other players and families out there who needed this

help and also wanted to work with people they could trust . . . people who genuinely cared.

I'd never really thought about it before, but I realized that as soon as these young athletes get drafted or sign with a team, most of them suddenly find themselves with more money, choices, and influence than they've ever had in their lives. *Who helps them manage all of that? I wondered. Who helps them plan for the future? Protects them? Advocates for them? Makes sure they aren't taken advantage of? And what if they get injured? Who's helping them prepare for life after the NFL, helping them see how they can use their influence and platform to help others?*

That's when everything clicked. I could pool all the skills, knowledge, and experience I had acquired as an attorney with my passions for football and for serving others. If I became an agent, all of those things would combine to help me provide guidance and protection to young athletes like Josh.

By following my passions, I had found my calling.

Granted, not everyone was as excited about it as I was. When I shared my new career choice with my friends and colleagues, they gave me some . . . well . . . feedback.

"Why would you walk away from a great law practice?"

"Why would you start a sports agency in Oklahoma City? Don't you need to live in New York or LA to be a successful agent?"

"You should talk to other lawyers who have tried doing that. It's *impossible* to be successful in that business."

"You're going to lose more money than you make."

“What makes you think you could be a football agent? You’ve never played football.”

And, of course, my favorite: “What do you know about football? You’re a girl!”

In spite of their “support,” I dug in and started doing extensive research, cold-calling every coach and athlete I knew and grilling them about their experiences dealing with sports agents. Unfortunately, most of them felt as though the agents they dealt with were largely in it for the money, focusing on the big names and ignoring the rest. The phrase I heard over and over again was “overpromised and underdelivered.” And I couldn’t find one person who said that his agent offered him any advice or preparation for life *after* football.

I also called countless agencies. The larger agencies didn’t even respond. Most of the mid-level groups said they would only be interested in talking with me about being a client services assistant, marketing rep, or some other supporting role, not a certified agent. I knew working in that capacity wouldn’t allow me to do the work I was envisioning.

And of course, I reached out to as many agents as I could find. Only one took my call—Kristen Kuliga. Like me, Kristen had started out as a lawyer, handling athletic marketing, sponsorships, and licensing deals for Woolf Associates out of Boston. When the founder retired, Kristen took on some of his clients, and in 2001, she became the first female agent to negotiate a starting NFL quarterback’s contract

when she brokered a \$33 million deal between Doug Flutie and the San Diego Chargers.

We didn't talk long, but Kristen was incredibly helpful and encouraging. Still, her message came through loud and clear: I was going to face an uphill battle, and being a woman in a predominantly male industry wasn't going to make things any easier. Even so, I couldn't shake that feeling I got when Josh's mom looked up at me, completely overwhelmed, and asked, "Where were *you* in the beginning?"

What if Josh were my son? What if any of the athletes I've spoken to over the past several months were mine? I can't even get these big agencies to return a simple phone call. Who's going to pick up the phone when one of these kids gets hurt or gets cut from a team or just needs help?

Over the next several weeks, I created a business plan for starting my own agency, plus a financial document projecting how much money I would need to get me through the application and certification process. Then I pulled everything I had out of savings; borrowed the difference from friends and family, vowing to pay them back as soon as I could; and filed my application to become a certified agent.

I can still remember the way my hand shook when I signed the application and how I felt on that long, lonely walk to the mailbox. My critics' voices were echoing in my head, but with each step, the voices faded further and further into the background. As the envelope left my fingertips and disappeared into the mailbox, seemingly in slow motion, my destiny was set. There was no turning back.

EYES WIDE OPEN

Back in the ballroom, the proctor began passing out the certification exam booklets. As he placed the packet facedown in front of me, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. In my mind, an unexpected vision emerged.

I saw a group of little boys, maybe six or seven years old, playing football in their backyard. They were just kids from the neighborhood, wearing no pads and using a worn, slightly deflated, kid-sized football, each one pretending to be his favorite player and fighting for the ball. Most likely they'd never seen an NFL game in real life. But they were playing—and dreaming.

As I watched, I sensed that, someday, those little boys were going to need me to guide them through the process of leaving college and playing in the NFL. They would need to know what to expect and how to prepare each step of the way. I would need to be there for them through the highs and lows, the major and minor decisions, the challenges brought on by becoming a professional in every sense of the word, and the difficulties that might accompany one day leaving the game behind. Those little boys and their families needed me to pass this test so that I would be prepared to help them realize their dreams and become everything God intended them to be.

In that moment, a sense of total peace washed over me. The proctor's voice broke in. "You have three hours."

As I glanced up at the clock on the wall and flipped open

my exam book, all of the negative voices in my head began to fade away. I was *exactly* where I was supposed to be, doing *exactly* what I was born to do. And no matter what anyone else said or thought, that was all I needed to know. I had followed my passions, and they had led me to my true calling.

And nothing—literally, nothing—was going to stop me from fulfilling it.

PASSION + PURPOSE = CALLING

Though it's often described to me as a “dream job,” becoming a sports agent was not something I ever intended to pursue. Even when *Jerry Maguire* first came out, I never once thought, “Hey—now there's something I'd like to try!”

Yes, I love football. And yes, I love the law. Both are passions of mine. But that's not why I became an agent. I got into agenting because I wanted to help young athletes make the difficult transition from college to professional sports. I wanted to help them understand that they are more than what they do on the field, and I wanted to help them see how they could use their unique gifts and platforms to positively impact others. Those are the things I value. Those are the things I cling to when the going gets tough. Those are the things that make what I do not just a job but part of a larger calling.

So what exactly is a calling? Growing up in the Bible Belt, I always thought of a “calling” as a super spiritual moment when the booming voice of God suddenly shattered the silence to tell you that you had been chosen to be

a full-time pastor or missionary. Obviously, I figured, this only happened to certain, very special people. However, as I got a little older and my faith deepened, I realized that every human being has a calling—something that we were put on this earth to accomplish.

God gives each of us special skills, talents, and passions. Our job is to find a way to use them—not just for our own enjoyment but to help serve others and, in doing so, serve God. That added sense of purpose—that sense that you are contributing to something bigger than yourself—is what defines a calling. Passions are for your benefit. A calling turns those passions outward to benefit others.

Granted, the path may not always be as straight as an arrow. Goodness knows, mine wasn't. But if you continue to press in and follow your passions, God will point you in the right direction and show you what He's calling you to do. You just have to trust Him.

When I think about the path that led me to my career as a sports agent, I think of Proverbs 3:5-6: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths" (NKJV).

So often, we do lean on our own understanding. We look at the reality of our circumstances, and we apply our own reasoning and logic to those circumstances. We fail to trust and acknowledge God in the midst of it all.

But the truth is God loves us more than we will ever comprehend, and He cares about every detail of our lives.

He made us who we are. All the passions you have, all the dreams that are rooted deep within your heart—they're from Him. If you trust Him, He will lead you step by step as you pursue those passions. And in doing so, you will discover your calling.

Let me stop here for a moment and explain something. As you can probably already tell, my faith is very important to me, and my desire to fulfill God's calling on my life is at the core of everything I do. As I share personal experiences and important lessons in this book, I can't be fully myself without being transparent about my faith. But it is not my practice to expect everyone to believe exactly the way I do. I want you to be able to glean wisdom from these pages, whether or not faith is a part of your life. Yes, I am a Christian—a flawed human being who discovered God's love, mercy, and grace and, therefore, believes. Yet I have close friends and clients who are not Christians, and a difference in faith has never caused issues in any of those relationships because we show love and respect for each other. We learn from each other and grow.

As you read these chapters, my hope is that you will understand where I am coming from. Regardless of your spiritual beliefs, I hope you will receive what I have to say in a way that enhances your life and inspires you.



When I first started thinking about becoming an agent, I wasn't sure I had what it took to make it. But the more I

talked to family and a few close friends, the more they started pointing out all the ways God had been preparing me for this career from the get-go. I had a journalism degree, a law degree, and a background in athletics. (I trained and competed internationally in baton twirling for more than fifteen years—motivated in large part by my desire to be a part of the OU football experience. As an OU feature twirler, I had a chance to perform on the football field before each game and at halftime.) Thanks to an internship with a local CBS affiliate in college, I had experience working with the media. And, of course, as an attorney, I had loads of experience negotiating contracts and mediating between opposing parties.

Even then, as a natural introvert, I questioned whether I had the right personality for this job. But once again, my friends and family were quick to point out that even though I tend to be quiet, when I latch on to something, I become a fierce advocate. “Besides,” they said, “you should see how your eyes light up when you start talking about doing this.”

Eventually, I realized they were right. God had given me the training, the skills, and most of all, the passion. Even those around me could see it. I felt a confidence that I knew came from something bigger than me, and it showed.

WHAT DRIVES YOU?

What is it that motivates you each and every day? Is it primarily your paycheck? If so, it’s okay to admit it. But the mere fact that you’ve picked up this book tells me that money isn’t your only motivator. I don’t know where you’re at right

now professionally, financially, emotionally, or spiritually, but I can promise you this: If you do not have a strong sense of purpose guiding your decisions, odds are whatever work you do will leave you feeling empty and unsatisfied—no matter *what* your paycheck says.

One of the things I always ask my clients when we first sit down together is “Who do you want to become?” Of course, the obvious answer is “A professional football player.” But the shelf life of a professional athlete, especially in a heavy contact sport like football, is fleeting. In fact, it’s not at all uncommon for NFL players to retire by the time they’re thirty. The truth is most of my clients will spend more of their lives as *former* football players than they will as active players. And just as I commit to doing everything in my power to help them make the most out of their time in the league, I also want to position them to be equally successful *after* their NFL careers are over. That’s why it’s important to get them thinking about the big picture early and often.

Right from the start, I ask them what kind of impact they want to make on others and what legacy they want to leave. And yes, these are big questions—especially for a twenty-two-year-old whose entire life up to this point has been laser-focused on football. And yet in many respects, it’s not all that different from asking a forty-five-year-old facing a career change what he or she wants to accomplish. When so much of your life has been spent pursuing one career path, thinking about doing something else can feel overwhelming, no matter how old you are.

So with my clients, we start small. We talk about things like: What makes you jump out of bed in the morning, excited to start the day? What keeps you up late at night, working for hours and hours without even realizing you're doing it? When you take breaks or need to clear your head, what do you find yourself thinking about, reading about, or doing? Or my personal favorite: If money were not an issue, what would you like to do for the rest of your life? The answers to these questions help you identify your passions.

But remember, it's not just about identifying what you're passionate about; it's also about discovering what fuels that passion.

In the case of my clients, if all they're passionate about is *playing* football, what happens after their playing days are over? They might fall into the trap of thinking that their best days are behind them or that there's nothing more they can contribute. But if we can tap into what it is about the game that they truly love, suddenly a whole world of opportunities opens up to them. A player who has a passion for strategy or game planning might go on to become a coach. Someone who has a knack for seeing talent in others might one day serve as a scout, identifying potential recruits. Someone who loves the fitness component of the game might find a rewarding second career as a personal trainer or even go back to school to study sports medicine.

The point is God gives these young men the passion and the skills they need to play professional football, but often-times, the experience they have in the league will shine a light

on what they really love. Your passions and skills can do the same work of revealing what drives you.

FOLLOW THE PATH

A few years back, I represented a young running back out of Nevada named Steffhon. He wasn't chosen in the NFL draft, but he got picked up by the Tennessee Titans as a free agent. Unfortunately, he only lasted one weekend in training camp before being cut from the team. When I called him to deliver the news that his short NFL career was likely over (and yes, in case you're wondering, that *is* part of my job), I expected him to be devastated. After all, he'd been working for this opportunity his entire life. But he wasn't. In fact, he sounded more excited than he had the day the Titans signed him.

Why? Earlier that summer, I had taken a group of my clients on a mission trip to Haiti. I realize that may sound odd, but many of these young men were transitioning out of college into the intimidating world of professional football. As they prepared to report for training camp with all the experienced veteran players, they stood on the cusp of seeing whether their dreams would come true . . . or not. Most of these guys head into that first season feeling like they have the weight of the world on their shoulders. They're dealing with sky-high expectations from coaches, family, and friends; media scrutiny; and financial obligations they've never had to deal with before. Taking them to a developing country like Haiti, Rwanda, or Uganda gives them some much-needed perspective and a reminder of how much they really have been blessed.

We spent a lot of time during that trip talking about personal goals, the impact these young men's football careers would have on their relationships, and how to stay grounded and focused amid all the pressures and temptations they would experience as a result of who they are and what they do. I even brought along Brad McCoy, former coach and the father of NFL quarterback Colt McCoy, to teach some professional development and life skills sessions and to help lead Bible studies in the mornings.

Well, one day toward the end of the trip, Stephon rushed over to me with a gigantic smile on his face and said, "Mama Kells, if I wasn't playing football professionally, I would want to do this!"

"Do what?" I asked him.

"This!" he repeated. "What you're doing. Helping athletes prepare for life after football. As soon as my NFL career is over, I want to go back to school, get my graduate degree, and help mentor young athletes."

Needless to say, I was floored. It was the most affirming thing I'd ever heard. The last time I spoke with him, he was in the process of becoming an associate athletic director with an emphasis on player development.

God gave him the passion and the skills to get into the NFL—if only briefly—and in the process of following that passion, he discovered his true calling.

I had another client, Cody, who also played for the Titans and made it through the entire preseason before being cut. He went on to play football in Europe and then briefly in

Canada before finally ending up in the Arena league, an American indoor football league, where he suffered a serious concussion that put the rest of his professional career in question.

As it happens, Cody was a strong Christian, and I'd heard him share his faith with teammates and at other events. Whenever he started talking about God, his eyes would light up, and he would completely come alive. So one day, as it started to become clear that his football career was winding down, I asked him if he'd be willing to do a few speaking engagements with Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Not only did he jump at the chance; he was great at it! People loved hearing him talk about his time in professional football, and sharing the peaks and valleys of his career gave him a humility and depth that made his message even more powerful. Today, that young man has a thriving career in public speaking and has impacted hundreds of thousands of lives around the globe.

Like Steffhon, Cody had a God-given passion for football that put him on the path. He followed where it led, and God did the rest. And He can do the same for you, too!

ASK. SEEK. KNOCK.

Odds are, you already have an inkling of what your passions and talents are. Be mindful of them and see where they take you—bearing in mind that your calling doesn't necessarily have to be a full-time job. Just because you love to bake doesn't mean you have to become a professional pastry chef to be fulfilled or to give back to others. Teaching a class at a local library,

community college, or senior or rec center can be a wonderfully rewarding way to use your talents to help or inspire others. Love animals but not sure you're up to veterinary school? Try volunteering at a local shelter, getting involved with a program that helps train service animals, or helping at your local wildlife refuge. Enjoy playing the piano or guitar? Volunteer to play at church or at a local retirement center, give lessons to others, or make your own personalized recordings to share with family and friends. Whatever your passion is (and it may very well be a hobby you have right now), be deliberate about nurturing it and looking for ways to expand it to have an impact beyond just yourself. You may even discover another passion in the process!

Whatever your passion is . . . be deliberate about nurturing it and looking for ways to expand it to have an impact beyond just yourself.

If you're not yet sure what your God-given passions or skill sets are, ask those around you. Sometimes friends and family can point out giftings that you never noticed, like I did for my client with the talent for public speaking. Listen to them. And try to stay open, even if what they are suggesting doesn't make sense at first blush. Looking inward is important, but sometimes the view from the outside is even clearer. Just as my friends noticed how much I lit up when I talked about becoming an agent, it will quickly become obvious to those around you when you discover your passion and begin to pursue it. Do not ignore those observations.

Some of my clients have been so hyper-focused on football that they haven't even had an opportunity to explore other areas of interest. In these cases, I have a special advisory council comprised of people from a wide variety of professions—such as Brad McCoy—that I offer up as mentors. These are people my clients can talk with to find out more about a given career, see if it might be a fit, and if so, decide what the next steps might look like, either now or a few years from now. Granted, there isn't a lot of downtime for professional athletes, but many players do take college classes or online courses during the off-season—sometimes to work toward finishing their degree and sometimes to test the waters in another area they've always been interested in.

If you're on the fence about a particular career, you might consider auditing an online course or enrolling in a night class. Maybe you've always enjoyed tinkering with cars but lack the formal coursework required to become a licensed mechanic. Maybe you have a flair for interior decorating or gardening but don't know the terminology or latest trends. Whatever your area of interest, odds are there is an online course, workshop, or seminar available to help you take the next step. Community colleges are often filled with people looking to start a second career or pursue a calling that had to be put on hold for one reason or another, so you'll probably find a few kindred spirits in the mix.

Also, don't be afraid to reach out and talk to others in your field of interest. Many people are more than happy to tell you about what they do, how they got involved in it,

what they love about it, and what they don't. Listen to what they have to say. They may sour you on the idea completely (not all careers are as exciting as they look), or they may light a fire inside of you to take the next step!

Above all, ask God for wisdom and direction. After all, He's the one who created you and knows you best. Matthew 7:7-8 assures us that He will hear and respond when we approach Him: "Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE

The bottom line is I encourage my clients to start thinking about their lives after football—asking questions and exploring opportunities early and often—and I encourage you to do the same as you think about what's next for you. And just as it's never too early to start thinking about who you want to be and what you want to accomplish in life, please hear me say this: It is *never* too late!

As long as there's breath in your body, you have the capacity to make an impact on the world around you. How and where is up to you. But be ready—the answer may surprise you. If you had told me twenty years ago that today I would be running my own sports agency, I would have laughed out loud. And yet, here I am, exactly where God wanted me to be.

So who do you want to become? What kind of impact do you want to make on others? What is the legacy you want to leave?

Do some soul searching. Think about the things that bring you joy and the things you're good at. Ask others what qualities or skills they see in you. Explore other opportunities and areas of interest. Start small. Keep your eyes, ears, and heart open. And most important, surrender your plans to God. He made you who you are, He knows who you will become, and He has already put you on the path to getting

there. Trust Him—even when the path goes someplace unexpected. Remember that God doesn't waste anything. Every experience, every encounter, every peak, and every valley is there for a reason.

He made you who you are, He knows who you will become, and He has already put you on the path to getting there.

I realize that may be difficult for you to believe, especially if faith in God has never played a major role

in your life. But I truly believe that He does have a plan for every single human being on this earth—including you!

Jeremiah 29:11 says, “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (NIV). I hope you'll come to believe that. I do, and I can honestly say that it has made all the difference as I have sought and found my calling.

Now let's get started. Your future is waiting.

DEVELOPING YOUR GAME PLAN

1. How might you answer a few of the questions I pose to my clients: *What makes you jump out of bed in the morning? What keeps you up late at night? Or If money were not an issue, what would you like to do for the rest of your life?* What might the answers to these questions reveal about your passions?
2. Reread Jeremiah 29:11. Do you believe that God has a plan for your life? If so, how does that belief give you an increased sense of meaning or purpose?
3. What are some gifts, talents, or passions others have noticed in you? Ask a few trusted friends, family members, or coworkers what strengths they see in you and how they think you might be able to use them to serve others. If they had to guess at your calling, what would it be?
4. One key question for all of us is this: *Who do I want to become?* Take a few minutes to consider your answer, and jot down the words that come to mind. What's one step you could take today toward becoming the person you want to be?

