



CLICK [HERE](#) TO LISTEN TO EPISODE 18 WITH KENT THIELEN

**Don:** You grew up in Minnesota, and you attended Shakopee High School. While looking through your high school yearbook, I noticed you were the football team's quarterback, the starting forward in basketball, and the catcher for the baseball team. As you think about these different sports, with different sized teams, what did you learn?

**Kent:** The one thing I did realize was the importance of how you formulate a team; this includes the team members, everyone knowing their role and responsibility, and accepting that role in a way that they want to contribute to the overall success of the team. I think this is incredibly important. I had a core group of about five or six individuals who translated across all three of the teams I participated in. They were all very skilled athletes, but more importantly, they were great teammates and friends. Some of the experiences that we had in each of those various sports led to a greater understanding of knowing how each of the individuals would perform, respond, and interact with their teammates. It also demonstrated to me that individuals could translate their skill sets across multiple arenas, different sports, and different experiences, all in different environments. And they are able to do so in a really successful way if they're the right group of individuals.

**Don:** In 1981, you led the football team to the Minnesota High School League State Tournament and entering that game, your team had the most wins in a season of any Shakopee Football Team ever. You were also the first quarterback to throw more than 1,000 yards, which must have made you a Shakopee legend! Can you tell me a story of that team and a leadership lesson you learned?

**Kent:** I think back to our seventh game of the season when we played a team from Hutchinson, Minnesota. They're sort of historic in the state of Minnesota for their success as a football program spanning decades. When we happened to play them in that seventh game of the season, they were the number one ranked team in the state of Minnesota. We were both undefeated. Since we were in the same conference, whoever won would be the only team from the conference who could go on to the state tournament; that was the way it was set up back then. They came to town, and the game was on our home field. They had a 50 game, five-year-long winning streak, which at the time was the longest winning streak in the history of Minnesota high school football. It may still be. The thought was that they

had their best team ever and so on. In spite of us having a successful season up to that point, there was a lot of doubt about our ability to even compete with them. But there were a couple of takeaways from that particular game and even the entire season. One was about limiting beliefs and entering that contest with the mindset of "We can win this game. We're a very good team, and even if we don't win, we're going to compete in a way that they're going to remember how good we were." Secondly, in that game, there was a time period where, in the fourth quarter, we were down, and I believe it was 29 to 28, with just about four minutes to go in the game. We were at about midfield, marching down the field, but behind. We were on a play that was a fourth and five or fourth and seven, something like that, and our coach called a timeout. The whole season was on the line. Whoever won this game was going to go to the state tournament, and they had their fifty game winning streak. We came to the huddle. We had these plays that we ran over and over and over, and we were really focused on executing them perfectly, but our coach had recognized that their defensive back was playing softly on our wide receiver. So, we made up a play in the huddle on fourth and five; that was the one time we did it the entire season. We sort of drew up this play in this timeout to throw a quick out pass to the wide receiver, because of how soft that defensive back was playing, to try and pick up those five yards. We were all a little surprised that our coach, who was so focused on execution, doing things right, and sticking to the playbook, would do that. There was so much on the line. We ended up completing the pass. The defensive back tried to intercept it. It went just past his fingertips, and our wide receiver caught it at the first down, and then shortly thereafter, we kicked the field goal to win that game 31 to 29, ending their winning streak. It was really an example to me that you plan, prepare, and execute, but there are times when you have to think outside of the playbook and work off-script. And sometimes you need to do it very quickly. You need to recognize the lay of the land and not get so wedded to the plan that you can't think outside the box.

**Don:** Your football coach at Shakopee, the late Dale Vaughan, had 130 career wins and an incredible reputation. In fact, the Shakopee school board unanimously voted to name the new football field after him. What lessons did you learn from Coach Vaughan that you still think about all these years later?

**Kent:** He was a tremendous coach who really earned the respect of anyone who played for him. He was one of these figures who emphasized preparation, execution, and hard work. You had to earn your position. He really valued things like loyalty and commitment to the program, and he had no room for shenanigans by anybody on the team. No matter how great of a player you were, who you were in the community, or whose son you might be, he was really all business. Going back to the game I mentioned earlier, and I think it was important for that particular season, that he really pushed against limiting beliefs, showing us that you can excel and if you don't have the right mindset, you're sort of finished before you start.

**Don:** You went on to play baseball at South Dakota State University. So I have to know... why baseball?

**Kent:** I was actually recruited there for both football and baseball, but I only did football during my freshman year. I recognized that, at the college-level, one sport was probably a good idea. So I decided to pursue the baseball route, recognizing that it would be pretty hard to play both sports in college. Just because in college, there are year-round practices, and with fall ball for baseball and spring ball for football, they would overlap too much. Because of this, I went with the baseball route.

**Don:** In 1984, South Dakota State finished 27-13 and advanced to the NCAA Division II College World Series for the only time in program history. Tell me, what allowed that team to do what no other team from South Dakota State has done?

**Kent:** It was one of those situations where the stars aligned right. We had a couple of transfers to our program, who actually had come there not necessarily to play baseball, but they had come to the school for educational reasons, or they had injuries in another sport at another school. We gelled as a team. It was a wonderful team that had tremendous pitching, which, in baseball, is really important. Several of those players went out to be drafted by the major leagues and played up through the high triple-A level. We had a lot of talent on that team, but we also had a new coach that year, after decades of having a different coach. I think the new coach added to that mix by giving a new perspective and a new approach.

**Don:** While you were at South Dakota State, the team went through a coaching change. Your first coach, Erv Huether, was succeeded by Mark Ekeland in 1984. How did you adapt to that change? What did you learn about transition and leadership style through that experience?

**Kent:** The coach that we had, Coach Erv Huether, had been there from about 1950 through the early 80s. That's more than 30 years, and he was inducted into the National Coaches Hall of Fame. I think he has the most wins in the school's history. The field is named after him. He was a tremendous, wonderful, outstanding coach. He had a very soft-spoken, almost whispering style to his leadership as a coach. The type where you almost have to listen closely to make sure you heard what he said, but everybody sort of paid attention. He was a tremendous coach. There was a transition to Coach Ekeland, who came in with a more aggressive method in his style of play. He was more verbal and direct with the team. He set, perhaps, higher expectations for what he expected out of everybody on the team. I think I'm a combination of all the various leaders that I've come in contact with. I think every time you interact with a coach, leader, or mentor, you take bits and pieces of them away. You take what you find to be effective and useful. You apply them to your particular circumstance. I can move between various leadership styles depending on the circumstance. I think you need to react to the various circumstances as opposed to defining yourself as one particular type of leader.

**Don:** Throughout the years, you have volunteered to coach youth baseball, soccer, football, and basketball. To you, what makes a great coach, especially to younger athletes? How did that deepen the bond with your children when you coached their teams?

**Kent:** I think it was a tremendous experience. I've coached more than 30 youth teams over the years: Football, basketball, baseball, and a little tiny bit of soccer. Soccer was the one sport that I didn't have a tremendous amount of knowledge from experience, but it was a goal. It was an opportunity for me to learn, and I found it to be tremendously rewarding to engage and interact with the players and their families --- to be a part of the family and culture that each team sort of develops. You know, I've maintained contact with many of those, what I describe as kids, but they're now young adults in their mid-20s. They're now out of college, doing whatever they chose to do with their careers. It's rewarding when they reach out to me and still touch base or seek advice. I've had several of the players that I've coached over the years choose to go into medical careers, and many of them didn't come from medical families. The fact that as a physician, I may have exposed them to some of what it means to be a physician, and that you can still extend beyond being a physician to contribute to the community and participate in the community in ways like being a coach. I like to think that maybe I had some impact,

and I love that many of them have reached out to me and sought advice and guidance as they've pursued their careers.

**Don:** You know the premise of the podcast, that a disproportionate number of Fortune 500 executives were actively engaged in sports at both the high school and collegiate level and that that experience helped shape the way they lead today. Do you agree that being an athlete has helped make you a better leader? When hiring team members, does whether or not someone has participated in sports catch your attention?

**Kent:** So, to answer the first question regarding my personal experience, clearly, it's had a major role in developing me as a leader. It's had a tremendously positive impact on me and the experiences that I've gained, which have helped define how I work as a leader and how I react to certain situations when it comes to defining our team. As I interview many individuals to join our Mayo Clinic team here, I do notice if they have a sports background. Certainly, it's not an absolute that you need to have a sports background, but for those that have a sports background, I tend to draw upon that experience during interviews or as I'm reaching out and touching base with them. This lets me learn a little bit more about what that experience was like and how they reflect on that experience. I do think that those individuals who've had the experience of being a part of a team have a better understanding of how to be a highly functioning member of a team. I think it does enhance their emotional intelligence and their capabilities around interacting with others.

**Don:** Your parents grew up on dairy farms, and while you were growing up, your dad worked at a hybrid seed corn company, and your mom was a secretary at a junior high school, but you set out to become a doctor. I read that you were inspired to pursue that career after shadowing a physician. Those kinds of mentoring experiences can be so game-changing. Can you tell us about yours?

**Kent:** I think mentoring experiences are incredibly important for the development of any individual. Back when I was in high school, I had a friend of mine on those sports teams, and his name was Bobby Christensen. He played with me in a number of sports, and I used to hang out with him a bit in high school, but his father was the local surgeon for the hospital in town. He was a highly respected individual in the community. He was a general surgeon, and he went on to be also the president of the Minnesota Medical Association. He was extremely engaging. He was the first person that gave me the idea that maybe I can be a physician. I hadn't been exposed to somebody like that. So sometimes, you just need that initial exposure to just put the concept in your mind. I reached out and talked to him on several occasions about what it's like to be a physician. He provided encouragement and engagement. Once I decided that this might be something I'd like to do, he let me shadow him. I would be able to follow him on rounds on some Saturday mornings, and I would go in with him when he was doing his post-operative rounds the next morning. He even allowed me to observe, from a distance, several surgeries in the operating room, which really sort of cemented my personal goal of wanting to become a physician. He continued to provide me some guidance as I started to move through college and apply to medical schools. Actually, he trained as a resident at Mayo Clinic. He was the one who spoke so highly of Mayo Clinic and the tremendous training he had gotten there. So I think that likely had some impact on me wanting to train at Mayo Clinic as well. But clearly, it was an individual like him that had a tremendous impact on me. I don't think it was a tremendous amount of time, and I don't think I distracted him a lot, but he totally shaped the direction of my career.

**Don:** In a 2019 article in Mayo Magazine, your colleague, Dr. Jonathan Morris, said your strength was the ability to see the next big thing. Was there someone during your journey whose thought process along these lines inspired you to think bigger?

**Kent:** I think there are a number of experiences that I've had along the way that contributed to that. But clearly, I love innovation. That's my passion. In my personal clinical career as a physician, I've loved developing new capabilities, new procedures, and new devices. That type of work is really stimulating for me, and that happens at Mayo Clinic every day. So that's been an important part of my experience here. I'd have to say during my training at Mayo Clinic, I was exposed to some giants in my personal field of neuroradiology and radiology, who really introduced some very impactful tools to the field of medicine. For instance, the first CT scanner in North America was installed at a Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, and those physicians who led that effort to get that first CT scanner there trained me during my early career as residents and fellows. So, there were people like Bub Baker and Glenn Forbes who are neuro-radiologists. Glenn Forbes, still to this day, serves as a mentor for me. Every varying role I've had within the organization, from when I was a section head for neural procedures, to a division chair, to a department chair, and to my current role, Glenn always stops by and has a little visit with me as I take on those roles. She reminds me of important it is to make sure there are a few items that I want to accomplish during my tenure in that role. Those are the individuals who had that mindset and thought bigger and beyond. The things that they introduced to healthcare that have truly changed healthcare around the world is pretty amazing. For instance, that CT scanner is now thought to be probably one of the most impactful inventions in the field of medicine, and the first one in North America was at Mayo Clinic.

**Don:** You have a professional reputation for being a great encourager and pushing people past self-limiting beliefs. Can you tell me a story of a time you pushed someone in that way, and what words did you use?

**Kent:** One example that comes to mind is Jay Morris, who was one of the most innovative physicians, I think, in the world. He was someone that trained under me earlier in his career and has just really blossomed as an innovator in the field of medicine. But early on in his career, he and another one of our radiology colleagues, Jane Matsumoto, developed a new capability around 3D printing and anatomic modeling. Where you take, for instance, a CT scan of the body, and you're able to segment out various organs, and then print them on a 3D printer. You can use this information to guide planning for surgical procedures when cutting on bones when you're removing a bony tumor and other things with that capability. They can really enhance your ability to do really complex surgeries; It helps plan those surgeries, and guide the procedure itself. You can even make cutting guides that actually tell you where to cut ahead of time, along with being able to shorten the length of surgeries. He and Dr. Matsumoto were doing just incredible work, but they were doing it on a handful of patients, probably less than 20 a year over a five year period. I was having discussions with them about how I think there are a lot more people who could benefit from this capability and pushing them on the mindset of "Let's think bigger. How could we grow this? How can we expand this? What resources would we need? How would we make this something that's utilized not just at Mayo Clinic, but even beyond our walls?" They embraced that mindset. I pushed them on that, and they took it and ran. After doing less than 20 cases a year for about five or six years, they built a facility. Dedicated 3D printing and anatomic modeling lab and resources personnel started really getting out beyond our walls and discussing opportunities with other major academic medical centers around the world. Now, to make a long story short, they're doing

thousands of these cases per year. They're impacting so many patients; the quality of care that can be delivered by our procedural and surgical colleagues is enhanced, and the education of the patients is enhanced. It's been embraced nationally now. The Radiologic Society of North America now has a special interest group focus on this along with other reimbursing organizations. NASA nationally began the process of assessing this tool for reimbursement as well, so they can become more mainstream. That's just one example.

**Don:** Failure can be a great teacher. Can you tell me a story about how an athletic experience affected the way you handled something that didn't go as planned in your professional life?

**Kent:** I can think of a whole bunch of them, actually. I didn't finish the story of that football team that went on to the state tournament. After we beat Hutchinson, we actually lost in the state tournament. In one of the later rounds, after I threw an interception on an out pass. That was a little different play that was actually part of our playbook, but I can think back to so many times when I struck out in a key point in a game. I think what comes to mind more than a specific incident or experience is the cumulative number of times that things don't go the way you want them to. In the sporting competition, the strikeout, the intercepted pass, the missed free throw, at a key point in the game. All those things, they start flashing back, and I can think of a lot of those experiences. I think what they do, though, is allow you to become resilient. I think resilience is an incredibly important capability in order for leaders to be successful. I think it's underrated at times, and it's under-recognized. We're all going to have disappointments and failures. Having resilience allows you to bounce back quickly. I think it also allows you to have the capability to be willing to take some risks. And, you know, if we're not taking risks, to some degree, we're not going to advance. For me, in the science of medicine or our capabilities in helping patients, we have to occasionally fail. Of course, we need to be taking calculated risks, but without some failure, we're not going to be successful. We're not going to move the needle as a profession of medicine.