

# LA Times NFL Speaker Series

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## Ryan Leaf

THE MODERATOR: I want to welcome my friend Ryan Leaf to Hall of Farmer.

RYAN LEAF: That's a great name by the way.

**Q. Thank you. Did you see it's on the water bottles?**

RYAN LEAF: You didn't write it, though, right?

**Q. No, I didn't write it. I didn't write it. I like to claim that I wrote it. I'll tell people later that I wrote it. Now I have to give credit where credit's due.**

I want to talk about a lot of things, but let's first start off with football. I know that a game you called -- in fact, the first Rams game you called this season for Westwood One was that home loss to Tennessee, when the Rams were rolling, Tennessee just lost Derrick Henry, and it really looked like the Rams were going to beat Tennessee. Tennessee won, triggered that three-game losing streak. What are your memories from that game?

RYAN LEAF: Well, they did it without pressuring. They did it with the four up front D-linemen, or three even, which I think is what the Cincinnati Bengals are going to have to do. Any time you pressure Matthew Stafford, he just dices you up. He's been the best in the NFL against the blitz.

So what I noticed was Simmons and Landry just getting to the quarterback, making those offensive linemen look foolish up front, and then making Matthew Stafford make mistakes that he hadn't made so far during the season. Then people started looking back at what things he'd done in Detroit.

That was an incredible game by their defensive coordinator. Kevin Byard had studied a great number of film to see the play that ultimately won them the game with the pick six. It was something that he had to have seen Matthew Stafford do before because he jumped before Matthew had even let go of the football.

**Q. So did that expose a vulnerability in the interior of the Rams offensive line that, as you say, Cincinnati**

**could exploit?**

RYAN LEAF: Probably, but it also, I think, exposed Sean McVay and his -- I mean, he was in 11 personnel the whole game, right? He was in a three wide receiver set the entire football game. Not one other snap was he out of that personnel, which was so rare for him. I know they live in that formation and that personnel, but he didn't go away from it any other way, and they didn't commit to running the football.

When you're backed up like that, you've got to run the football. And what's made Matthew Stafford so much better later in the season is they committed to running the football. Cam Akers came back. They can run play action which allows Matthew to get outside the pocket, set up, and have better throwing lanes, and you have receivers running into bigger open spaces. That's why Cooper Kupp has been such a dominating force late in the season.

**Q. Can you explain to me why Matthew Stafford can look so precise at times and then look sloppy at others and have those interceptions, which I think scare a lot of Rams fans. Like how does it go off the rails so quickly?**

RYAN LEAF: I think, like anybody, pressure does different things to different people. I mean, you watch the coaching staff for the Buffalo Bills with the final 13 seconds of that football game at Arrowhead, they'd never been in that type of pressure cooker, and they flat out didn't get it done because of what the pressure did to them in that moment. They made bad decisions, bad mistakes.

Pressure does different things to different people, and when Matthew Stafford sometimes feels pressure, he resorts back to or has muscle memory of when he was in Detroit, which was he was the only answer. He had to try to win every single game by doing everything he could.

So if he's falling down and trying to get away from a sack, his answer was I have to throw and get something complete or get it out of my hands or we're just going to get run over in this football game because there's no one else really around me helping. That's just muscle memory.

He doesn't realize that he's got the defense that they have, that he's got the playmakers on offense that you can take

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the sack, right? You can take the loss, live to fight another day, and that's a learning process because he's just come from Detroit. It's not like he hasn't been gone for a long time and been in this offense and understand.

And if you saw down the stretch, he still was making a few mistakes, but their team, their team won the football games, and that's because collectively they're a very, very talented football team.

**Q. Probably didn't hurt in Detroit that for the first part of his career he had Calvin Johnson, who could turn a 50-50 ball into a 90-10 ball.**

RYAN LEAF: Right.

**Q. He could throw up one of those balls, and Calvin Johnson was going to be a rebounder and pull it down, right?**

RYAN LEAF: The difference here is he's got a similar receiver in Cooper Kupp because Cooper does such a tremendous job of body control. Like the ball can be behind him on a different shoulder or down low or anything like that, but Cooper does a great job of using that body control to bend and to lean and can catch balls in different spots.

So even though he's not the size of Calvin Johnson, that's why I think the relationship has gone so well, it's because he has the similar feeling that he can throw the ball in just the vicinity of Cooper Kupp, and he's going to make the catch.

**Q. You were with Jordan Palmer when Jordan was working with Joe Burrow.**

RYAN LEAF: Yep.

**Q. What did you see in Joe Burrow that impressed you?**

RYAN LEAF: When I walk in a room with guys that are going to be the first overall draft pick, same thing with Trevor Lawrence, when those guys look at me, I would just assume that they would think, why would I listen to this guy? He may have been in my shoes then, but he didn't succeed at what I'm going to succeed at or I want to succeed at.

Both those guys aren't like that at all. They opened up their notebooks, and they were ready to take notes. Like to get where I got, I had to have been pretty darn good, and then once I got there, it's what I didn't do, right? So they have to understand that. Like what red flags, what triggers,

what things, what land mines got in the way? And both of them were just incredibly impressive.

I mean, it's -- I think there's humility there. For a guy that's going to be the No. 1 overall draft pick, just won a National Championship and the Heisman Trophy, to walk into a room when everybody else is looking at him, and he sits down, and he gives you the attention. The reason why Jordan Palmer brought me in, right? I think he trusts Jordan. He said, Jordan's not going to place somebody in front of me that's going to waste my time and not make me a better quarterback.

And I've seen that from some of the greats that are playing right now, their ability to humble themselves when they are definitely the more talented person and maybe even -- and probably smarter person in the room.

**Q. The NFL's filled with historical revisionists. So when people look back at that '98 draft and I was covering the league then, they say, well, of course I pick Peyton Manning over Ryan Leaf naturally. That was a mystery down to the wire. I mean, that was -- what are your recollections of that? Because I think Bill Polian was on the fence, and every team was. Now you've got Peyton in the Hall of Fame, and you referenced your career went sideways.**

RYAN LEAF: Yeah.

**Q. What do you remember about that? Set the record straight on that.**

RYAN LEAF: Yeah, a lot of people picked me to be the No. 1 pick.

**Q. Through preseason, the whole deal.**

RYAN LEAF: Yeah, then when the season started, I won my first two starts. He lost his first two. I mean, it was -- you know, it is revisionist history, just the way our careers turned out, mine, and especially what happened in my post career, where his would take off.

The difference between Peyton and I have always been the ability to deal with failure in a positive way. He led the league in interceptions. They went 3-13 his rookie year. I don't know how I would have handled that. I saw success or failure. Those were the only two options, black and white. There was no gray.

I was horrible at dealing with failure. I didn't realize it was an opportunity to do it better the next time. That's the best definition of what failure is in my eyes at the NFL level, and he was exceptional at it. He got better throughout the year.

Then I forced the hand of the San Diego Chargers to -- they did not know what to do with me. Peyton struggled, but Jim Mora and that team kept him on the field. Let him learn, let him develop. I was just getting pulled in and out, yanked in and out, and I lost respect for them, and I started to resent them. Therefore, I didn't like going to work.

**Q. Did this start -- this was rookie year?**

RYAN LEAF: Yeah, I mean, I yelled at the reporter, if you remember that one.

**Q. Yeah, Steve Hosner.**

RYAN LEAF: That set things in motion, and I started developing a relationship with my teammates through the media that fired my head coach five weeks in. I really liked him. So I had three head coaches in my first two years, blew out my shoulder, missed my entire second year with the lab rum tear, which is the year you're supposed to make that jump, and I just never had that opportunity.

I'm terrible when I have idle hands. Like my -- you don't want to be in my mind when I'm alone, right? I need to be active. I need to be going. I need to be like a shark. So that second year, it was just a recipe for disaster with the new head coach, Mike Riley, who -- I don't know how he ever became a head coach in the NFL. He was un confrontational, and he was -- we certainly didn't fit, that's for sure.

And you had superstars like Junior Seau and Rodney Harrison on that defense that it got squandered, and the guys had to go other places, New England in particular, to get a championship and really be the best possible versions of themselves.

**Q. Take me into that locker room. What did it feel like for you?**

RYAN LEAF: I felt -- I mean, it was my fault. I ostracized myself. I didn't accept help when help was offered. I think that John Carney had some relationship with -- he was our kicker. He had some relationship, he knew somebody who knew Tony Robbins, and I remember that he passed along that Tony was willing to meet with me for a weekend. And I think it was on his private island in Fiji and everything like this.

I'm pretty sure my exact words were F Tony Robbins. I mean, that's the blatant idiocy that was going on. Like I had all the answers. And if Tony Robbins is listening now, I'd love to take that weekend in Fiji, by the way.

**Q. Plus two (laughter).**

RYAN LEAF: Yeah, plus two.

**Q. Take the family.**

RYAN LEAF: Just, you know, I'd never seen another man in my whole life growing up in Montana and the cowboy culture and then in locker rooms in college and the NFL, I'd never seen another man stand up and say, I'm really struggling here. I need help. So I'd never seen it before, how would I know how to do it? Didn't see it on TV or movies. The stigma existed so much that that I didn't know how to do that.

I didn't know to look at John and see he was trying to help me by setting this up and seeing Tony Robbins or somebody like that and think, this guy can make me better -- a better human, a better football player, all of it. That's the difference between me and the likes of Joe Burrow. Joe Burrow saw me not as a failure or less than or a loser. He saw me as a guy that could help him be better.

That's why, and that's who is great, who can humble themselves and take anything that comes at him as an opportunity to do it better the next time.

**Q. Yeah, wow. And you're in a sport where it's verboten to sit up and say I need help, right? You had to hide everything.**

RYAN LEAF: I think that's changing. I think that platforms such as this and opportunities for me and others to destigmatize mental illness, substance abuse, all of that, I think we're moving in the right direction. I may never see it, just like people who grew up in the '60s who tried to make change are still seeing issues that exist, and they may never see the actual change, the full change that comes. Maybe I won't either, but what are you going to do? You're not going to just pack it up and go in. You're going to try to change the narrative.

We're seeing it differently, right? We've seen players come out and talk about it. We've seen Calvin Ridley step away from the football field this year because of his mental illness. When you can't see it -- when it's diagnosed but no one can see it -- like when you go and look at an X-Ray and there's a broken bone, you can see it, you can touch it, you understand it. That's my injury. I need to rehab it.

But you can't see a mental illness. You get diagnosed, and people look at it differently than they look at it as a physical injury.

**Q. So roll the film forward because an uncomfortable**

## **locker room was far from the bottom.**

RYAN LEAF: Yeah, it was very far from the bottom. Uncomfortable going to work. When I finally left San Diego and I ended up in Tampa with Tony Dungy, I learned how to be a professional, but by that time, I had wrecked my wrist. I was nowhere near as talented as I was when I came out of college. I was not as accurate. I wasn't as in shape.

I would bounce around for a few years. There would never be any more problems. I had really good relationships with my teammates and everything like that, but I wasn't the same player. My whole life, even if I was -- I misbehaved or anything, the consequences weren't as dire for me because I was just exceptionally good on the football field, right? And I wasn't that anymore, and I was starting to be regulated -- or relegated, sorry, to the backup, and I'd never been that.

So my pride in my final stop when I got to Seattle and I was going to be fighting for the backup spot rather than the starting position with Matt Hasselbeck, I started kind of thinking about things or what I was dealing with, and that was an undiagnosed depression. I was having a real hard time getting out of bed. I felt lazy. I sat all the time.

And instead of telling Mike Holmgren that, I walked into his office, and I said, I quit. I'm done. So the thing I wanted to do since I was 4 years old, because I couldn't be the starting quarterback, because I couldn't muster up the courage to tell somebody that I was going through all those things, I left. I assumed, okay, remove this part of my life, which is being heavily criticized, and then it will all go away.

I still had all this success. I had money, power, and prestige, which I thought was the pillars to success. The prestige may be a little tarnished now that I was a former NFL player, but come on, there's 27,000 of us ever. Still pretty darn cool.

### **Q. Number 2 pick.**

RYAN LEAF: So I thought I could just walk away, and I of course didn't address any of the issues that I was having, and when I was in Vegas for a fight -- because I still was a complete narcissist in that I show up in a room like this, and I feel like please don't recognize me, please don't recognize me, and then like 15 minutes later, I'm like why the hell isn't anybody recognizing me?

(Laughter).

That's a narcissist, everybody, all right? That's me. So I

would go to fights in Vegas because I would get that. Oh, look, look at the famous, rich Ryan Leaf. I don't care if they're you suck at football. Hey, buddy, I'm rich and famous, and that was enough for me.

That night, I was in that moment we're at the MGM Grand and they're announcing the celebrities in the audience, and it was Tiger Woods and Charles Barkley and Dr. Dre, and the audience just went into applause and cheering, and then when they give you these tickets ringside, they use that as a reason to announce your name. They're like it's promotion, right? And I just was hoping and hoping they wouldn't announce my name, and they did. And the whole MGM Grand booed and hissed.

It's not like that hadn't happened before. Playing football, you walk into an opposing team's stadium, but you have armor on. It almost emboldens you. What I heard was that you are a terrible football player and you are an awful human being. That's what I heard.

Sure enough that night an acquaintance of mine offered me some Vicodin. I'd been introduced to that drug my whole life with surgeries. I had like 15 surgeries in my life. It was an opiate pain killer is what it is, and it's given to you to treat acute physical pain, and it worked for me, right? It took that away. But then I would always go back to competing, which I think is my first drug of choice is competition, and that was no longer there.

He gave me these pills that night, and I was mixing them with the alcohol. When I went to these parties where there were Hall of Famers, Super Bowl champions, where I always felt less than and judged a lot when I walked into those rooms, I took those, and they do exactly what they're supposed to do. They kill your pain. I wasn't -- I didn't have that emotional pain. I walked into those rooms, and I didn't feel anything. I didn't feel judgment. I didn't feel fear. I didn't feel anxiety. I felt nothing, and I was searching for that for so long, I think, to feel nothing.

So that started eight years of trying to duplicate that feeling. Once they came up, once I started feeling those feelings again, I would try to numb them. That was the next eight years of my life.

### **Q. So where did it take you?**

RYAN LEAF: It took me to prison. It took me home to my hometown where I'm -- I used to say this. I used to say I'm the only No. 1 -- I'm the only first round draft pick ever from the state of Montana because I thought I was. But I said it on the Rich Eisen Show, and the internet let me know that a guy named Ed Barker was drafted in 1953 by the Los Angeles Rams, and he was born in Dillon, Montana.

**Q. Local boy?**

RYAN LEAF: Good job, Ed. You ruined my story.

(Laughter).

1953. You know, I wasn't even going to come around for 23 years.

**Q. 13 years, 14 years till the first Super Bowl. But we digress.**

RYAN LEAF: Anyway, when I tell the story a lot of times, I'm the first first round pick in the state of Montana's history, and I always say there are more first round draft picks in the Manning family than the whole state of Montana ever. No trailblazer, nothing, I'm supposed to be the hero. I'm back in that hometown, broke, a failure, just made my hometown and my state not proud.

And now this junkie who would look in the mirror every night and just like somebody please help me. Every night. Not to anybody in particular, to the universe, like that was going to fix anything. And I started scouring the outskirts of my hometown, going to friends' homes that I hadn't seen in years, pretending I was interested in spending some time with them and go into their medicine cabinet, excuse myself to go to the bathroom and go through their medicine cabinet and steal their pills. I was ordering them online from pill mills in Florida.

Then ultimately at the end, like going to open houses, pretending I was interested in buying the house. It's a great grift. I've had a lot of criminal friends tell me like that was a really good idea because nine times out of ten, they just give you the run of the house in an open house. Nine times out of ten, there would be pills there. It wasn't like I was collecting them for future use. I was so psychologically dependent on it, as soon as they were in my hand, like my day was over. Okay, I'm free. I'm clear. I'm good.

I'd take them. I would numb out. I didn't feel any of the shame or guilt of who I was, what I had become, and what I had to do to get them. The ends justified the means. That was before they were even in my system. As soon as I had them in my hand driving back to my house, I knew I was going to be okay, and that would start over every single day. So it was just hell.

Good thing I'm a terrible criminal and I'm easily recognizable at 6'7", 250 pounds, and I finally got found out. I was arrested, and I was so fearful around anything to do with police and jail or anything. I bonded out

immediately with money I didn't have, but I just thought, okay, I need to not feel this, and if I can't not feel this, then I need to really not feel this, and I need to be dead. I googled ways to kill myself.

I think I've showed you this before, my scar on my wrist. I slit my wrist, and it just -- it didn't take. So I went to a house that I knew had pills again, and I robbed them essentially, burgled their home. But they were in my hand, and I knew that everything that was going around was going to be numb in a minute. And that was what I was searching for.

The family noticed me coming out of the house. I talked my way out of it. I didn't look like a burglar. I'm in a nice coat, a pea coat, but when they called the police when they noticed something was wrong. I was, like I said, easily recognizable in a lineup in my hometown.

The police showed up that night and arrested me in front of my dad and my brother, who had come to try to help me because, when I mess up, like when I mess up, everybody knows about it. It's on the banner of SportsCenter, right? It's in every paper. For whatever reason. The fact that I was considered one of the biggest draft busts ever, I was drafted alongside arguably the greatest to ever play the position, the internet had just started. How badly I crashed and burned post-career to add fuel to the fire, I guess.

So it's a national story when I mess up. So everybody, everybody sees it -- all my family, my grandparents are embarrassed again because their eldest grandson has embarrassed the family name.

But those nights where I was asking for somebody to help me, my higher power, whatever that is, finally said, okay, dude, you don't get it. So I'm just going to send the sheriff's department to save your life, and that's what happened. They saved my life. Came and arrested me, and I wouldn't get out of prison for the next 32 months, almost three years of my life. And they did. They saved my life.

**Q. What was prison like?**

RYAN LEAF: Horrible. But almost a relief, no responsibility. I wasn't creating chaos -- or so I thought. I wasn't creating chaos with my community, my family, all of that. Because I could have gotten out much sooner than I got out because I kept denying my parole because I thought this is the best thing for everybody. Even when the judge sentenced me for my sentence, I asked for more time. I could have got 20 years, and he gave me 7. I was like, what are you doing? I almost like tried to insult him to give me more time. It says 20 years here. I'm confused.



Why are you giving me 7?

I just thought I was better off dead and out of everybody's life. That was the most selfish thing I could have done. My parents, they just wanted a safe, healthy boy. They didn't ask for a famous football playing son. People who wanted to help me, I was just shunning because of it.

And nothing changed in prison. Like for 26 of the 32 months, I did nothing. I sat on my butt. I got fat. I watched the NFL Red Zone in the fall on my little TV at the end of my bed. Prison is not a deterrent. There's a reason we're the most heavily populated prison population in the world because it's just another society where people go. And they know they're going to have three meals and a place to sleep, which they may not have if they're on the outside.

So I sat there and did that and did nothing. Didn't talk to anybody. Didn't have any visitors. I just shunned everybody away.

And finally, my roommate, who was an Afghan Iraqi war veteran, who had made amends for what he had done and tried to better himself every single day, and I just looked at him sometimes like what are you doing? We're prisoners. We're numbers. We're a warehouse. We're losers. No one cares about us or wants anything from us, or we can't change anything.

And he was fed up with my attitude, I guess, and felt comfortable enough finally one day, and he just confronted me and said, you don't understand the value that you have. Not only for the value you have, not only for the men in here but for when you get out. You're going to get out sometime, Ryan. I may never get out. He suggested we go down to the prison library and help prisoners who didn't know how to read learn how to read.

I've had many of those come to Jesus talks with people, coaches, mentors, family, and I just dismissed it because I'm the big strong football player. I got it. So I can't tell you why I went with him. Maybe because the substance had been out of my brain for 26 months. I still went begrudgingly. I remember walking down the hallway thinking -- I'm in this red jumpsuit walking down a prison hallway thinking this is stupid. This isn't going to help me. Like he doesn't even know how important I am.

The comedy of that, everybody, that a guy in prison in a red jumpsuit thinks he's still important is hysterical. I walk into a room in a place where you're supposed to show zero vulnerability, and here's this man who comes up to me, 50 years old. Ryan, I can't read. Can you help me? Never heard it before in my life from another man. I was blown away. That will get you hurt in prison, vulnerability. It just

will. It's how you take advantage of people.

And he asked for help, and I started helping, and here we are in the most miserable place you can imagine. Two guys who were going through very difficult and adverse times being of service to one another.

And I kept doing it. I kept coming back because it doesn't just change if you do it one time. You don't go to the gym one day, and you wake up the next day, and you look like the Rock in the mirror. It's about consistency. It's about showing up. So a couple weeks passed, a month.

#### **Q. I don't wake up like this (laughter).**

RYAN LEAF: No. I realized I was sleeping better. I was more personable. I was talking to family. And it was because I was being of service to another human being for the first time in my life. I used to think what I did on Sundays and Saturdays was being of service to other people. Silly concept. Play a silly game. It's a game that I was really good at, but I still was an awful person, and that's what needed to change.

So when I got out December 3rd, 2014, only two people there to pick me up were my mom and dad, and that's more than a lot of people have when they walk out of prison, a ton more, and that's where the journey started. I had no idea what was going to happen. I had no money. I had no job. My credit score was 500. Girls weren't lined up to date me mentality. ESPN wasn't there offering me a job, right?

I had hope, and I didn't understand where that hope came from, but it's from what I had done while I was in prison there. That's where the journey started, and it's taken me here with you today because of that beginning. But just had to be consistent.

#### **Q. Yeah, and your family, Anna and McGyver, son --**

RYAN LEAF: Yeah, if you'd have told me seven years ago when I walked out of that prison cell that you're going to have this life of your dreams and you're going to have a son, I would say, no, I'm never going to have a son because I'm never going to give somebody my last name because I don't want them to be teased and embarrassed. What a selfish, selfish thing to think. It was all about me. My dad is a two tower Vietnam veteran. My grandfather served. That name is meaningful.

But I was so narcissistic that I thought it was still all about me. And then as you know, being a father, once they lay that child in your arms, like there's this wave of selflessness that just washes over you because you know

everything you do from this point on is going to be about them and not about you, which was exactly the mindset I had to have walking out of prison.

It was like everything I did from this point on had to be about somebody else and not me always. Otherwise, I would be the exact same person that I'd always been.

**Q. And it's work, right? It's work daily.**

RYAN LEAF: It's work daily. That's a great point. Some days I mess up terribly. I have more self awareness and understand what I do, and I make amends for it, and I understand that I'm a flawed human being like everybody else. I'm not more important or less important. I'm just trying to be better, a better human being every day. So that's what I do.

**Q. You indicated that there have been some changes. People are showing -- in the league. People are showing more vulnerability, more awareness of mental illness, addiction, those types of things. Is the league where it needs to be? Has that change been glacial? What's going on right now?**

RYAN LEAF: Yeah, it's been glacial. What I found -- and I would argue that most of my NFL brotherhood and peers, former players, we just now know that we can't rely on the NFL. They are -- they're a propaganda machine. They print money. And I can't fault them for it. Why would you stop doing something like that and not look at us as assets that you can disparage and throw away when you're no longer good for the brand?

Initially, I was like screw you. And now I'm just like I don't believe a thing you say, and I don't need it. We're going to help each other. This is a peer-to-peer thing. Because current players who the NFL PA works for is about the current players. They are not about former players. And current players don't realize that they're ultimately going to be former players at some point. You just don't think that's ever going to be the case. You think you're going to play forever and you're going to make millions of dollars the rest of your life.

So I don't trust anything that comes out of the mouth of DeMaurice Smith or Roger Goodell, and we're all in it together who played previously. And that's the work we do because we're losing too many of our brothers because no one cares about them after they're all done, when they've finally given it to you. Unless you're maybe one of the 360-plus Hall of Famers.

But still, those guys struggle a ton too, and they're not seen, especially the early Hall of Famers, guys that don't

have the health insurance, that don't have the pensions like some of those others have.

So it's been a struggle, especially when you see peers of yours dying alone in hotel rooms, right? Because I know exactly how that feels. I was alone in a hotel room, and I was dying, and I have a ton of survivor guilt on why I'm here and they're not because I feel like they could be so much more impactful because they were so much more successful at football than I was, and they felt like they were more -- they didn't treat people like crap like I did for so long. So why am I here and they're not?

So it hurts. It hurts a lot. It hurts that the most we get out of the NFL is thoughts and prayers.

**Q. When you were in Las Vegas at that fight, you got booed and hissed and turned to substances to numb that. Now we're in a world where you can be booed and hissed constantly through social media.**

RYAN LEAF: Right.

**Q. How do you deal with that? How do you process that and maintain your sobriety and integrity and those things? How do you?**

RYAN LEAF: It's hard, right? Because we're all human and criticism hurts. Usually when it hurts, though, you probably should take a look at it because there's probably some truth in it. The things that people are just projecting whatever they're projecting, there came a point where I just became -- I surrendered and accepted what it is, right? I take full accountability for everything I've done.

It doesn't cost me anything to be accountable for the things I've done my whole life. It doesn't cost me anything. In fact, it gives me so much more. And I think the true definition of humility is just fully understanding and being okay with who you see in the mirror. Like I am okay when I wake up in the morning and see who I see in the mirror. All those flaws and cracks and scars and all that, that's me, and that's okay.

So when people are negative or boo or pointed, though there may be a twinge of heartache, it is over in a hurry, right? I don't resent them. I don't pay them much mind. I control what I can control, and that's my response to it.

**Q. There's a four letter B word that people might attach to you and say to you from a great distance. When they're in your face, they would never use that word. You named your podcast Bust.**

RYAN LEAF: I'm an incredible businessman, Sam, right?



I knew I could market the hell out of it. I work in media. I heard stories about The Boz, when he had such a tough time in Seattle, he started getting these shirts printed up that said The Boz sucks or Boz sucks, and he sold them outside the Kingdome and made a bunch of money off of it. That and it's an opportunity to take some power back.

You can't be considered a bust if you're one of 27,000 ever to do it in 100 years of football. My peers don't call me that. My NFL brotherhood doesn't. But it was a way for me to do something that had never been done really with a podcast, and that's just sit in front of a microphone and tell my story from when I was born to where I am now, in the hopes that someone who needs to hear it can save their life because I needed that. I needed my life to be saved. I couldn't do it on my own.

So that's why I do it. Ripping off the Band-Aid constantly can be emotionally draining. It can be. I'll sleep hard tonight. I know I will. But it's important. My mentors have told me these last seven years, like you cannot have this peaceful, unchaotic life unless you give it away. And I didn't understand what they meant by that at first. By giving it away, it's giving away everything, my story, and that allows me to keep the peace and the unchaotic life. So that's why I do it.

I also needed to trust somebody, and who better to produce it than my wife. She knows me better than anybody. She produced it alongside with me and alongside any of you Entourage fans out there, Mr. Kevin Connelly, who has been in the entertainment business his whole life and understands story-telling. And him and I just walked into a studio almost a year ago and recorded 25 hours of content over a matter of three or four weeks.

Then we released it, and the response has been overwhelming. It's been amazing to see. The thing about it too, if you need it tomorrow, you can listen to it tomorrow. If you need it five years from now or ten years from now or 20 years from now, it's not one of these topical podcasts. It's evergreen is the word people use. You can use it when you need it. It can be as powerful as a thing that I ever would have been able to do.

I'd never have been able to have the impact that I have if I'd been a two time Super Bowl champ. I'd have just been a 45-year-old jerk with two Super Bowl rings. No one wants to hang out with that guy.

**Q. So as we wrap up here, what is your goal? Who are your -- who's your audience?**

RYAN LEAF: My audience is anybody who still struggles or worries that they're not enough or they can't do it. Like if

I can do it, anybody can. People always compliment me because of how I went through this in the public eye. I think it was easier for me because every time I messed up, I was shown that mirror. I was given a consequence. I was in the spotlight.

There's so many of those human beings out there that are struggling like I did that are doing it in the shadows, and they just disappear, and we never hear from them again. It's a representation of how every human life is precious, every one of them. It doesn't matter who you are, what walk of life. Every human life is precious.

What a purpose to have coming out of a prison cell, thinking that the only thing I could offer this world was as an athlete or as a football player. When that's your identity your whole life, how can you become purposeful again? To get messages from people, to make relationships with others who are having the hardest of times and they're struggling with family members, and for them to be in your life and still tell you about so and so is four years sober now and it's going great, just thank you for everything you did. Like that's the most meaningful thing there is.

So that's the audience. That's the audience. But what this life, this foundation of recovery has given me, it's given me the opportunity to get reintroduced and reinvested in the sport that gave me everything, football.

It turns out I'm a pretty good storyteller, which allows me to be a pretty darn good broadcaster, and I get to go and travel and be in stadiums and be around this game. And sometimes I was nervous around my bosses, whether or not they were going to give me an opportunity, especially to call NFL games. And I remember my boss at Westwood One and Sirius XM just looked at me and said, Ryan, you have forgotten more football than most people will ever know.

I can't tell you how many people have just lifted me up and supported me where they didn't have to. Like I have burned so many bridges in my life. Over the last seven years since I've been out of prison, they've carried me, carried me through everything. I'm so grateful, and I think that makes me a better employee for these companies because like no one's going to have to go grab me coffee or -- I'm going to do everything.

I'm so grateful for the opportunity because seven years ago I was sleeping on a cement slab in a prison. So there's a different perspective I have than a lot of other people do.

**Q. Ryan Leaf, my good friend, doing his most important work right now. Thank you so much for joining Hall of Farmer.**

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®



RYAN LEAF: You bet. It's good to see you.

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