

NBA All-Star Technology Summit

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Ernie Johnson

Host, Inside the NBA

Jalen Brunson

Point Guard, New York Knicks; Co-Founder,
Second Round Foundation

General Martin Dempsey

General, U.S. Army, Retired

Michael Rubin

Chief Executive Officer, Fanatics

Sabrina Ionescu

WNBA Player, New York Liberty; Philanthropist;
Founder, SI20 Foundation

Steve Stoute

Founder & Chief Executive Officer, UnitedMasters
+ Translation

Victor Wembanyama

NBA Player, San Antonio Spurs

THE LEADERSHIP PLAYBOOK: HOW TO WIN IN 2025
AND BEYOND

AHMAD RASHAD: Our next panel is on leadership from the court to the corner office. Now, here to moderate is the only person who has ever kept Charles Barkley, Kenny Smith, and Shaq in check when it comes to basketball. He's an award-winning sports journalist, a member of the Sports Broadcasting Hall of Fame, and another longtime contributor to the Tech Summit.

Please help me welcome the host of "Inside the NBA," my main man, Ernie Johnson.

(Applause.)

ERNIE JOHNSON: No, please, sit.

(Laughter.)

This panel will discuss what it takes to lead in today's world, including the impact of tech on decision-making,



meeting the soaring expectations around growth and performance, and navigating the always-on media landscape.

This should be awesome. I've been here so many years and had so many topics, but when they said leadership and they said this is the panel, this is going to be great stuff. So thank you very much for inviting me back.

Let's start on the far right. You may recognize him as a first-time All-Star, 2024 Rookie of the Year, center for the San Antonio Spurs, Victor Wembanyama.

(Applause.)

See, that's what I like about these panels, is that you don't hold your applause. I like that. So continue with this as we meet Michael Rubin, the chief executive officer of Fanatics.

(Applause.)

Here's the founder and chief executive officer of UnitedMasters + Translation, Steve Stoute.

(Applause.)

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Go Steve.

ERNIE JOHNSON: That's a little over the top over there. Polite applause.

For my second straight year, it is nice to have Sabrina Ionescu --

(Applause.)

-- the 2024 NBA champion, New York Liberty guard, philanthropist and founder of the SI20 Foundation.

And then the point guard and captain of the New York Knicks, co-founder of the Second Round Foundation, Jalen Brunson.

(Applause.)

ASAP sports . . . when all is said, we're done.®

And finally, and I consider it such an honor to have met this man through our association with the NBA. I have just much respect for him and what he's done in his career, and the guy knows more about leadership than rooms and rooms and rooms full of folks.

The former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Retired U.S. Army General Martin Dempsey.

(Applause.)

And I'll tell you already, it's going to make me uncomfortable when I call him Marty, but that's what he always tells me to call him, is Marty. I want to say General. I want to salute. I want to do all kinds of stuff.

But we're going to start with you. And I think in this first round, we're going to try to define what leadership is.

I don't know if you know. Some of you may know John Maxwell, known for leadership. And I've been fortunate enough to have a relationship with him and spoken with him at events.

And it's a hard term to define to me, Marty. You kind of know it when you see it. And I don't know if you were born with it or you develop it. But take that from there. Were you a born leader, or did you become a leader?

GENERAL MARTIN DEMPSEY: Well, I think that's the nature or nurture argument taken to leadership, right? You're born with it or you develop it.

I think the answer is yes, in degrees. I mean, we all take something from our upbringing, from our relationship with our peers, from our relationship with our coaches and teachers. And then you decide how to build on it, and that's the part where you develop into the leader you think you should be.

I want to make a case that, in doing that, we should pay equal attention to competence and character.

We spend most of our lives measuring ourselves against our ability to perform a particular skill, right, or do a particular job. But equally important -- and I'd love for the panel to either confirm or deny for me, and the audience for that matter. For me, equally important, we have to develop our character.

And there's all kinds of ways for people to help you develop your competence. That's what your coach does. That's why you have practices, right, is to develop your skills.

But you own most of the responsibility to develop your

character. You get help, but you own that. And I think it's important, in terms of defining leadership, that we just don't talk about outcomes. Because as we say in USA Basketball -- you know this -- it's not just what we accomplish but how that makes a difference to the game, to us, to our country, and ultimately to the world.

And the second thing is inclusion. I just have become convinced over time that the best leaders are the most inclusive leaders. And they're inclusive both because they probably believe in it, so they have a bit of idealism about it, you know, that this is what we should do.

But pragmatically, when you're inclusive, you're drawing in people with different perspectives. You're drawing in, you know, their contributions and valuing them. You are getting ownership from them of outcomes.

And so the two things I would leave you with, Ernie, in answering your question, are leadership is about -- for me, about being both competent and being a man or woman of character and also being inclusive.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Would you say your style of leadership changes?

GENERAL MARTIN DEMPSEY: I think there are some -- everybody in the room has some basic belief about what it means to be a leader. And, you know, we could talk about that for a long time. But I do think you -- as you -- if you're inclusive and you are understanding the people who are entrusted to your care -- and that's, by the way, my definition of leadership, people entrusted to your care.

And if you're attuned to them, you will change because it's -- you know, my generation learns differently than the current generation. You know, all the studies about how people learn.

So, yeah, you do change your leadership style. But I don't think you fundamentally change very much what you believe about being a leader.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Pardon me while I was just jotting down your definition, as a matter of fact. Seriously. There's a lot of good stuff right there.

How would you define it? How would you define a leader, Steve?

STEVE STOUTE: You know, the aspect of things changing or do you change as a leader, I do believe that there are -- like, as a CEO, there's like a wartime CEO and peacetime CEOs.



And your style of leadership, depending on what you're facing -- where the business is, where the industry is, the amount of headwinds or tailwinds you have -- absolutely affects your style of leadership.

I think the fundamental principles remain the same, that people got to believe in you, and you have to be inclusive and take in and understand their opinion. They also have to believe that there's nothing that you wouldn't do that you're asking them to do as a leader. I think that people have to believe that you're not sending them on a mission that you wouldn't go on yourself in both peacetime and wartime.

So that's sort of my take on the responsibility as a leader, is to invoke that feeling amongst your team -- no matter what it is, it could be a creative or executive team -- that your values and your beliefs that you're asking them to do is something that you would take on yourself.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Jalen, you're the first Knicks captain since '18. And so you've seen, in the course of your career, your role on a team change.

When you're in New York, you feel like that mantle was given because -- I mean, you were the leader without the seed, basically, but it needed to be done. How did you assume that mantle of leadership?

JALEN BRUNSON: It started when -- I guess when you asked -- I'm going to call him Marty, too.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Please. It's okay, Marty. It's not just --

GENERAL MARTIN DEMPSEY: There goes my reputation.

ERNIE JOHNSON: It's not just me who gets to call you that? Okay, there you go.

JALEN BRUNSON: It's when, like, you asked him are you born with it or do you grow into it?

For me, I felt like I grew into it, being a leader. It goes way before being a captain of the Knicks or being a leader of the Knicks or whatever team.

My parents raising me said, You have a choice. You can be a follower or you can be a leader. What do you want to be?

And they kind of pushed me to be a leader in everything I did, whether it was in a classroom as a kid, on the court as a kid. And I grew up having those leadership qualities of wanting to be my own person, wanting to be myself,

wanting to work as hard as I can and do what's best for the team. And so I always put the team versus me first. I've always had that mindset since I was a kid.

So once I got the opportunity to become the captain of the Knicks, yes, it was a no-brainer, but I've been living with these qualities my entire life.

And the way I went about being a leader on the team now hasn't changed. I'm the same person. I'm the same leader. I may have to talk differently sometimes or get a message across at different times, but the way I was growing into it prepared me for moments like these.

ERNIE JOHNSON: I want to pursue that with the other players here on the panel, with Victor and Sabrina.

So you go through the disappointment of not winning a Final, then you win the ring in the WNBA. How did you navigate leading that team and then feeling, knowing when it was time to lead or something needed to be said or needed to be done?

SABRINA IONESCU: Yeah. Well, I think, first, everyone that's spoken has kind of nailed exactly what I've wanted to say as well, but I think with your question, that year that we lost two years ago in the Finals, I had never had that experience before. I was the youngest in the starting five. I had never gone through playing in a Finals and understanding what it feels to be there.

And that was a really challenging task of kind of figuring out how do you lead in a situation where you've never had these experiences. And I really did have to rely, even though I was a leader of my team, on a lot of my teammates who were a lot older and have been through Finals, have won and have lost.

And those were a lot of quiet conversations of, like, how did this feel, how did you go through this, to then help me be able to be in that position of, even though I haven't dealt with this at the same level as you have, there's still this belief that my teammates have in me to lead and to lead by example, even though I've never done it alongside some of my other teammates, a lot of the younger ones who had never been in that position.

And losing in that Finals, I'll always say, helped me be able to lead in this year's WNBA Finals and finally win it. I think we really had to understand, I personally had to understand, what it felt like to lose and what it took to win.

And I think being able to grow through those experiences, you can talk about it, but you actually have to go through it for me to really understand it's not going to be pretty.

There's going to be a lot of things that aren't going to go your way. People are going to get quiet. People are going to get anxiety and pressure of feeling like you need to win after you lost one year.

And it's kind of understanding what you need to do as a leader and how you have to stand and hold yourself in that situation to be able to show everyone else on your team that looks up to you, like, everything's going to be okay.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Victor, you're in a unique position. In one way, look, you're a guy that many look to lead the league into this next generation; yet, at the same time, you're 21. You're playing with a guy, Chris Paul, who's, what, 74, who's like -- this doesn't go anywhere anyway, right? I mean, this stays in the room. Love CP. And he's a great leader.

VICTOR WEMBANYAMA: Yes.

ERNIE JOHNSON: So do you allow him to lead, or do you feel part of you is like, I want to be that guy?

VICTOR WEMBANYAMA: Let's say I want to -- I want for sure to grow into that role naturally, but I really listen to him, to Chris Paul. And I think in our case, you know, we got a young team. We got an old guy on our team, but we got a young team.

And as Sabrina just said, a lot of us have never made anything in that league, really. So leading by example is always the first thing for me, but it's also a lot of finding out, you know, of mistakes. And Chris Paul, him being added to our team this offseason, really helps in that term.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Yeah, I mean, do you take mental notes as -- you know, you guys are together all the time. You're in the locker room, you're on the court. You're taking mental notes about, wow, that was a great leadership moment right there?

VICTOR WEMBANYAMA: Yes. And I even surprised myself speaking like him a couple times, you know, like -- yeah. So it's -- we learn a lot.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Yeah.

Michael, let's get into the business side of this a little bit, where success is measured by growth and by revenue. But the whole leadership thing extends beyond the financials. How do you lead your team in what is a, to say the least, fast-paced environment?

MICHAEL RUBIN: Yeah, well, I think the responsibility, whether in sports or business, it's the same thing, right?

You need to get incredible talent, and then you need to get that incredible talent to work together.

I think so many times what I think we see, and it's more visible in sports, but it happens in the businesses every day, is if great talent isn't led to work together, it blows up.

And so how many times have we all sat and said, holy shit, this trade, this team's going to win it all, and then it doesn't work, blows up? Same thing happens for me.

So I think my responsibility is to go out and, you know, kind of build and recruit the best talent and then really get people to work well together. If people don't work well together, you're dead, and it doesn't work.

And so I think, you know, we spend so much time just trying to -- and, look, we're, you know -- look, we grew up in the merchandise business. Now we have a gambling business, a trading cards business, and three different businesses, 22,000 people, but we need everyone to be aligned and work together. So I think there is a huge focus on our end, just getting people to work together.

Now, by the way, you asked the question of born with it or build it. Like, I remember flying to meet Victor the first time when we went to sign him, because he was very important to Fanatics, and I remember walking out of there and said, This guy's a born leader.

So I actually think --

ERNIE JOHNSON: How did you -- I'm sorry to interrupt. How'd you know?

MICHAEL RUBIN: Because you listen and you study. In the same way that he's paying attention in the locker room, picking up all these little tidbits, I study everybody all the time. I mean, well, first of all, I barely made it out of high school, and I can't read. So you've got to be a good listener. You've got to listen to people.

And so, you know, it took -- we had a couple-hour dinner. I was, like, blown away by his maturity and everything he was saying. And then you're like, by the way, this kid is 19 years old at this point? And so you could see that leadership in him.

And so I just said to him when we sat down -- kind of everything went exactly as planned. Like, no surprises here. And obviously there's surprises in every game, and you get -- you know, there's things that don't go your way and you get the shit kicked out of you, and then you just bounce back.

But, you know, I think what you have -- you know, and a lot of people in this room are natural-born leaders who then study to get better. Because that's what I'm always doing. I'm always paying attention to what can I learn from Marty and what can I learn from Jalen and what can I learn from Sabrina and what can I learn from Stoute and Victor.

And so we're always paying attention to each other to figure out how we can be better.

ERNIE JOHNSON: You know what's interesting too? What I've thought -- and this is a sharing of ideas on what makes a good leader, you know. And the one thing that sticks out of, like, 35 years of doing "Inside the NBA," producer of the show for a long time, and he's back producing, is Tim Kiely.

And the thing that always impressed me about him and his leadership style was that he never got carried away with his title and realized that there were good ideas out there that don't have to come from his mind, where he says: I'm the boss, I'm the producer, this is what we're going to do.

He could hear from the assistant lighting guy that, you know: A good way to do this little gig you're going to do is this way.

And he'd say: I love it, we're doing it.

And I think that's not getting carried away with your title and listening to everybody in the room. Because there are good ideas everywhere.

So how do you foster, Steve, how do you foster an environment that's innovative, that's accepting of new ideas, that's sustainable?

STEVE STOUTE: When we were building UnitedMasters, so we had a creative agency that existed for 15 years, and we were building a music distribution company, and we were putting them together. And for anybody who's been a part of an integration before or had led one, it's very, very difficult.

And the idea was we were going to converge culture, technology, and storytelling. So you had three people from three different disciplines working together as one.

And before -- it was prior to COVID, where people actually came to the office every day. How we sat people, the clusters in which people sat together so that it allowed for conversation, it allowed people to actually start to work together. And then the fact that I forced this idea of empathy, where it doesn't make a difference where an idea comes from.

So even though it may be a storyteller, and the engineer were like, I don't care about the storytelling, forcing them to work together and for them to have empathy for what each other does that's different created an opportunity for this convergence to happen.

So, literally, I would say it boils down to allowing an idea to come from anywhere and teaching your people the value of empathy so that they could understand where the other person is coming from.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Part of leadership too is mentoring, sharing what you know with the next wave.

How do you mentor, Sabrina?

SABRINA IONESCU: Yeah, well, I think that's --

ERNIE JOHNSON: And is it always a conscious thing or just an understanding that, you know what, their eyes are on me, they're watching what I do?

SABRINA IONESCU: Yeah, I mean, I think it's the understanding of what we do in our sport is a lot bigger than just ourselves and our teams. It's understanding there's this next generation of athletes that are growing up that are watching you. And we were all those athletes who were young, who had mentors and idols that we either watched on TV or went to games and watched.

And you kind of grow up realizing that that's who you want to be like. And I still feel like that sometimes. I'm still looking at what Steph Curry does all the time because that's someone who I look up to. And then you realize that there's all these young girls who are doing the same thing with me.

And so I do think it's definitely something that I want to be a part of my legacy. I want to leave the game better than it's at right now, better than I found it. But I think it's understanding how many eyes are on you and how you can impact many people's lives.

And it's in a lot of different ways. It's not always on the court and with basketball. But especially being able to kind of start my foundation, you realize that there's a lot of, you know, different paths that people are on and trying to find what they love and help them kind of believe in themselves while doing so.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Marty, can you lead by intimidation?

GENERAL MARTIN DEMPSEY: You can.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Is it suggested?

GENERAL MARTIN DEMPSEY: No. In fact --

ERNIE JOHNSON: But we see it.

GENERAL MARTIN DEMPSEY: Of course we see it. You see it?

ERNIE JOHNSON: In the course of my career, I have, yes.

GENERAL MARTIN DEMPSEY: No, look, when I thought about, you know, what kind of leader I wanted to be, you get to choose, right? You can be a leader who leads by influence, where your point of view is embraced because you have, you know, a stronger set of facts around you and you maybe have more experience than most of the people. You take their feedback, as has been said repeatedly, and then you make a decision, and you have influenced your organization into the course that you think is the right course.

Or you can tell them to do it, but they don't take any ownership of it at that point.

I mean, you know, I think most of you know the chairman of the Joint Chiefs -- sounded impressive when you said it, Ernie, actually, but the chairman has zero authority in our military. On purpose. All the authority rests, first of all, with our civilian leaders and then with those that are out there maneuvering troops around the world, combatant commanders, service chiefs.

But what the chairman has that no one else has is influence because he sees the Secretary of Defense every day. He sees the President two and three times a week.

And they know that. You know, my peers knew that if they really wanted to get something done, they couldn't go around me to get it done because I wouldn't be able to bring my influence to bear.

And, frankly, I think we've got that about right, you know, where the advisor to the President has a whole bunch of influence and where those that are doing the heavy lifting have all the authority, and then we manage to work as a team.

ERNIE JOHNSON: In your life, being a leader can be the difference in wins and losses in games. It can be how well a company does. You're dealing with leadership in life and death. How did you handle the gravity of that?

GENERAL MARTIN DEMPSEY: A couple of things. One

is that -- that's why I mentioned in my first answer the idea that the way I thought about leadership was taking care of the people entrusted to your care. You have to get the mission done, and in some cases that will lead -- in my profession that will lead to injury and death in some cases.

But you never can forget the fact that they're yours, you know. They are very much America's sons and daughters entrusted to our care. And when duty calls, you know, we have a very clear path to get the job done, and winning matters. And you just constantly communicate to your team.

You know, one other thing I would say. People say to me, What's your one piece of advice on how to lead? And I say, Give them memories. Don't tell your, in my case, soldiers what to -- give them a memory about what right looks like. Give them a memory about what it feels like to fail. You know, that's why we put ourselves in situations. Give them memories, a pat on the back, a note to a soldier whose spouse just had a child.

It doesn't have to be giant daily activities. You know, you're not going to move the world every day, but you can move it eventually if you give the people entrusted to your care a memory.

That's what they'll remember, by the way. They're not going to remember your -- I know this is going to -- it's painful to acknowledge this, but that chart, that PowerPoint presentation, that chart with your vision statement hanging in the coffee room, they're not going to remember that.

And if you say that trust is an important part of your organization, then you got to demonstrate it. You got to give them a memory of what trust really means.

So, I don't know. That's what I think.

ERNIE JOHNSON: By the way, if you haven't heard it today, thank you for all you've meant.

GENERAL MARTIN DEMPSEY: No, thank you very much.

(Applause.)

ERNIE JOHNSON: Thank you for your service sounds trite, sounds hackneyed, but it's true.

Jalen, when you think about folks who have led you, and you hear -- and this is for you and Sabrina and for Wemby, because we talk about different kinds of coaches, and we talk about a player's coach, and it almost gets this feeling that, well, he's not very tough on them, he does exactly what they want him to do.

What makes a good -- in terms of leadership, as a coach, what do you want? Are there times you want to be pushed and at times you need him to listen to you and say, This is what we want? How does that all work?

I can come back to you.

JALEN BRUNSON: No, no, no, I mean, I feel like -- hopefully you guys think the same way. You guys want to be pushed. You want to be coached. And there are times where you obviously don't want to hear things, but you know you need to.

But I would love to be pushed every single day, and I feel like I get that with Thibs, I feel like I got that in the past with Coach Wright in college, and even before then. Every coach has had a lasting memory on me.

So going back to middle school, I've talked to every coach that has coached me still. At some point throughout my season, throughout the year, we catch up, we talk, just because of the lasting memory.

And so it means a lot, knowing that they pushed me to be the person I am on and off the court. And so, I mean, I wouldn't want it any other way. It sounds cliché, "Yeah, push me, Coach, push me, Coach," but when you do that and then you're able to accomplish something, you have a relationship where you trust and love each other, I mean, those are the lasting memories that you want, and those are the type of person you want to play for.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Wemby, you almost had your hand up to jump on this question, so talk to me.

VICTOR WEMBANYAMA: Because I've had the chance to, you know, work with a very inspiring leader in Coach Pop, in terms of, you know, pushing his players, getting the best out of them, I don't think there's two like him. And the reason behind it, I think, is he gets that out of players because he shares memories with them, because he inspires them.

And this is kind of a utopian view of leadership in basketball for me, but how can you get the best out of your players and how can you ask for incredible feats in Finals and playoffs experience without trusting, without trusting your guys, without knowing to -- learning to know them and getting the best out of them.

And Coach Pop has been so successful because he's got this relationship with his players. He's not just a boss, you know. He's a leader. He even does too much sometimes. He works out, he does everything. And he shares these

memories with these players. That allows him, I think, to get things that a normal coach-to-player relationship would not.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Was there part of you that was a little apprehensive before that first meeting with him, before that first practice, before that first film session?

VICTOR WEMBANYAMA: I had heard a lot, of course, of Pop, you know, legendary coach, even in France. But he made it very clear that the human relationship was most important for him, and that allows him, as I said, you know, to get 100 percent trust from his players.

STEVE STOUTE: I just want to ask, we hear it all the time in sports that younger players, it's a different generation. And we experience it with our hires. Work ethic is different.

When you have a coach like Pop, is there a different way he coaches older players versus the younger players, given the age difference or the generational difference in the athletes?

VICTOR WEMBANYAMA: Yes, there is. And I think that comes from his will to adapt and to -- like, he doesn't force his players to adapt to him, but he makes them understand that this is the right way to work. So he's got a different approach for everybody.

MICHAEL RUBIN: And by the way, I just want to say, every environment's not for everybody. Like, I say this all the time. I think a lot of young people are soft. Okay? I'll just say right out, like we say Fanatics is not for everybody. Like, this is a culture. We're working to win. We're working our asses off. We're taking shots all the time. We take some Ws, we take Ls.

But you know what? Like, we have a culture of, like, you know, for us, like, you got to work your ass off. And if that's not for you because, hey, the younger generation says "I don't want to work like that," you shouldn't be part of our team.

So I think defining your team and how you lead is also very important. And we're not afraid to say to 22,000 people: This ain't for everybody.

Which I think is a good thing. Like, we define who we are.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Sabrina, back to this point about those who are leading you. And do you have a preference for what kind of a leader it is, or do you try to not project "This is my idea of a leader," and then you're just adapting to the way that person leads?

SABRINA IONESCU: Well, I think every coach is a leader. I think that's kind of part of their job in terms of understanding how to run a team, how to get everyone collectively working together for the same goal. But I think a big part in that understanding is they have to know how to coach each individual player.

And I think Wemby kind of hit on that. It's that understanding that the way that I talk to Jalen might be different than the way that I talk to Wemby, and what you need to get out of each and every player is different. And I think being able to unlock that is a huge part of what players need from coaches, what coaches need from players.

And so for me, obviously, you want to be pushed, you want to be the best, you want to be the greatest, and you need that from your coach to continue to push you.

But I think there's a human understanding of you love me. Like, you want what's best for me. And I think that's bigger than what necessarily happens on the court. It's just that understanding of the relationship that you build with your coaches and the people around you are on the same mission as you are, and that's to help you be the best that you can be.

ERNIE JOHNSON: There's been some really good stuff. We have, what, 10, 15 minutes here left? Good. Because there's more to dive into. But excellent, excellent stuff.

Michael, you've gone from apparel to collectibles to --

STEVE STOUTE: Gambling.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Gambling, yes. I was just going to say sports betting, but yes.

MICHAEL RUBIN: It's gambling.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Yeah, it is. I know it is.

How do you stay agile? How do you stay current? How do you keep up with the -- it's ever-changing.

MICHAEL RUBIN: Well, I think we have a real respect that if you're not innovating, if you're not pushing, someone's going to disrupt you and put you out of business.

I always think one of the real things that makes people win is just the fear of failing. As we've expanded our business and gone from being in one business to being in three businesses, it's all about getting the best people, continuing to innovate, disrupt ourselves, by the way.

We look all the time, and we try things. We're not scared to fail. We went out last year, we created a sports festival. And there had never been one, you know, Fanatics Fest. No one had ever tried anything like that.

And I said ten days before, I have no idea whether this is going to be great or be a disaster. And we did it. It was amazing, and a thousand things went wrong. And then you learn from it, and you make it better the next year.

You have to have that culture of constant improvement. I think that's what so many people in sports and so many people in this room are always figuring out. How do I get better? I'm not accepting -- to get to the Finals wasn't good enough. I've got to win the Finals. I'm just going to keep pushing, I'm going to keep pushing.

I think we have that culture, and that's why we keep growing. But we're not afraid to fail. Like, we fail all the time. I think having a culture of embracing, you know, you're not going to win in everything you do. Because if not, then eventually you get put out of business because you just keep doing the same thing. So you need to have that very disruptive mentality; otherwise, we couldn't expand the way we did.

And one thing is for sure. Different than me saying to Victor at the beginning of this, I kind of feel like everything's gone exactly the way you planned, including -- he said he was going to be drafted by the Spurs even before the lottery balls went his way.

You just got to -- from my perspective, the way to lead is to get your whole team playing the best game they can, embrace the Ws, embrace the Ls, and just keep pushing every minute. That's what we do. We're always constantly pushing.

ERNIE JOHNSON: The time we have remaining is actually not 10 or 15 minutes. It's down to 5. So we're going to kind of go around the horn.

But first, as we do that, Marty, you say you refer to yourself as a lifelong student of leadership. Explain that.

GENERAL MARTIN DEMPSEY: Well, to highlight your point, if you're not constantly trying to think about how to become a better leader, you just become complacent. And things change around you.

You mentioned in your opening remarks, I think, Ernie, the ubiquitous nature of information and the scrutiny. Leaders today are under far more scrutiny than I was 25, 30 years ago.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Instantaneous.

GENERAL MARTIN DEMPSEY: It's incessant. For example, we have a saying that we use, because when we bring in recruits, we bring in recruits from all over the country, 18-year-old recruits, some of whom have not had a very challenging physical, emotional, or intellectual experience.

We've got to level them pretty quick. You'll often hear them say, This is hard.

And we say, That's right, and we have to do hard better. That's what we have to do. We have to do hard better. Don't think it's not going to be hard, especially in our line of work.

The other thing that I find fascinating in terms of adapting to the environment is somebody once told me don't just bring facts to a feelings fight. It took me a bit to figure that out, but when you think about it, because of the incessant nature of information and the competitive nature of information, facts are not stubborn, as John Adams described them in 1768. They're not stubborn at all now.

Most of the arguments we get into in terms of the day-to-day activities are about how we feel about something. You can't just bring facts to a feelings fight. The point is leaders have to be sense makers. Maybe that's the best way to put it. Leaders have to be sense makers.

ERNIE JOHNSON: I'm going to have to get a new Sharpie. I'm writing so much stuff down.

We're going to go down the line here. Best leader you've worked for or learned from, Victor?

VICTOR WEMBANYAMA: Got to be Coach Pop. Chris Paul has been a great addition, but I'm going to go with Coach Pop.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Michael?

MICHAEL RUBIN: I don't have one. I learn from everyone every day, and that's the God's honest truth. Like, I am always just taking up information to be better. And I think if I just had one, I think I wouldn't keep evolving. I think everyone together makes me better.

ERNIE JOHNSON: I love that.

Steve?

STEVE STOUTE: I would love his answer to use it, but he

already took it.

MICHAEL RUBIN: It's great to be number two.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Follow his lead.

STEVE STOUTE: No, no, I would say there's a few people, it's a short list, but Ben Horowitz, who's a dear friend and is a great leader and wrote a book on leadership, I would say is a leader that I've learned a lot from.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Sabrina?

SABRINA IONESCU: I would say mine is Kobe Bryant, a great mentor and someone who led by example and also was the best at what he did.

ERNIE JOHNSON: I can't believe it's been five years, by the way.

JALEN BRUNSON: I'm going to say, honestly, every coach I've had, they've had an impact on me since the day I stepped foot on the court, on and off the court. They've shaped me to who I am. And I can't just pick one because they've all just made me to be the person I am.

GENERAL MARTIN DEMPSEY: You know, it's Valentine's Day, and so I want to give a shout-out to military spouses. And I want to do that because, remember I said earlier, the best leaders, in my judgment, are those who can get things done with influence, even in the absence of authority.

And that's exactly what military spouses do. You know, when we deploy, they organize themselves, and they get it done. You know, my wife, Deanie, was with me for 41 years in the military with no authority, but that didn't stop her or the other military spouses from doing that.

I want to do one other thing, if I could, Ahmad. Don't look at me like that. So I'm going to give Ernie a memory. Am I tethered to this thing?

STEVE STOUTE: Yes.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Just unplug it. Oh, the mics are flying.

GENERAL MARTIN DEMPSEY: By the way, is that on? It's on, okay. By the way, most people won't hand me a hand mic because I'm a karaoke nut, but --

(Laughter.)

There's a tradition in the military where we give out coins as a recognition for someone who's done something kind



of above and beyond the call of duty, if you will, who's made a memory for somebody else, maybe.

And mine was in the shape of a dog tag. You're all familiar with dog tags. Dog tags are a symbol of trust. And on the back -- it's my flag on the front, but on the back I had a phrase that animated me throughout my career and continues to animate me, and it's "Make It Matter."

It's a phrase that I first came upon in '03 when you asked me, "How did you bear up under the strain of having soldiers under your command killed?" And the answer was, "Well, I have to make that matter."

And so what I would do with soldiers at memorial services and things, the teammates of the fallen, I'd say, Look, you can't change what happened. I know you feel guilty about it. I know you're fearful yourself because you've got to go back out. But you can make it matter, and you can make it matter not just today, but for the rest of your life.

And it's not unique to the military. Imagine what a world we'd live in if everybody got up every day and said, you know, today I'm going to make it matter for somebody other than myself.

And by the way, December, Jalen won the Bob Lanier Community Assist Award for the entire NBA. Sabrina's running a foundation.

(Applause.)

You guys, you all make it matter in this world.

But Ernie, this is for you, this coin, because you've made it matter for so many of us through the years with the humility and the grace with which you've done your job.

(Applause.)

ERNIE JOHNSON: That is -- that is absolutely awesome. Man, you just made my day.

GENERAL MARTIN DEMPSEY: And you can call me Marty.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Marty, I will.

Give me one second here, Ahmad.

AHMAD RASHAD: Oh, you have one. This is a wonderful moment.

ERNIE JOHNSON: And I love that. And he brought up Valentine's Day. And I'm away from my wife, Cheryl Anne.

42 years we've been married.

But I wanted to share something with the folks in the room here about something that will endear you to your partner. So make note of this.

And, Sabrina, if you wouldn't mind playing the role of my wife for a second, standing here.

(Laughter.)

SABRINA IONESCU: I am married.

ERNIE JOHNSON: I know. First anniversary.

AHMAD RASHAD: Whoa, whoa.

ERNIE JOHNSON: Jalen, if you would stand right here. Hey, I'm like coaching.

And so imagine we were at a social event, we were at a social setting. And we're just sitting here, we're just kind of talking, and Jalen comes up and asks me how long we've been married.

So, Jalen?

JALEN BRUNSON: How long have you been married?

ERNIE JOHNSON: Not long enough.

(Applause.)

See, it's about the eye contact. It's hearing the question.

Again, how long have I been married.

JALEN BRUNSON: How long have you been married?

ERNIE JOHNSON: Not long enough.

(Laughter.)

Does that work?

SABRINA IONESCU: Yes.

(Applause.)

ERNIE JOHNSON: And that's guaranteed, "Honey, you play 36 holes this weekend. You just go on and do what you want."

(Laughter.)

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

Thank you all for being here today. Thanks for letting us be part of this. Thanks Marty, Jalen, Sabrina, Steve.

(Applause.)

AHMAD RASHAD: Hey, can we just one more time give it up for Ernie and all the great moderators and panelists?

(Applause.)

My brother. I'd like to thank all of you in the room for being such a great audience and hope you have a great weekend. Enjoy the rest of the All-Star weekend. Thank you.

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