



## **After the Buzzer**

Episode 15: Sean Frazier, Athletic Director at Northern Illinois University

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Bob Wallace:

Welcome to After the Buzzer. I'm Bob Wallace, Chair of the Sports Law Practice at Thompson Coburn in St. Louis. We specialize in representing entities with sports interest, whether it's acquisitions, facilities, real estate deals, or contract negotiations. We have lawyers with a lot of experience in these areas. I started doing these podcasts to highlight a lot of great people involved in sports, and I wanted to let our listeners meet them. Today we have one of the rising stars and college athletic leaders: Sean Frazier, the athletic director at Northern Illinois University, where he has been for eight years. Under Sean's guidance, the Northern Illinois Huskies have been historically competitive on the field, academically and socially. Sean is a tireless fundraiser and his success doing so has transformed the Northern Illinois facilities. It benefits student athletes and fan experience. His fundraising powers have resulted in an average of \$2.5 million in donations. On the field, the Huskies have won the Mid-American Championship in football, basketball, wrestling, gymnastics, volleyball, tennis, cross-country.

Northern Illinois has also won the Mid-American Conference Fred Jakobi trophy presented to the top women athletics programs and won the NCA Minority Opportunities Athletic Association diversity and inclusion award. And Sean himself was honored with the distinguished service award. Sean is a recognized NCA leader and an active member of the National Association of Collegiate Athletic Directors serving on its Executive Committee. Sean is a Long Island native and football player at the University of Alabama from 1987 to 1991. Prior to coming to Northern Illinois, Sean worked at Meramec College, Boston University and Manhattansville College. Sean also holds a Master's degree in higher education from the University of Maine. Known also for his leadership in diversity, inclusion and leadership, Sean recently chaired Lead1, an association of college athletic directors working group on diversity and inclusion which has offered a white paper on actionable recommendations to make more diverse leadership in the NTA division on football. It is my pleasure to welcome Sean to After the Buzzer. Sean, thank you for joining me. I appreciate that. Let me ask a question, the first question. Where are you from in Long Island?

Sean Frazier:

It'd be Huntington. Township of Huntington. So, I'm a proud Long Islander. Proud Long Islander here.

Bob Wallace:

Okay. I'm from, I went to, I'm from Jamaica, New York.

Sean Frazier: Okay.

Bob Wallace: Yeah, and I went to school out in Woodmere, Long Island, and my mother lives in Sag Harbor, Long Island. So tell me, what made you decide to get into college athletics?

Sean Frazier: Being a student athlete, you know, got a scholarship in high school and went on to play in college. The University of Alabama was a great environment, especially for football and just all things athletics. Coming out of graduation, I will had a fire to be involved in collegiate athletics, athletics in general, and went into coaching ranks but I didn't have the fire to be a college coach even though I did coach football - I was involved with youth sports. I wanted to be in administration and had a mentor by the name of Jim Livengood, who is a former athletic director at the University of Arizona. We got together in an NCAA program and you know, not necessarily what you think about when you become an athletic director but wanted to be something in college athletics and he really befriended me and put me on a path of saying that hey, you know, this is a great deal for you. You have a passion, you want to make changes, you want to make the athlete environment one that is nurturing and things fell into line and I was mentored by some great people, Jim being one, Guy Alvarez, who was a Deputy Athletic Director at the University of Wisconsin, and then Dr. Sherry Clark was Dean of Multicultural Student Affairs at the University of Maine who really was the one that said hey, you know, you can throw the rope back over the fence and be very impactful with this platform. So that's what kind of what happened. It was a long way to say that I followed my passion and coaching and athletic administration were the vehicle for me to do that.

Bob Wallace: Well, now you say you didn't have the passion to be a coach. Was it the hours, I mean, I'm sure you're not working 200 hours being the A.D. --

Sean Frazier: Yeah.

Bob Wallace: -- Than you were if it was a coach.

Sean Frazier: Yeah, that's a good point. That's a really good point. I think that what I meant by that is that in coaching I can impact one particular sport and one particular set of lines wherein athletic administration I touch multiple sports across administrative lines or working with shared governance programs on campus and in the community so that's what it was. I was feeling a bit that okay this is where we're going to be and I'm tied to a particular agenda that only deals with in my afterthought around football versus what I could do possibly on the greater good across a lot of different people's lives. So that was where I was missing. I just felt like I was missing something and I think the administration provided that.

Bob Wallace: Okay. Now, who's the head coach at Alabama when you played?

Sean Frazier: I had a number of them. I had Ray Perkins, I had Bill Curry and my last year I had Gene Stalling. So I had some really great coaches.

Bob Wallace: Gene and I worked together when I was with the St. Louis Cardinals, and Arizona Cardinals, and he was the head coach then.

Sean Frazier: Yep, yep. Great man, he's a great man.

Bob Wallace: I'd say I heard Gene give a speech to a team before preseason and I wanted to go play.

Sean Frazier: Yeah, he was, you know like, obviously he was with the Bear, he coached with the Bear, Texas A&M, he's a Texan, he's a player's coach. He really during that time of transition for us, he brought in a sense of pride and determination. Won a national title '92 - I had already left and started a coaching career but he was always that person I said, you know, I wish I would have, I spent more time with him. He had a special needs --

Bob Wallace: Right.

Sean Frazier: -- Son, Danny, and, you know, it was just, you know, you could tell he was more than just a coach to a lot of us, so.

Bob Wallace: And now what position did you play? What were you, a --

Sean Frazier: I was recruited as a fullback and then ended up as a defensive back, a hybrid linebacker for the Tide. So yeah, it was an interesting thing. I came in as a blocking fullback for a Heisman Trophy candidate, Buddy Humphries was his name --

Bob Wallace: Okay.

Sean Frazier: -- And, Hump was unbelievable but a guy by the name of Kevin Turner beat me out -- who ended up being a long time pro. He actually passed away from that ALS.

Bob Wallace: Right.

Sean Frazier: But I was happy he beat me out because I wanted to be on defense anyway because I reveled in the hitting, and getting in the hit, and being hit back in those days.

Bob Wallace: I got to know Kevin Turner a little bit when I was with the Philadelphia Eagles. We recruited him to be a free agent fullback. We really wanted Kevin Turner and I remember doing the whole sell sale on him. I mean, we got him to sign. He was a good football player. He was tough.

Sean Frazier: Tough as nails and I'm so glad. We came in together. We were the two to come in and I looked at him and he looked at me and we went head at it and I had my shot but I did appreciate the fact that he was a man's man, great person.

Bob Wallace: Yeah, yeah. So what brings a long island kid down to Alabama?

Sean Frazier: We'll, my people are from the great State of Alabama and I'm from Birmingham, Alabama where it all started. I got to splits. I got family in Chattanooga, Tennessee who's my father's family and my mother's family is from Birmingham and obviously if you know anything about households, mamma's gonna win. And I had a chance to be recruited and it was always a dream for me to play at the highest level. I really appreciated my time. It actually defined the experience for my student athletes and Alabama, as you can see, definitely has put a focus on excellence especially when it comes to athletics and specifically football. So it was a great experience for me but family, college football, that's what brought me down to the great State of Alabama.

Bob Wallace: Yeah. Well you played at a much higher level than I did. I played football at Yale and I was a backup running back at Yale and realized that if you're a backup running back in the ivy league, you're not going to go to then next level, so you got to find out what you're going to do and that's when I decided to get in sports. Tell me a little bit about your philosophy, Sean, as a leader of an athletic department. How do you manage?

Sean Frazier: Yeah, so, you know, it's a great question and a lot of it has come from the different mentors that I've had, you know, and I think that for me it's definitely being a hands on but more importantly putting people in the right position to be successful. One of the things that I found in my coaching career and as a student athlete is that, you know, all the different people have lots of gifts of leadership and the ability to communicate effectively and to do the job. They just need a little help or a clear set of expectations drawn out for them. But for me it's really more about putting great people, people who are smarter than myself, people who are driven, passionate and then getting them all to work together well in the sandbox for greatness. So, that's really a look at the best coaches, the Phil Jacksons, you know, these people are out there, they're able to do all these individuals – to get together and to work together for a common goal. That's always been a mantra of mine is to get people working together.

They might not like each other all the time, you know, you're dealing with Type A personalities, but you also are dealing with people who say hey, the end goal is to go win championship or academic excellence or fundraising or moving this rock uphill. So part of my recent model is about getting good people around, making sure that clear expectations are out there, making sure the goal is clear for everyone, making sure everyone has respect for one another communication-wise, make sure you have diversity of understanding and getting folks driven to get to that goal set. So I've been very fortunate and humbled to be on staff and be a part of staff and Leigh's staff, that have a similar understanding and even though they may be working for themselves, and that's okay, as long as the great good and the greater core mission is complete.

Bob Wallace: Now how many sports do you have at NIU?

Sean Frazier: I've got 17 here at NIU.

Bob Wallace: So what is that, nine men, seven, eight women, or?

Sean Frazier: Yeah, yeah. We've got about, what is it on the men, we've got seven and ten, yeah, that sounds about right, yeah so. Men, there's more women than obviously men. You know, football, when you have a football program, you know, you're dealing with a number of different issues as well as balancing, resources, so you've got less men's programs than we have women but from a participation standpoint, they even out based on size of offering.

Bob Wallace: Now you mentioned that your philosophy was to get people and give them the tools to do their job and to work, you know, get them to work together. One of the more challenging things I'm sure is dealing with your head coaches and the demands of the head coaches. How do you, how do you manage the successful coach?

Sean Frazier: Yeah so that's a great question to sense that over time. I've been an athletic director of division one, two and three. It didn't start out that way, right? It was okay, the opportunity meets design and it just kind of worked its way through. And I've also been at hybrid institutions where there's been division one programs and division three programs within the athletic department so. You know, I've been at Carson University. Division one hockey, men's and women's hockey and then division three everything else. I've been at Merrimack division one hockey and division two and everything else. So it's interesting to take a look at those Type A's and those head coaches and I think that, you know, managing head coaches is very similar and when dealing with the Type A individual that's trying to achieve anything they – everything they can get.

And I think it's important that you do have a certain level and reference of understanding about what they're doing – one of the toughest jobs you can ever have is to have a revenue-producing sport or a head coaching sport and the stress that goes along with that. There's so much stress that goes along with the microscope on that so putting yourself in those shoes and making sure that you can relay, communicate and understand the expectations and also the stresses that go along with the job. So I like to be able to have those conversations with the head coaches and talk about what can I do to put you in a situation to be successful. And then we go forward with a litany of that. And there's a number of things that I take – that I use to be able to motivate and also too, to make sure that there's connectivity about why it's important for me to be in your corner every step of the way and to understand what you want to get out of the end of the goals and objectives that you set for yourself, and to make sure that those goals and objectives are in alignment with the department's goals and objectives which are also in line with the institution's goals and objectives. But part of that is good active communication. Effective communication and clear defined goals at least everyone needs. And yes, it is quite challenging sometimes to get everybody into alignment. But I find that hat communication, clarity of expectation and again that connectivity to the fact that I'm here for you and to make sure that I can give you everything you can to be successful in some of the things that you want to get done.

Bob Wallace: So what, without naming anyone, what was the most interesting thing that a coach said to you that you could do to help him be successful? And what was the thing that you walked out of his office and said, or her office, I can't do that.

Sean Frazier: Well, yeah, there's been a lot. You know what I'm saying. I don't want to give away so much here --

Bob Wallace: Right.

Sean Frazier: Yeah. Sometimes those coaches find that their patience is not in alignment with both the institution as well as the department or goals, they are more self-serving to the individual or the individual coach. I think the most – the one that was really crazy that I heard was that, you know, we should be treated this way or I should be treated this way, and I need certain extracurricular things that are not related to the program to make sure that my stress level is lower so I can be the most successful to be able to lead this department and that would be, you know, maybe activities vacation related and also to increase dollars to support my family so they can also be less stressful so they cannot put stress on me to be able to do my job.

So yeah, I would say that the extracurricular and extra dollars to support your personal needs that are not related to the job at hand, were axed. I also had individuals that would say that, you know, we have to increase certain dollars in my sport and my sister sport doesn't need this because no one goes to the games and supports that program so why would you give those types of resources that I should get and they shouldn't get, you know. So in the day and age of Title 9, and compliance and equity, you know, I can't believe that that was even a question, that came up. But being myopic about their situations and what they wanted they needed to get that out to me. So both times walking out of the office saying, we got work to do to help our coach realize that they're part of a team and not just on the island by themselves.

Bob Wallace: Just a little – to riff off of that a little but, is there something that someone has said to you that has resonated that you say, you know what, I'm going to incorporate that in the way I go forward in dealing with these programs?

Sean Frazier: You know, dealing with I think the communication and the clear expectations, I've had a coach when I was a young A.D., you know, I've been an A.D. at – until age 30, I'm 52 now. So, if you can take a look at that, you know, as an A.D., you know, I was learning on the job as a young A.D. and there was some coaches that said, you know what I need an extra piece of equipment I need to be able to put into this recruiting, my recruiting process. It needs to be much more diverse in the way that I go about recruiting rounds that I'm doing. So a couple of it was the, you know, fact that I need to be a little more intentional about resources around recruitment. And I think as a younger A.D., okay, you know, what do you need. Well I need this, this and they were very specific to the situation at that institution. So I walked out of that meeting saying man, that doesn't just happen at this school here. This needs to happen across the board.

We should be putting emphasis in recruiting on this level for all of our sports and why aren't we, not doing it and why is this only one coach telling me this. Well this one coach had experience of 20 something years and has been very successful and turned his particular program over and was in the national limelight where I had my other sports that was maybe a similar sport didn't do any of it, but wasn't recruiting, wasn't doing those types of – but I think the instances on the intentionality around recruitment and getting the best athletes and not compromising academic standards to do that was probably the most impactful thing that as a younger A.D. that I carried with me to where I am right now.

Bob Wallace: I'm going to come back to being a younger A.D. and you're no longer that, but okay. But and also being an African American A.D. dealing with that but so you started talking about you've worked at the various three levels, one, two and three, are they the same? I mean obviously Alabama has a lot more money than NIU. I mean their football budget is your whole athletic department budget times two maybe. What are the differences that you see? You're dealing with the same problems but you got less resources to deal with it.

Sean Frazier: Yeah, I think that you have to be more intentional about the resources at this level. You know, I think that you've got, you know, no offense to Alabama or any other places that are, places that would be classified as a Power Five type of level, I think you have to be a lot more deliberate and intention and I also think you have to work a little harder and I say that because I've been at those other levels. Sometimes people take resources for granted. I think that we're being exposed right now with COVID and also the financials in America right now and higher ed about using resources and not being more intentional to make sure we get a return on that investment. But I think at our level, we've had to be very intentional about what we are using these resources for. So it's not just okay, give me more money. Okay, what do you need more money for? Give us the examples. How are we going to move the agenda? What is the ROI? And I think the group, specifically in my situation and looking at the dollars and we've been one of the cost most, most cost-effective football programs in the country and we've won more than a lot of folks. As a matter of fact, we have the best win percentage in our league and in the State of Illinois. So those are some big chops right there and I'm proud of that, especially in the last decade. And I think the reason why we've gotten out of that is that we pay our coaches a very good wage, we make sure we position them to be successful and I think we're much more intention with the dollar that we spend when recruiting, facilities, overall amenities for our student athletes, coaches and we count every dollar and in some cases at our level it was pennies to make sure we balance the books on that. So think it's more than intentionality. On the other side, not to say that people are wasting resources, but you read what I read relative to some of the amenities or things that are going on at that level. I think that it's a tough way to justify a certain amenity or a piece of equipment if it's not returning on that investment. Now maybe it is, but some of those athletes that want to see some of those bells or whistles that are going on at facilities. There's needs and wants. We deal with the needs. The wants, that's a whole other

category and we only fulfill that once we know that we can generate the revenue to actually substantiate that and support that.

Bob Wallace: Yeah. So you talk about wants, needs, you know, the recruitment of the athlete – the athlete is different than when you were recruited. Talk about some of the differences and where do you think college athletics is going to be in terms of, you know, compensating athletes, the Name, Image and Likeness bills, and those issues that you're now confronted with.

Sean Frazier: Yeah, it's tough. You know, right now, you know, dealing with what we're seeing with name, image and likeness, dealing with the Alston case, seeing exactly what's happening with cost and attendance, you know, we're living in a watershed moment for college athletics and higher education, you know. When we're taking a look at the business model for higher education, and it's definitely breaking up. The ability to pay student athletes, the changes around the cost of attendance and the ability to pay athletes and then the name and there's a likeness they want to compensate folks for that, that –those categories and those things that we're talking about now are going against the collegiate market, okay. You know, when I played, you get a scholarship, there's no cost of attendance, you know, yes, there was some gaps of need that I still needed to have to be able to do some things outside of the scholarship but at the end of the day, I still had the educational component.

The ability to be able to garner education to better myself for citizenship in today's society. Nowadays there's a lot of institutions and a lot of student athletes that want more. Now we're still talking about the one percent, right. One percent of these particular athletes are going to be able to do some of those creative things around making money off their image, their name, their likeness, and we get that. And maybe that's what should happen. You know, I'm not against that. But I still think that I'm concerned about the majority, is the 99, the 98 percent, the 90 percent of the student athletes who are coming here for a college education, for an experience or competition. What does that look like for them? Okay, not to isolate the one percent, maybe the Dion Williamsons or the individuals of that can make money, I think that they should be allowed to do that. I don't have any problems with that as a former student athlete and as a coach. I just worry about blowing up the whole collegiate model for that less than one percent or that ten percent, or whatever you want or whatever category it comes to.

So I think now we need to be really strategic in our understanding about, you know, destroying the collegiate model and making significant adjustments on that. There should be legislation specifically for that. We have a congressional intervention federal and all that that's taking a look at that and all these bills are being introduced across the country. I get that. But let's be careful not to destroy the essence in opportunity. And as you know as now I'm speaking as a person of color, as a person of color who was given an opportunity to be able to complete this education. If all of a sudden that changes and I don't have access to education because all of a sudden it becomes too cost-prohibitive for higher education institutions



to support that, what did that do for that percentage of individuals who were getting a chance for higher education and it's no longer because it goes away because of the ability to be able to now pay for this particular enterprise. That would be devastating for large numbers of individuals who just wanted to get an education versus trying to make money off of their name and likeness or some aspect to that. So think we have to be very cautious about that and I would want and hope that people past my pay grade would have sense and understanding about the impact of certain decisions that could destroy 80 to 90% of the population that it wasn't intended to affect.

Bob Wallace:

You would think that the discussions that are being had are being strategic. While you were talking, I'm thinking that, you know, the problem that you're dealing with at Northern as opposed to what Smith is dealing with at Alabama are so different in terms of name, image and likeness opportunities. Then as I began to think about it I was saying, a small town where you're located, a student athlete who is the star quarterback, he could have some opportunities off the field for name, image and likeness. Now I'm not sure that the women's soccer player is going to have that same opportunities but, you know, you deal – are we being strategic – are we looking at it – one of my criticisms of where we are in college athletics is I think we are trying to put a Band-Aid over a problem that has evolved over so many years and the game is just much different than even when you played and when we started the NCAA and we just need to look at it from a more – what do we do to provide – and I think probably Northern Illinois is a better example of providing the student athlete educational opportunities than somebody of USC or one of the bigger schools there – football takes over, you know, such an important role in basketball – I kind of got on my NCA soap box a little but when our final four one of my friend's teams were in it and they left on Tuesday to play a Saturday – play a Saturday night game. And I'm thinking well where's the educational performing so don't we bring tutors. I said, you know, I learned more being in conversation with my professors or my other students than I ever did just reading a book. I don't remember any of that stuff that I did 50 years ago but I do remember the interactions that I had and the groove that I had as a young man coming up. So, very interesting. Let me talk about what happened during the pandemic a little bit and how that affected what was going on in your world. Did you play football this last fall?

Sean Frazier:

Yeah, we did, we did. But let me just back track because you're probably going to want this piece from me. I think ultimately what we've done in higher education, specifically in a larger athletic department that we've allowed the proliferation of, you know, salaries, travel, other types of things. We've let that horse out of the barn so to speak with the spending that now we're catching up. To go to your point the question you just asked me about COVID, we've been exposed as a industry or high education because we've let the proliferation grow computation quite frankly college athletic spending, you get to a point where people are asking a question, okay are we still collegiate, are we still nonprofessional, are we still providing certain things. So those questions are constant by the external people who are not a part of the industry itself and they still call to question

about why wouldn't you pay your athletes. Why wouldn't you do it. Now, I can give you a list of thing that I provide to my athletes that would be considered ala carte expenditures. I can give it to a – very healthy. It's a pretty healthy number between medical support that athletic training, the supplies, I can give it to you and cha-ching, cha-ching we can go through it, so I think people are getting that information but because of the proliferation of some of these big numbers and these one or two percent type of numbers that are out there, it really snows over what all the good that is currently going on and we call it athletics. But to your point of COVID, yeah it was play football, it was one of the most challenging things that I've ever been a part of. I equate it to flying a plane and trying to build the plane while it is in the air flying. That's how hard this was as it relates to trying to manage COVID, competing football and just trying to get through it and protect people's lives. It continues to be challenging as I'm in basketball season and I'm doing a double season right now with fall sports in the spring, spring sports in the spring, winter sports in the spring, yeah, it's a bit crazy.

Bob Wallace: Yeah. It just – and you mentioned that there's some legislation congress is looking at NIL and looking at paying athletes, probably the worst thing that could happen is a bunch of politicians trying to solve a problem but if you look at it from the other end, the NCA just postponed, you know, talking about NIL so, you know, it's – people are saying well you don't really want to do anything so they're delaying it and people – and the congressmen who were looking for headlines are saying no we're going to push that, so it's very interesting. Very interesting time for college athletics. Do you have any thoughts about what will happen in the next, when we get to a point? I always tell people I'm not smart enough to decide how to pay athletes.

Sean Frazier: Yeah, so my thoughts on, yeah. Change is going to happen. Change is already here. I think there's a number of bills that are out there in the Senate and Congress that are proposing some level of compensation for student athletes. I think NIL was postponed maybe because of the Department of Justices made some, you know, some emphasis that whatever legislation that's put forth by the NCAA needs to pass the mustard so to speak. It needs to be able to support initiatives around the student athlete experience. If it's not done right, it will be challenged in the courts and the laws and there will be a number of lawsuits and as you know the NCAA is not in any way in a condition where they're not going to be sued. They get sued regularly and often. And then the NCAA is us the number of institutions that quite frankly view as their governor. So I think that for us I think that there is going to be some obviously just had their inauguration at the time of this taping, just, you know, just yesterday and I know that once Congress and the Senate get back to some type of working scenario with our new president in place, there will be ongoing conversation about the different pay for play models that are out there, hopefully, that people take heed to the practitioners like myself and others and to talk about how we're not going to blow up the collegiate model to get again just one or two or ten percent of the population to be able to make money on their name, image and likeness. That's a big issue. Now, I think there's a number of folks that want us to solve our own problems and want us to do it and want

us to stop waiting to do it. I would just like to say that yes, we can make it happen but it still, there's a small number of individuals that can do this and we need to make sure we carve something out for them and not disrupt the sanctity of the collegiate model that is serving the majority of our student athletes that are competing on our campus.

Bob Wallace: So let me – you mentioned a small percentage of it and when I asked you to come on this show, one of the things I wanted to talk about is the small percentage of minorities, African Americans, in positions of like where you're at and Lead One which is a group that you're part of and 130 athletic directors Division One recently put out a white paper about following closely the NFL's hiring this season which is not going any better than it really did last year. I guess maybe Robert Sola puts us one above where we were last year. What is the problem that we have? I mean we've got all these athletes coming out, African American athletes coming out from playing and but we don't have any coaches. We don't have any athletic directors. We have some but not enough. What can be done?

Sean Frazier: Yeah, it's a passionate question and one that I've dealt with in my old 30-year career and yeah I'm one of 13 or one of 14 African Americans at the FBS level out of 130 that I can mention. I'm fully very much aware of that fact. Yeah, I'm also aware that more than 60 to 65 percent participate just in the sport of football who are black and brown boys. And that's a glaring number. Knowing that participation is so high then we got less than, you know, 12, 13 African Americans who are head football coaches at the FBS level. So these are numbers that are known. I think people know Richard Lapcheck has put out a report card every year outlining the, you know, the fairness doctrine around representation of minorities and senior level administrators. But to answer the question directly, I don't have the answers. I'm going to be truthful to you. I'm going to say that I've been very fortunate and humbled. I'm going to say that I've been tapped by a larger force to make sure that this is life's work and I want to be a tool of education and I do recognize that I've been one of the fortunate people to rise into a roll where I'm at an FBS school and I am in a minority in a situation. I think that the white paper that was produced is probably the most comprehensive actionable tool that's ever been assembled in my lifetime and I'm so humbled to have been a part of the leadership along with Tom McDillon in his leadership and his bravery, with my co-chair at the University of Wyoming and then the collection of researchers, scientists, practitioners, that came together over a six to seven month review of best practices not just at the college level but at their, at the professional level, you know, at the private sector, at the high red level, to put together these particular initiatives and some of them are bold, you know, like the ones for, particularly of search firms, in grading them and assessing them. And then some of them were, you know, training, understanding cultural, political. Some of them were training, right? But at the end of the day it was a well-sourced, researched document that dug into the bowels of every aspect of hiring and education around diversity, athlete and inclusion that I've ever seen and I've poured my life into it mainly because if I get hit by a fruit truck tomorrow, I want someone to say and pick up the documents and say oh why aren't we doing this or how can

we implement these and it was a great experience for me to kind of get that off my chest. But I think the short answer to your question is that institutions, college, a chance as a president, have to make it a priority. Board of trustees and regions have to make it a priority. I always say an institution, college presidents and chancellors are high A.D.'s and head football coaches. If you want to hide behind the fact of search firms or doing that, okay. I work with a lot of search firms. They're not the problem. They are part of the overall system that is a part of the process of why we haven't had numbers increase but at the end of the day, people need to make an intentionality and go through the process and find the right fit and lot of that fit is there, and used to be, well, where are they. Do we need to develop minorities and women for these roles. Now, they're all over the place. You know, now there are people sitting in positions looking for roles, looking for opportunities and their bypassed for whatever reasons they are. But they are being bypassed. So now it's all about taking actionable, taking accountability and pulling the proverbial trigger to go and make the higher and I think that that's where we're probably stunted and that's why the actionable tools were a way for college presidents, chancellors, board of trustees, regents and those who are in the decision-making way to say okay here's some things that we can do. And by the way, there's a large network of individuals who are qualified now, we just need to do it. And the only way I can tell, you know, I had a conversation with wife, my beautiful wife, Rosa Frazier, who is also an attorney by trade, she would often talk to me and said your industry is quite interesting. I think that the part of it has come down to maybe some type of legalities, some legal issues, and maybe someone's going to pull a lawsuit and she was from a legal standpoint, I would think of it as a okay, we need to make sure we give institutions a way to diversity themselves. Give them tools themselves to then make it operationalize within their campus so it's not a forced issue. No one wants to have a lawsuit or potential liability associated, they want ways to solve their own issues. So this attempted white paper is giving them that. Now, it's all about implementation on those various campuses.

Bob Wallace: Yeah, I mean you talk about intentionality and having them but this is not a new problem that we've been dealing with.

Sean Frazier: Right.

Bob Wallace: And, you know, I've always pushed back on what you identified as not a problem which is we've got, there are a lot of qualified African Americans that are in the pipeline already. Don't tell me that – and, you know, I always got the hair on neck standing when they said we have to have a problem to teach them about A.D.'s. No you don't have to have any special program, no more than you have to have for a young white guy who's been in the profession. You've just got to give them an opportunity. One of the things that I think is interesting, maybe, and the white paper addressed it a little bit, you touched on two points that I'm very interested in; one was the search firm, and two was, you didn't call it this but I'm going to call it this, implicit bias, which is that people are just – want to hire people that, you know, me and you could have those African American men. I'm quite a bit older than you, but we can have a conversation where we're not judging

each other by he looks different than me, or that. And that's kind of a problem that we see. How do we eliminate that, that bias that is here.

Sean Frazier:

Well, I think that, we had mentioned implicit bias. We talked about micro aggression. We talked about, you know, some of our painful past here at Merrick. We cannot talk about this subject. Cannot talk about the dividedness that we have in our country. We just hired, you know, we did. We just elected a President of the United States on the basis of the two major issues that, that were, that it basically came down to was dealing with COVID or the lack thereof and then obviously race relations in America right now. We're talking about a racial reckoning that we're dealing with between George Floyd, Brianna Taylor, you know, white racists have been a part of our culture, especially in American, since the dawn of time, right? And I get feedback that's trickled down to a lot of industries but more so in athletics, you know, Collin Kappernick, we're talking about the things that, you know, the social consciousness or social justice so I think that what we're dealing with right now and which is so obvious and gets continuously played out is when, you know, you have prophecy, you have hiring opportunity and the bottom line is that, you know, the news at eleven is that so and so's been hired and no one knows about a process, no one knows how it happened that way but we see the same faces and names over and over again and I have this conversation with the media as well. You know, we'll have a media outlet and there'll be a job open and then the media outlet spits out all names and none of those names are people of color or women in that process. So it starts the visibility of implicit bias, the micro aggression that these people are the best because we didn't put a spotlight maybe on folks we don't know about or our folks that are not as visible or visible to the majority. So part of it comes down to being intentional about going out and getting to know the people that are out there. Henceforth, we see, you know, the emergence of the black alliance. I think Alan Green and Brad – Alan Green was the athletic director and Auburn and Glen Martin who's at UNKC, athletic director, they got together and they formed the alliance, the black alliance, right? Obviously, my work with the lead one, you know, with the white paper and actionable steps we've got Minority Opportunities Athletic Association.

I talked about Richard Lapcheck so there's lots of people out there trying to do this work. The issue of it comes down to when these people are ready to actually take actionable intentionality around their hiring practices as well as educating their office, their organization. So yeah, it's a uphill up-hill battle and I will tell you that it's probably cost me some friends and it's probably added some new friends, you know, based on what I do and, but I think for me it's more about making sure that I have the opportunity to help everyone, not just the minority or the majority, but everyone in the street because we become better, improving, and we have a more diverse operation, black, white, gender, whatever the protected class is, we are better. That's what we have founded on, as Americans. And I think ultimately what we do right now is put ourselves in a potential liability when we just give one of anything it's not going to help. Being not intentional around diversity, equity and inclusion definitely puts us in a box and it doesn't get us to where we need to be when it comes to critical issues when

they come up. Henceforth, the racial reckoning, the voice the of the student athletes. We're seeing things that quite frankly are a little scary and a lot of my colleagues who are not people of color have given me a call and say how do I deal with this and they're ill-prepared to be able to deal with now the voice of our young people asking things. It's not okay anymore not to be diverse in accepting about everyone's difference. So, I think that's the level playing field that we're starting to see right now because of the racial reckoning that's happening because of the most recent issue around George Floyd.

Bob Wallace: It's very interesting - you transitioned us into the next topic that I just want to touch on and I know we're coming close to the time that I asked you to give to this. But the student athlete and the young people, they're becoming a lot more socially conscious, a lot more woke or whatever term you want to use, what differences have you seen? I'm not sure that, you know, back in the day Jim Brown and those guys weren't woke and Kareem and back then didn't have a social conscious but the athlete now has the mechanism, the communication infrastructure to get their point out. How do you see that? What rolls do you see the student athlete playing as we go forward?

Sean Frazier: Well I think it's major. I think that's the reason why we're talking about it right now. I think that, you know, we saw the social justice. We saw in, you know, in the month of June, I think a news outlet avoided my personal power. But not just mine but others as well. And one of the things that you called me up just to alert me and said, you know, I forwarded your calendar, Sean, and I also did that with several other athletic directors intentionally and it was interesting to look at the month of June because the month of June, before the month of June there was no mention of social justice, racial programs, diverse education, equity and all that. The month of June had everybody create a tagline about diversity training, social actions, social justice, and that really shows you about the, you know, being proactive versus being reactive to the situation. So I think that the difference now is that there's a young group of young professionals as well as our students that are saying this is not acceptable and we don't want this to be reactive. We want this to be the culture of who we are, and by the way, we are the majority now, and I'm not just talking about people of color, we're talking about our students, white, black, doesn't matter who it is, they're all, as a matter of fact, some of my most vocal students are not people of color, they are the majority who do not want this level of racism or social issues not being addressed.

So I don't think we can sit back and wait for another crisis situation because it can be devastating and we've seen people at the chancellor, president as well as the A.D. lose their position because things were not taken care of, culture was not paying attention to, and that's why you see in the white paper all these educational components as a part of this. So I think this is here to stay and I think that if we have not demonstrated leadership in this area, that's a potential liability for an institution, for a leader that's in higher education right now of not embracing a certain level of conversation around education on this issue to make sure it's proactive because if you don't

have a skill set of understanding, if you're confused about what's happening, you better educate yourself because that's going to be a tough way for you to keep your leadership role and not appealing to everyone, not just the students of color but all students because they do not want this level of conversation any longer. They are like you said, woke. They are educated. We are in a state of, of dividedness in our country and a lot of our young people do not like it and they are frustrated and they're calling us old heads. They want us moved out of the way and they want to express themselves and they will express themselves, so I think that's also a case for diversity and education and getting the best people and getting other people involved because if you think you're just going to sit back and do what you want to do when you want to do it, our young people are going to get their voice out there and they can either do it the way you wants to do it or they're going to do it the way they want to do it in a very public manner.

Bob Wallace: Right, well, you know, you're just saying that you're not only getting this pressure from minority students but from others, is a – that gives me hope that it is becoming a more widespread movement. I listened to that young woman give that poem yesterday and I never felt so good about young people as I did after listening to her poise and articulation that she did, it was just spectacular. So in a year if I said Sean, will you come back and do a podcast in a year, do this, give me an update, where do you think we'll be in a year from now on this diversity and inclusion? Will we look back and say, you know, eight A.D.'s are 15 instead of, you know, four head coaches and, you know, twelve. Will we make progress?

Sean Frazier: That's a good question, you know, I'm conflicted. We've already had a number, and again this is before the paper was drafted, what was released, right. We had at that time, we were about to hire, I believe, the University of Tennessee was about to hire a football coach, yeah, I think that's the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> head FBS coach but we already have 11 that's already been hired since December. None have been a person of color at football FBS. I think we've already had now three or four FBS A.D.'s that have been hired since January, this January, and none of those have been folks of color or women. So I'm an eternal optimist, you know, that's why I do this. But I will say that I do think there's going to be people, I believe in my chancellors and presence out there and board of trustees, I do think there's going to be a shift, mainly because of the fact that I think the visibility is always there and I also think that the climate is still one that there's a risk of doing things that are not process oriented so I'm going to tell you that we're going to see at least some level of, of increase on the A.D. front, on the football front, some bumps, maybe a little bit more there with the possibility of change but I don't know if we're going to see a over-arching bump, mainly because of the fact of where we are. But I will say that we will see an uptick in student voice and if we're not prepared, I think that we could have some issues with that because I don't see that going away because of the climate that we have in America right now.

Bob Wallace: Yeah, I'm just wondering at what point do the student athletes, or not even the student athletes, athlete, African American athletes say we want change and if we don't get change, we're going to take some action. I think

your optimism for the next year is probably okay but the next five years, I'm not sure if we don't see enough change, if these young people are going to tolerate this anymore.

Sean Frazier: Yeah, I would have to agree with you. I think that the student athletes that I have spoken with that, not just on our campus, but a whole, they're frustrated with the leadership. I think we're going to see a lot more turnover in future. I think we're already seeing that, where people are looking at higher education and saying you know what, I think I've done my time, you know, the average went three to five years already. I think people are stepping down at a significant rate. I do think we're going to see some turnover in A.D.'s as well, so I think there's just going to be opportunities because of that. I'm just hoping that, that the young, our young adults are patient because that I have not seen the patience. I've seen I want action now and that has led to a number of individuals stepping down and others in not the right way, you know what I'm saying, in the way that they were forced versus retiring or move on. So yeah, I think my optimism might be a little bit more so because I believe in our, our industry and I'm hoping that there's going to be people who are going to step up and do the right thing and make sure we support diversity, equity and inclusion.

Bob Wallace: Well Sean, I really appreciate you taking the time. I don't want to jinx NIU but I can't imagine that when there's this shift in athletic directors and Sean Frazier's name's not going to be at the top of all the power five if they want to be intentional about making a difference and then hopefully, you go to one of those big power five schools and somebody comes in in your place and gets the experience and then can move to the, you know, \$120 million dollar budget and we see some changes happening that way.

Sean Frazier: Yeah, I would tell you that NIU, it took a, I would say a risk because, you know, they knew me, by the president that hired me that my current president, she's outstanding, I have no qualms that NIU has reaped the benefits of everything that I've been able to do for them and vice versa but what they've been able to do for me, I'm humbled to be in this role and I feel really certain if, God, you know, forbid, if I leave this institution, that the leadership here gets it, they have done it, they lead by example and, you know, it's been a great ride and I'm not ready to hang it up by any means but I will tell you that NIU has done some great things here and it's got a great leadership of presidents and board of trustees that has stepped up and I'm fortunate to be here in my role and it's been challenging but it's been a great laboratory to help young people and quite frankly administrators grow into doing everything they can. So I appreciate that sentiment. I got lots of work to do at NIU. They keep me busy night and day and I hope that we can just continue to do what we do here without compromising standards because that, that's the other piece that needs to be recognized too.

Bob Wallace: Well, you say that you've been, that NIU, you're lucky to be at NIU, I think NIU is lucky to have you and the leadership that you provided, the success that you brought or continued at, at NIU, and I want to thank you very much



for taking this time to discuss this. As I say, I'm coming back in a year to see where we are.

Sean Frazier: Okay, good.

Bob Wallace: See how you're, see whether we have made that progress. So thank you very much, Sean for taking the time to do this. Let me go say goodbye to our listeners. I just hope you enjoyed listening to Sean and that you enjoy some of our other podcasts. And if you do, please let us know. You can provide your feedback by going to the Apple Podcast, going to the ratings and review sections, on our pod – for our podcast, if you're listening on Stitcher, go to [Stitcher.com](https://www.stitcher.com) and if there is a topic you would like to hear us discuss, let us know that too. And thank you for listening.