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Dean's Executive Leadership Series - 2011-2012 Transcript of Interview with Dennis Kuhl, Chairman, Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim

About DELS: The Dean's Executive Leadership Series at the [Graziadio School of Business and Management](#) features in-depth audio or video interviews with today's top business practitioners and thought leaders. [Listen or subscribe](#) to the podcasts to hear their views and insight on the current challenges and opportunities facing the business community.

Start

Rick Gibson: Hello and welcome. My name is Rick Gibson. I am vice-president for public affairs here at Pepperdine University and I am joined today by Dr. Linda Livingstone, who is the Dean of the Graziadio School of Business and Management. Welcome, Linda.

Linda Livingstone: Thank you, Rick. It is good to be here.

Rick Gibson: Well, it has been another outstanding series for the Dean's Executive Leadership Series and today we wrap things up.

Linda Livingstone: That is exactly right. We have had a great year with some really exceptional speakers and we are really pleased to close out the year with Dennis Kuhl, who is the chairman of the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, so we think this will be an exceptional event for everyone.

Rick Gibson: So kind of a sports theme going on here. We had Jerry West before and now Dennis Kuhl.

Linda Livingstone: That is exactly right and we had Coca Cola and some others that do a lot in the sports arena as well so it has been a fun and interesting year with some really high profile leaders.

Rick Gibson: We really look forward to this conversation. Let me invite our listeners to sit back and relax and to enjoy this conversation with Dennis Kuhl.

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Linda Livingstone: We are here for our final podcast of the Dean's Executive Leadership Series for 2011-2012. We are thrilled to end our series this year with Dennis Kuhl, who is the chairman of the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim. Dennis, we are glad to have you with us for our series this year.

Dennis Kuhl: Thank you very much. It is a pleasure.

Linda Livingstone: Well, we have had a bit of a sports theme this year. We had Jerry West with us earlier in the year and so we are doing a little basketball and a little baseball, but you did not start out in the baseball world so talk to us a little bit about sort of your professional journey and how you got here from where you started.

Dennis Kuhl: It is a pretty interesting journey. As I tell everybody, it is not about the destination. It is about the journey. After graduating from the University of Arizona, my first job was as a cost accountant in Kearny, New Jersey. About a year later, Arte graduated from the U of A. He had done his stint in Vietnam, came back, finished his education, got a job with a company called Eller Outdoor, and called me and said, "You know, you might be interested in doing this."

Linda Livingstone: So you guys were classmates? You knew each other at Arizona?

Dennis Kuhl: We were fraternity brothers.

Linda Livingstone: At Arizona. Fabulous.

Dennis Kuhl: Yes. We were fraternity brothers.

Linda Livingstone: That is great.

Dennis Kuhl: We were very close. He then asked me if I would be interested and I said, "Yeah, I'd love to get into sales" and we worked in sales there. He was a salesman and became sales manager. I was a salesman there. He went to Kansas City. I became sales manager. He went to New Jersey and I went to New Haven, Connecticut. He then left and started his own company. I came to California. From California, I went back to New Jersey. From New Jersey, I went into New York City and worked national sales in

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New York City for at that time was the Gannett Company. Arte came to me one day. We had dinner and he said, "I'd like you to come with us and run our national sales in New York." And I said, "Well, I'm here." I wanted to get back on the entrepreneurial side so I said, "Okay." I then went from New York to Atlanta to run his Atlanta company. He then went and proceeded to buy the Gannett Company, who we worked for and asked me to move to California. So I came to California. Arte then built the company to the largest outdoor company in North America with Canada and Mexico. He then proceeded to take it about as far as he could and had an opportunity to sell to Infinity, which was part of CBS and Viacom, which he did. I stayed around. He kind of went off in to the sunset for a little bit and I knew a couple things he was doing. He then one day, it was a funny story, he had called me up and said, "Let's go. I got tickets for the University of Arizona's playing Kansas in the regionals in the NCA," so I said, "Okay, I'll meet you down here." So came down here and we were standing at halftime outside. And he said, "Before we go back in," he said, "What do you think of that baseball hat over there?" I said, "The Angels?" I said, "They've done a nice job." He goes, "I just bought the team." So I said, "Okay, that's good."

Linda Livingstone: That is good. Not something you hear every day from your friends from college.

Dennis Kuhl: No. He bought it in May. In November, he called me up, I was still working in Los Angeles, very happy with my job, and he said, "Do you have time for a drink?" I said, "Yeah." Drove down here, we met and got into a conversation. He said, "I'd like for you to come and be president of the Angels." I said, "Okay." And he said, "I didn't tell you how much I was going to pay you." I said, "I really don't care." We had always been baseball fans. Every opportunity we ever had wherever we were, we always took in a baseball game. We loved the sport from little kids on. So it was interesting how the world turns and to use a soap opera, how the world turns is very strange but it was very rewarding. Everywhere I went, I made new friends. Atlanta, I loved. I grew up in New Jersey so I went back there and I spent some time with family, which was great. New Haven, Connecticut, I still have friends there. So, like I always say, it is the journey, not the destination that is most important to me.

Linda Livingstone: Yes, and given that we are a university and one of the things we talk a lot with our students about is really how they engage with their fellow classmates while they are in the programs that we have. For you, that in many ways, was sort of a significant piece of your professional career as well as of your personal life was that connection you made with Arte when you were in college.

Dennis Kuhl: It even goes beyond that. John Carpino was our president when I went to the University of Arizona. In the billboard business, there was a ton of us that went to the U of A. It was the connections. We knew the type of person and Arte was very good at the type of person that he wanted to hire and he

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knew these guys. And Arte was always, "I'm gonna hire people I know." And it worked out for him. It worked out for him.

Linda Livingstone: It is a great example of why those are so important and you need to maintain those connections throughout your life for lots of reasons.

Dennis Kuhl: I can not tell you how important that is and no one will ever know the connections you make, especially in college.

Linda Livingstone: Yes. Absolutely. Well, the transition from sort of the outdoor advertising world to the baseball world, clearly you can sort of see what some of those connections might be, but what did you take from sort of your world before professional baseball into what you do with the Angels now that has been helpful to you?

Dennis Kuhl: You have to understand that business is business and it is about revenue and expenses. I believe and I always believe, it is all about selling. You have got to sell. You have to. When I came here, I told everybody, "You're all going to be sales people. Remember that. You're all selling the Angels, the brand." So when we were selling billboards, we were probably lower on the totem pole when it came to media so we had to do things different. We had to find our niche in how we were going to do it. We had our culture and our culture was service. We out-serviced any other media there was. We under-promised and we over-delivered. We took advantage of every opportunity we could to get a new client and do something special for that client. It was not always wining and dining. We had to know their business and I would tell people, "Go and learn their business and how to solve their problem." But service was number one that we preached, number one over all. So when we came into this business, it is how are we going to service our fans? What are we going to do to make the fan experience better than any other place in any other stadium? That is why we have been fortunate every year to be voted the number one fan experience by ESPN magazine, so it is working. But, you know, there are a lot of things that went into that but you had to keep that focus. You had to keep that focus.

Linda Livingstone: So let us talk a little bit about what went into that because no matter what kind of organization you are, having a customer focus can be important. You might have different customers. You certainly might have a different product or service that you are selling. Can you give some specific examples of things you did from a customer service perspective or things you have done over the last several years that have made a significant difference in the minds of the fans that come to the games?

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Dennis Kuhl: What happens is you get settled in your thinking process that you are servicing the fan. We would sit in our staff meeting and say, "Hey, we're servicing our fans." But it was the management and we were not touching our fan. We had to decide who was touching our fans. And it was the ushers, it was the ticket takers, it was the parking lot attendants. I do not mean this wrong but the lowest pay level were the people that had more contact with our fans than we did. So what we did is we went into training mode. We had to teach and train these people what we expected from them. You cannot expect somebody to do something unless they have an idea of what is expected of them. We found out little things like when people came through the door, they did not look the person in the eye when they took their ticket. We said, "You look that person in the eye. You say, 'Thank you and you have a good day.'"

Linda Livingstone: Makes it a much more personal experience.

Dennis Kuhl: Absolutely. We still do it. You can never stop doing it. There are little things that you get an opportunity to do things. But it was about training the people that were touching the fan more than anyone else. That was the key. We do it every year because we get new employees. It was the ushers on how to treat a person. "Can I help you?" Instead of pointing to the seat, say, "I'll take you to the seat." We did a lot of reading on service. I went to a couple seminars that Disney did.

Linda Livingstone: Yes, they are well-known for their customer service.

Dennis Kuhl: Well-known for their service.

Linda Livingstone: Yes, absolutely.

Dennis Kuhl: We pulled their best. Went over here and pulled the best over here. Made sure that I go around and every one of our managers go around every night and walk the stadium and find out. You know, stop and say, "Hi" to a fan. "Can I help you?" "Let me see where your seats are." They are surprised. I could give you so many examples of opportunities that I have had. I was outside the ticket office one day and two ladies were there with their husbands and they said, "Our husbands aren't here," they were not with their husbands, "Our husbands aren't here yet and we need to use the restroom, can we go inside? We don't have our tickets yet." I said, "Come on, come with me." I got them through and I waited for them and I brought them back out and their husbands were standing there with their tickets and they go, "Where you been?" "Well, this nice gentleman took us. He's the president."

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Linda Livingstone: You got really good service today, lady.

Dennis Kuhl: You got really good service, but that will always stick in their mind.

Linda Livingstone: Sure, absolutely.

Dennis Kuhl: So I tell my people, there is always an opportunity out there to do something special. You have to have it that everybody thinks the same way in your management team and in your whole staff. If they do not have that same common thread of what you are trying to accomplish, you are going to miss it and you are going to miss an opportunity.

Linda Livingstone: We are talking about customer service kind of on the individual customer level, but I know another area that you have put a tremendous amount of focus on is the brand and the Angels brand, which certainly ties to that customer service piece but it is also at sort of a 50,000 foot level as well. What have you all done to really try to sort of imbed that brand into the minds of this community and more broadly, across the country that was maybe different than what was being done when you came?

Dennis Kuhl: What we did was we focused on three things. There are a lot of things that you can scatter around and you really lose focus. So we picked three things. We picked the color red.

Linda Livingstone: I have seen a lot of that. We were in the stadium today, for those listening on the podcast, there is a lot of red around here.

Dennis Kuhl: We focused on the A. What we do with that A is we never change it. We do not put it to the left or to the right. It is just straight on. It is always red. We branded the name Angels. We wanted to make sure that the kids were wearing t-shirts. They did not have a name associated. They were Angel fans. So we focused on that. If you go to our team store, there is nothing but red down there. There are a couple white shirts maybe but it has got red in it somewhere. We focused on the word Angels. When I was growing up, I grew up in New Jersey and I was a Yankee fan, and they talk about, "Well, you know, you've changed the name here from Anaheim Angels to Los Angeles Angels." I said, "You know, as a kid, I couldn't care less where they were from, I focused on the team."

Linda Livingstone: They were the Yankees.

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Dennis Kuhl: The players. The Yankees. That is all I cared about was the Yankees. They could have been the Oswego Yankees. I did not care. I focused on the players. So what Arte has done is say, "We're gonna focus on three things and we're gonna push it and push it and push it." One of the things we first did was when you came to the stadium and you went to a merchandise store, you wanted a red hat that they had the on field hats. The on-field hats are \$35. They are same thing the players wear. But if you are a father and you have three kids?

Linda Livingstone: That is a lot to spend at the baseball game.

Dennis Kuhl: Right. So first thing we did is we developed a family value and went and got hats made. We got replicas as cheap as we could so that we could sell them to the kids. A father could come in and buy five hats at \$6 and he was a hero. So we wanted to make him a hero. But it was a red hat and that is what we are doing. We have each of us, all of our managers have hats in our cars and wherever we go, we pass them out. We pass them out, pass them out. The thing that you have to do with branding is you have to believe in your brand and you have to stick with it. You can not go left or right. You have got to go that straightforward. That is what we have done and it is going to take a long time. We are not even at second base as far as where we want to be. I want every kid in southern California to have a red hat on.

Linda Livingstone: Well, this year, prior to the season, made a couple of really big acquisitions of players.

Dennis Kuhl: So-so.

Linda Livingstone: So-so, spend a few dollars here and there on them. I mean, those are huge decisions. They are multi-year decisions. You are obviously doing that to build a strong team on the field, but it also helps build the brand and other things. So talk about the impact those kinds of decisions make on the organization beyond just what goes on the field.

Dennis Kuhl: Well, I am very fortunate. The two gentlemen that we have that we were able to secure in a contract are very community minded, but in the long run, what Arte has always said that we would always be competitive. Two years, we did not make the playoffs. Your product is what you have. He wanted to get across to the fans that he wants to build a winner. The fans are important. I am very fortunate to have these two guys here because they are so active in the community and that builds your brand.

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Linda Livingstone: Sure.

Dennis Kuhl: C.J. Wilson has his foundation and we are doing things together. Albert has another foundation, huge and we are doing stuff together with him. He has already contributed to our foundation so this inner workings of a person. I will give you an example. On July 26th, it is the one day off they have in the month and both of them are running a charity event that day. C.J. has got his bowling tournament. Albert has got his golf tournament. To me, for a guy to have his day off and to do that for his charity says a lot about them. When it was announced on baseball network, MLB network, the coverage we got, you can not pay for that. It was worth so much. The Angels got Pujols. Then they got Wilson. When we had our press conference here, we had 5,000 people show up. We will see if the investment pays off but sometimes you got to take a risk.

Linda Livingstone: That is right.

Dennis Kuhl: And Arte is taking a risk. He turned to John and I and said, "Now, you guys go figure out how we're going to pay for him."

Linda Livingstone: Got to bring those fans into the stands.

Dennis Kuhl: There you go.

Linda Livingstone: Well, I was reading an article and in it you were quoted as saying, "Never make decisions looking at the past, make decisions for the future." Those certainly seem to be decisions that are very future oriented because they are long-term contracts with people that you expect to have a big impact on the organization for many years.

Dennis Kuhl: Absolutely. One of the things that Arte is, he is a visionary. He looks seven years out. He wants to know what this team is going to look like seven years out. We are here today, okay? But where are we going? He has drilled it in us. We have discussed many times I can not change the past, I can only plan for the future and make the future what I want it to be. We do not make a lot of decisions on the past because in today's world, things are changing so fast that you can not look in the past. You can not look at, "Oh, well, what did we do in attendance last year?" I do not care. What are we going to do this year to get the people in the door? What promotions are we going to do? What are we going to do about

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pricing for our tickets? What are we going to do about concessions? Just go forward, always go forward and that is kind of fun.

Linda Livingstone: Yes. Absolutely. Well, we were talking about the charity events that Pujols and Wilson have done and that brings you great positive publicity, but you too. When you are in a really high profile business with really high profile employees, you also have the risk of other types of publicity. How do you, in working with players and others, try to manage the risk of that and to sort of help folks understand their actions and what they say and how that impacts the image and the brand of the organization? Is that something that you have worried a whole lot about?

Dennis Kuhl: We have been very fortunate.

Linda Livingstone: Right. I was not asking the question because you had had problems, which is fortunate, but you could give lots of examples of teams that have had those challenges.

Dennis Kuhl: We try to stay away from the players that have had a history of doing that. We had one player, who we had a problem with and he was gone the next day. We make sure that no one player is better than another player out there. Mike Scioscia and his coaching staff do a really good job in making sure that people understand, again, why we are here and that starts at spring training. That starts at first day. And do not get me wrong, you are always like this. You are always like this. You never know in the world of sports and it is not baseball, it is any sport. We have been very fortunate. We can not worry about something that we have no control over. If it happens, then it is damage control and so far so good.

Linda Livingstone: Well, that is a good way to be able to think about it as opposed to some of the other sports franchises are dealing some really difficult challenges right now.

Dennis Kuhl: Very difficult. Unbelievable challenges.

Linda Livingstone: Yes. But it probably also has something to do with the culture that you have developed and certainly the selection of players makes a big difference in the level of issues like that that you have to deal with as well.

Dennis Kuhl: Yes.

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Linda Livingstone: So the series that we are doing is called the Dean's Executive Leadership Series and so we bring people to this series that are in significant leadership positions. One of the things I always like to ask them about their values because we talk a lot at the business school at Pepperdine about values and how important they are to your leadership style and how you approach leadership. Are there two or three or four values that are particularly important to you as a leader that have sort of guided kind of your style and your approach to leadership?

Dennis Kuhl: You know, it is interesting because I have worked for a lot of different leaders or managers and I have tried to take the good parts of those managers. I have worked for what I call screamers. I am not a believer in that. I do not think that that is the way to go. I am very, like Arte, very loyal. I believe in the loyalty factor. I always say, "I can teach you how to sell but I can't teach you how to care." So it is about caring. I want to see people when they come to work that they are enthusiastic about work. My management style is very hands on. I do not expect anybody to do anything that I would not do. I believe in the old management by wandering around. So goes John Carpino, our president, at game night, we wander around. We try to learn everybody's name. You want to build a sort of a family but remember you got to be careful of that too. You do not want to get too close to someone, but you should know their name. People like to know their names. You want to build an atmosphere of fairness. I think that is very hard. It is very difficult to build that fairness. There are so many times, I know, in my career, where I thought I should have gotten this position for what I had done but somebody else might have gotten that position because of somebody they knew. Their performance might not have been as good. So being fair, you really have to work at but also I can not think of anything much more important than being fair and you have to be loyal. You have to communicate. I think that is the hardest thing. We used to say all the time in sales is, "You know, we're in the communications business and that's probably the hardest thing for us to do is to communicate," and to communicate clearly and to communicate so the person understands what it is you are communicating. I do not believe in getting it by yelling. I do not believe it is by any other way but just sitting down with that person. Leading by example has always been my forte. Now, it does not always work, you know? You try to because you think people will. "Well, if I do it, they'll see that and they'll do it." Not necessarily. I have always been a high energy and high motivational. I always believe, if I am going to work, I have got to give my employee a good day's work. So you try to instill that in people but you got to have fun too. And we are in a fun business.

Linda Livingstone: You are.

Dennis Kuhl: So it kind of fits into our style and it fits into Arte's style definitely. We like to have people know what is going on, you know? I do not like a lot of closed doors. We have always worked with a horizontal type organizational chart, not from the top down. What I mean by that is, John Carpino and I

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have worked together for years and we have managers under us, but I may have this manager under me. John does not come to me and then go to this manager. What he does is goes right there. It is what you have to do to get the job done.

Linda Livingstone: Sure.

Dennis Kuhl: We do not like a lot of not bureaucracy, but the little fiefdoms that can happen.

Linda Livingstone: Yes, layering.

Dennis Kuhl: Layering. If you need an answer, get up and go to talk to that person. It does not bother me if he goes to talk to one of the persons that answers to me. It does not bother me a bit and does not bother him.

Linda Livingstone: And that suggests that there is a lot of trust in the system, that you trust that each other is doing it in the appropriate ways for the right reasons and it works when you have got that kind of atmosphere.

Dennis Kuhl: It does work.

Linda Livingstone: Absolutely. So you were talking about being in a fun business and I expect there are thousands and thousands of children all over the country thinking, "Gosh, I wish I had that job some day when I grow up." So it is a wonderful job to have and a wonderful industry to be in. As you look ahead, we talked about looking ahead as opposed to looking back, what are you most excited about in the next few years that you are looking forward to with the Angels?

Dennis Kuhl: There are a couple of things. First, on the field, Arte and I talk all the time and John, we get together a lot and we talk about we want jewelry. We want those rings. We want a World Series ring. And with this job, especially with getting C.J. and Albert, you have these tremendous high expectations and when those expectations are not met, the bottom is the worst in the world. Arte is so good at, "Here's what I want to do," and "Here's what I'm looking at," and he gets you excited about something. He has asked me to be more involved in the community and to reach out and sort of be the outreach person. Many times in the community, we have been reactive to what the community wants. Well, we want to be

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more proactive and find out what is going on. I belong to a lot of boards and I enjoy that because I want to understand where the money is going. I am on our board of directors for the Angel Foundation and I read every grant that comes through and I find it so interesting, you know? But I was telling a group the other night, it is more important for me to know where that money is going. We open a lot of doors, but if we do not teach them to turn on the light, then that money is just not doing what it should be. We are the most giving country in the world but yet we fall behind on curing some of the things. Last night, I was here with Rod Carew. We are both involved with leukemia lymphoma society. We have seen tremendous improvement there, tremendous, but Rod and I ask, "Where is this money going?" It is research. It is research. I have been involved with the United Cerebral Palsy. A friend of mine has it and I am on his board to raise money to do a learning. Arte has been very good in letting us do that. Arte lets you manage. He lets you manage. I always say I would rather get yelled at for something I did than get yelled at for something I did not do. We may present him with ten things. He may only pick one but that is okay. We feel like we got one through.

Linda Livingstone: You got one thing done.

Dennis Kuhl: We got one thing done and having an owner like Arte, he is one owner. You do not have to go through a lot of red tape. You pick up the phone, "Hey, Arte, I need 'blank.' I got to get this done." "Yes, okay, go." And then I make sure I write it down and say, "Remember, you said this." But it is a lot easier that way to get things done and make decisions because he lets us manage.

Linda Livingstone: That is great.

Dennis Kuhl: I think that if you do not let your people manage, then you do not need them. You do not really need them. Then you can do that. But it is interesting, we hire about eight interns a year for all different things and I always have lunch with them at the end of the year and say, "Okay, tell me about..." "Well, we didn't know we were going to have to work this hard," Because we do work them. It is not filing. We give them a project. How are you going to do on this? We want to see how you are going to do. We do not grade them, but what did you learn from that project? I learn a ton from them, a ton because I find out what are kids looking for, you know? It is the Twitter. It is the Facebook.

Linda Livingstone: It is a great focus group.

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Dennis Kuhl: Oh, what we do is all our promotions, we bring them all in. What do you think? Yes, yes, yes. If it was up to me and John Carpino.

Linda Livingstone: We are not the market.

Dennis Kuhl: We are not the market. You got to think about that.

Linda Livingstone: You have to remind yourself of that regularly.

Dennis Kuhl: All the time. And you have to be open. You have to listen to other people. When you are building a company or you are hiring or anything, you have to hire people that are better than you because they are going to make you look better. People are afraid to do that. They are afraid that, "Oh, this guy will take my..." No way. He will make me look better. I have been in many sales organizations. I had salesmen make twice as much money as I did in sales. I did not care. They were making me look good and they will get ahead and they were good salesmen. The worst thing you do is to take a good salesmen and make him a manager. So you have to study your people and what you want to do but you are not going to hit it 100% in hiring people. You think you got the right guy and then all of a sudden they disappoint me.

Linda Livingstone: It is one of the hardest things to do is to hire the right people. Absolutely. One of the most important and one of the most difficult things.

Dennis Kuhl: It is. When they do not work out, you are more disappointed than they are.

Linda Livingstone: Yes, absolutely. Well, Dennis, it has been a pleasure having you with us to conclude our Dean's Executive Leadership Series this year. You are in a fascinating business that helps keep us all entertained and happy so we wish you the best with the rest of this season and into the future and thank you for joining us.

Dennis Kuhl: Thank you very much.

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Rick Gibson: Well, Linda, it has been an outstanding series and Dennis was just a great and delightful interview.

Linda Livingstone: Well, it was wonderful having Dennis with us and to have the opportunity to be at Angels stadium, which was a fun venue for everyone.

Rick Gibson: Of course, yes, absolutely.

Linda Livingstone: And to learn about what is going on in the professional baseball world. They have had an exciting year and done some really interesting things so it was great to hear about it.

Rick Gibson: Well, it is a terrific series and we really did enjoy these great interviews and lectures throughout this year and we want to invite our listeners to tune in for next year's edition of the Dean's Executive Leadership Series. We will be making announcements about that soon. In the meantime, you can visit bschool.pepperdine.edu/dels, that is D-E-L-S, to listen to past podcasts. We hope you do so. Until next time and until next year, thanks for listening.

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