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Dean's Executive Leadership Series - 2011-2012 Transcript of Interview with Jerry West, Head Consultant, Golden State Warriors Member, NBA Hall of Fame

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

M1: The Graziadio School of Business and Management at Pepperdine University proudly presents the Dean's Executive Leadership Series. This podcast invites top business practitioners and thought leaders to share their view on the real world of business.

Rick Gibson: Hi, 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 today.

Rick Gibson: We are very excited about the Dean's Executive Leadership Series. It has been a tremendous series so far. I am assuming the feedback for all the programs has been very positive.

Linda Livingstone: It has been. We have had an exceptional series this year with some really outstanding folks from companies like Herbalife, Coca-Cola, and Yahoo! So you cannot beat that kind of a lineup.

Rick Gibson: Absolutely. This is an outstanding program. Well, tell us today about your guest, Jerry West.

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Linda Livingstone: We are just really privileged to have Jerry West with us. He is, obviously, known for his years as a Laker both as a player and coach and then as a manager, but now he is a head consultant with the Golden State Warriors. We are looking forward to hearing about his experiences and what that teaches us about leadership.

Rick Gibson: Absolutely. Well, what a privilege to interview him. He is really a legend in Los Angeles and beyond. So let me invite our listeners to sit back and relax and to enjoy this interview with Jerry West.

Linda Livingstone: Well, we are very privileged today for our Dean's Executive Leadership Series to have with us Jerry West, who I am sure everyone who is listening to us is very familiar with based on his NBA career for many years with the Lakers and then as a coach and general manager and actually, now with the Golden State Warriors. So Jerry, we are just really privileged and thankful to have you with us today.

Jerry West: Well, thank you. Nice to be here and I think it will be fun to share some of my life and some of the things that have led me in a direction that frankly, I had never dreamed possible. So I have lived one of those lives that has been very charmed and because I had a skill, it has been, obviously, frustrating at times. It has been testing, but to be involved in something you love certainly is maybe the most motivational thing you can have in your life. And again, I have been so fortunate to do something I love.

Linda Livingstone: Well, you said you had a great opportunity because you had skill, but you only had that skill because you worked really, really hard at developing that skill, and then you have leveraged that skill in multiple ways through your life as a player, as a coach, as a executive in the NBA. So what sort of has driven that desire to develop that skill in a way that has really led to an entire lifetime of career and professional basketball?

Jerry West: I grew up in a very small place in obviously, less than desirable circumstances growing up where I grew up. I think the one thing that maybe I had and still have today was that I have a very vivid imagination, very vivid. Sometimes I could imagine myself being whatever I wanted to be and along came this round ball. And that for some reason kind of captured my mind and led to all of these incredible thoughts knowing full well that probably none them were going to happen. But I realized that when I was in high school that maybe I was just a little bit different because all of a sudden, instead of no one talking to you, I had all these people who wanted to talk to me about going to school. And it certainly was not about me being a student. It was about me being an athlete. It is very flattering when someone comes to

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you when you are shy and you are backward and socially inept to come and tell you that they want you to come to their school and get a free education. That is the only way I could have gone to school to play a sport. Sometimes it does not seem right or fair because we have so many gifted students and so many people who do not have that opportunity because of financial resources. I was given the opportunity to pretty much go to any school I wanted to. I chose my home state and my imagination would continue to grow. I could imagine myself maybe being instead of a great high school player who won all honors, our team won all state. We won the state championship. All of a sudden, I am thrust into a role that was completely different from me. The awkward part of it was going to school. To be honest with you, I was ill-prepared to leave a little place of 500 people and all the people that I was so, so familiar with and particularly my friends. I think if it had not been for my roommate, I had two of them, and one in particular, I am not so sure I would have ever made it through college because I was homesick for a town of 500 people when it was really nothing there for me. And growing, I think, as an individual really is about communicating with other students, learning how to care for yourself, learning how to live with life away from your home. It was a difficult process for me for a year and a half, a very difficult process, but all of a sudden, as a player, I blossomed even more and against better competition. Suddenly, my name is in the paper a lot. I became kind of a national figure and I used to question that all the time. I would say to myself, "I'm just a very average, normal person, quiet and shy. What? Why has this happened?" And again, I started thinking back and all these crazy dreams I had as a kid making the last second shot, winning championships, being the best player in America. Those were right there. And that is when you know that you are different. You do know that and you also know by how people interact with you, but I did not even know that at all because I did not want to hear it because I would say that is not what my life entailed. My life was about competition and the competitive drive that I had started when I was a young kid. It has frankly, continued to this point in my life. I have to have a reason to get up every morning. I still have habits that most people would think would be silly. I still work out. I still lift weights. I still stretch, but I am at a period in my life right now where I am really into learning. So my life has kind of ran the gauntlet from being an athlete to being a coach to being an executive to being a giver and wanting to give back more than I ever had in my life.

Linda Livingstone: Let us talk a little bit about being a learner because you said when you went to college, it really was not about the learning piece. But now as you have told me before we started this interview, you are a voracious reader and obviously that comes from a desire to keep learning and developing yourself. When did that passion sort of kick in? Was that something that happened in college or was it something that happened later in life? And why has that become so important to you?

Jerry West: Well, when I was a professional basketball player, we played a lot of games, and I could not sleep after games. I mean, I would literally be up at 4:00 in the morning, and I hardly ever left my room. I stayed in the room. You would watch TV and you would get tired of watching TV. And all of a sudden, I

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started reading. Most of the reading I was doing was for pleasure. It was not for learning. Every once in a while, I would get a book that was not about a detective story or some kind of a mystery or something. I would read that and usually on the life of someone who had accomplished something really special. I have always been fascinated by a number of our older elected officials. I probably think the greatest document ever written was the Declaration of Independence. It is amazing to me how that stood the test of time and how brilliant these people were to write a document like that and for us to even want to touch that today. It is almost offensive. These people were brilliant. I have read about obviously Lincoln and you name it, I have read the books on a lot of presidents, and I find it fascinating the diverse personalities that we have had as president in our country. I find today that our leaders are completely different then. They were public servants. Their life was to be public servants and today I am not real political, but I have my opinions about politicians. I have always said, "To lead is to serve." I am not so sure that to lead is to serve someone else. I just got into this reading and my kind of motto everyday is to try to learn something everyday whether it is minute or something bigger. I read the newspaper thoroughly, completely. I read periodicals. I read books. I read a lot of books. It has been my pastime. I read every night. I live in West Virginia two and a half months a year. I would have no idea how many books I read there. I mean, it is an enormous amount and most of them today are not for entertainment. They are for knowledge.

Linda Livingstone: Interesting. So you talked earlier about wanting to be a giver, and then as you talked about leadership, you talked about leaders serving, which is a very giving approach to leadership. How does that giving kind of play out in your life now from a leadership perspective at this point in your life and in how you use your time? And what could maybe our listeners learn from that about how they should they think about their lives particularly at various stages of life and how giving might play out differently?

Jerry West: It really probably goes back to when I was a kid again. When life is a struggle and there are no financial resources around, if you get fortunate enough in your life to make a little bit more money and have some money, you start to do and believe in causes. I had a brother killed in Korea and his name was David West. I always said that because he was so good, like a perfect person. Everyone loved him. Someone asked me about him and how after all these years I said, "Well, he'll be 21 forever in my mind, and I'll be 13." But as I got fortunate enough that I was able to do some things for my state university, which put me in the position to live the life that I have. I got an education. I had a platform for showcasing that I was a pretty good athlete and by doing that, I felt I owed them a tremendous duty. And so I always wanted to do something for my brother. There is a learning center there. There are four buildings there, and there is a learning center there that is a David West Learning Center. It has got 80 computers in this room. There are tutors in there to help kids that need help and two large scholarship funds obviously for students in needs and minorities. And because I was a basketball player, that has been a big part of my life too. So I have given back to the state that I love and I still love because I live there two and a half months a year. But I think the greatest gratification and the thing that has prompted me to want to give

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more are the letters that I have received from kids and their parents thanking me for helping them get an education. And also, every once and a while, someone would come up to me and say, "I can't tell you how much I benefitted from going into this learning center." So you start to get that and you get so many accolades in life, you tend not to believe any of them after a while. Sometimes it is very cruel how cruel the media can be in terms of judging you as a person by a win or a loss. That is not the way to judge a person. I am very flawed and do not mind admitting it, but I have always felt that you treat people with dignity and respect. Now because of my association with the university, it seems like to me that this is what my mission in life right now is to give. I try to help numerous charities in many, many ways. At the end of the day just getting a nice letter thanking you for helping and seeing kids kind of led out of harm's way; I have a great interest in kids that live in an environment that are less than perfect. At-risk kids are probably something that has really resonated with me now and as long as I am able and as long as I am capable, that is going to be at the top of my list. There is another thing going on right now that is about jobs for our veterans. There are 800,000 unemployed veterans in this country. They serve us. We forget them. I think it is tragic that we see some of the awful circumstances that the military people have to endure and so that is something that I am pursuing right now. I am doing a PSA or two for them and am involved with the Northern Trust Open Golf Tournament.

Linda Livingstone: I know that is a passion of yours.

Jerry West: Well, that is a very big passion of mine. We gave a \$1.6 million to local charities, and so I have helped the state of West Virginia. Los Angeles has been so good to me and giving back a \$1.6 million this year, a \$1.6 million last year, and a \$1.5 million the year before to needy charities that people who work very, very hard and again provide a safe haven for young kids. The First Tee program, for instance, takes these young kids that never touched a golf ball or a golf club. To watch how they emerge as people and to watch how they change their personality because golf is probably the greatest test of individual character that anyone could possibly imagine, but it is also about integrity. You see some of these polished kids and you see them become very gifted golfers. A kid can play a round of golf for \$5.00 or nine holes of golf for \$5.00, which First Tee provides for. They get free lessons. They get free golf balls, but to see the change in these kids where you got somebody out there that got an arm on them and this is what we are trying to do for you. But to see the progress they make, how polite they are, and how thankful they are. Those are things that are very meaningful to me today.

Linda Livingstone: You know it is interesting. You are probably one of the most recognized, rewarded, honored figures in sports, generally, but certainly, in the professional basketball world. It seems like today maybe more so now than even as you were playing of athletes or individuals whether they are athletes or not that are lauded in so many ways that it sort of goes to their head and leads to behaviors that we might

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not think are the most appropriate in terms of being role models. But when you talk about yourself, I heard you use words like, "Well, I was a pretty good player, and, well, I'm a flawed person." So there is a deep sense of humility in you as you reflect on who you are and even the kind of basketball player you are using terms that probably the average person would never use in describing you as an athlete. Where does that humility come from and what role do you think that plays in someone being a good leader and an effective leader?

Jerry West: Well, it is probably the greatest word there is. If you are good at something, you do not have to tell anyone you are good, okay? If you are going to accept the praise, you also should be strong enough to accept the opposite side of it, the tough side of it. Again, I think it is one of the greatest words there are. I am never better than anyone else, okay? Because I did something in a different level than most people, I think I am really easy to be around. I think anyone around me would laugh and have fun. There is a fun side to me and there is a very serious side to me, but I think it is something that I learned early in my life that you do not ever call attention to yourself. These young kids today, I do not blame it on them. I really do not. They get identified so early as athletes by AAU and that is a huge part of it. They travel all over the country. They play against everybody. They become great friends. They decide where they are going to go play ball in school. They stay in school for one year and you wonder how many classes they go to after basketball season is over with.

Linda Livingstone: There is no incentive to keep going after that for many of them. That is for sure.

Jerry West: If they are good enough, it is not.

Linda Livingstone: Yes, exactly.

Jerry West: And so it is just a stepping-stone and a small stepping-stone to what they hope will be a great career. I think the thing that probably kept me very level in terms of who I was is the fact that I went to school for four years. I got an education. I learned from being a very shy, awkward, backward, socially inept person to fit in. Many of these kids today, the only people around them are their friends from high school. The people who are going to be around them no matter what they do. It is going to be acceptable. I think that is probably the biggest difference that I see in athletes and particularly basketball players because they can come out and play so young. The enormity of the financial rewards for coming out and playing far outweighs, if they are good enough, any education. But they do not have the foundation, if they are not quite good enough. They do not have a foundation that will let them understand that somebody says, "No, you're not good enough, okay?" This can happen in one or two years if they are in

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professional basketball. If you are not good enough, all of a sudden, their friends are gone, okay? They are gone. And what do they have to fall back on? It is really tragic some of the stories you see with young players. It is just tragic to see young kids make so much money and end up with nothing, where they could always kind of be a trailblazer in terms of making their lives comfortable and making their family's life comfortable if they would just have enough discipline. I am going to use that word discipline. Some of them do not have the discipline to do that. They think that there is no end to the rainbow and there is an end to the rainbow. And if you do not have the tools to live a life after you are finished playing, it is pretty tough out there because they do not know anything except people giving them stuff and people doing things for them – entitlement. Everyone thinks entitlements are for people who are underachievers or who have had tough luck in life. There are so many entitlements for people who are politicians, who are wealthy, who are athletes. It goes beyond description, and I guess I just think entitlements for young kids are a gigantic red flag.

Linda Livingstone: So just a little bit less than year ago, you took on a new role with the Golden State Warriors at a time in your life when you, certainly, do not need to feel obligated to do anything like that. What continues to keep you motivated to want to take on new challenges and new opportunities and something like that with what you are doing with the Warriors?

Jerry West: It was a unique opportunity. It really was. They did not want me to work everyday, which I would not do and I told them I did not want to be the voice of their franchise. I basically said everything not to approach me, but I happened to like the owners. I have worked for two owners in my life, and I liked them both a lot. I think sometimes in your life you have loves, okay? And fortunately, the biggest love of my life has been basketball. It is something that I have had some success with. It is something I think I know something about. There are no basketball experts by the way. There are none. Do not let anyone tell you there are. There are some people that success follows and why that happens, I am not sure, but I have been involved in places with the Lakers, where we just seemed to have the right formula for winning. But probably the greatest achievement I ever felt in my life was when I went to Memphis because I always wanted to work with a team that had never won. I wanted to work in a small market because the challenge is so much greater. My friend said to me, "Why in the world would you go and do something like that?" I said, "I'm testing myself to see if I am any good." It was my second year at Memphis. The most games we had ever won were my first year. We won 28 games and 23 before. My second year we won 50 games. I think in many ways, it was probably as an executive, maybe my greatest accomplishment even though we won so many championships here in Los Angeles and had so many wonderful players. The obstacles in these stronger markets are enormous and to be able to do that in the two years, it was like, "My gosh. What?" I almost pinched myself. Maybe I am halfway decent at what I do. But it is still a love for me.

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Linda Livingstone: That is great.

Jerry West: I watch games every night, and obviously with the NCAA around now, it is a special time for the colleges and the kids. It is a good time. It is a wonderful time of year

Linda Livingstone: It is a great time of the year. Do you have a Final Four pick for the NCAA tournament this year?

Jerry West: Oh, boy. You know what I think? Anyone can win, but Kentucky. I look at the teams and the ability to recruit. I would like to see some of these smaller schools have some of these players sit on the bench of these major schools.

Linda Livingstone: Oh, wouldn't that be amazing?

Jerry West: It would be amazing, but these big schools can recruit. They recruit the cream of the crop because they come there. They are going to be seen on TV and if they are any good, they are going to be in school one year and gone. Kentucky has got four or five first-round draft picks. Does that mean they are going to win the NCAA championships? No. North Carolina is good. I think Missouri is a dangerous team myself.

Linda Livingstone: They proved that at the Big Twelve Tournament.

Jerry West: Right, I think Syracuse because they lost a very good player, I am not sure that they are capable of winning now. I think Bill Self at Kansas is one of the best basketball coaches, best ever. North Carolina and Duke are going to have two very good teams. I think at the end of the day, if I had to pick one winner, I think Kentucky would have to be right at the top of the list.

Linda Livingstone: My husband and I are a little partial to Bill because he played ball at Oklahoma State when we were in school. My husband and I played there, and so my husband and he were teammates. So we are fans of Bill and always hope that he does well.

Jerry West: Well, he has been a great coach, and he is an even better person.

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Linda Livingstone: Yes, he is a fighter.

Jerry West: His kids conduct themselves. You will never see these kids getting in trouble. I think it is a reflection on who he is as a coach, but more importantly, a leader. He is just not going to put up for having kids that are not going to follow the rules, and I think its important because again some kids they do some things that are less than desirable and embarrassing. They are embarrassing for the athletic department and they are embarrassing the university, but I think more importantly, they are more embarrassing to their families. I think coaches today, hopefully, will always understand that kids are going to make mistakes, but you need to simply have a system in place to protect the integrity of the program and also the integrity of the university.

Linda Livingstone: Well, we need to wrap up our discussion here, but I did want to mention before we close that I know you have had sort of a long affiliation with Pepperdine. I understand you and Gary Colson, who was the coach when they left the campus in L.A. and came out to the campus in Malibu where close friends. I understand you liked fast cars and motorcycles and you had common interest in that.

Jerry West: Well, no. No motorcycles.

Linda Livingstone: Just fast cars?

Jerry West: Well, I used to like fast cars. I have moved along in my life. And yes, there is another, I married a girl who went to Pepperdine University.

Linda Livingstone: That is what I understand. She went to Seavor College.

Jerry West: Right.

Linda Livingstone: And I think you have a son who is a graduate of the business school as well.

Jerry West: I do have a son, David, who is a graduate of the business school. Matter of fact, I saw him last night in Oakland. It is always good to come out here. I was driving up here today and particularly

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when you drive up high on this campus, I said to myself, "My goodness. You know maybe I would have come to school out here if I could have had some kind of a view overlooking the ocean."

Linda Livingstone: Well, unfortunately, we were not on the campus we are on now.

Jerry West: But I did practice when I first came to Los Angeles. I did practice because the Lakers practiced at Pepperdine.

Linda Livingstone: That is what I understand.

Jerry West: Definitely.

Linda Livingstone: When we were down at the old L.A. campus that that is where the Lakers practiced. It is fabulous. Well, we are glad to have you back at Pepperdine, and you are always welcome here. And thank you so much for joining us for the Dean's Executive Leadership Series.

Jerry West: Thanks for having me.

Q: Well, Linda, that was certainly, an interesting conversation with Jerry West.

Linda Livingstone: Well, it was so much fun being able to do that interview as a former basketball player myself. It was really a privilege and honor to be able to talk to him and hear about his experiences.

Q: And a very nice guy.

Linda Livingstone: Absolutely fabulous guy. One of the things he spent a lot of time talking about was how important he thinks it is to give back now that he is at this point in his life. So we love that message going out, and he really does that and lives it out everyday.

Q: Absolutely. Well, tell us what is next. I guess this is our last speaker for the series.

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Linda Livingstone: It is, and we are sort of staying with the sports theme we have going. We are really looking forward to having Dennis Kuhl, who is the chairman of the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim with us. Not only will it be great having him with us, we are actually going to do this at the Diamond Club at Angel Stadium, a wonderful speaker and a fabulous venue.

Q: Very exciting. Well, thank you for that. We would like to invite our listeners, if they would like to learn more about The Dean's Executive Leadership Series or to hear past podcasts to visit our website at bschool.pepperdine.edu/dels. Until next time, thanks for listening.

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