

2024
LEGENDS
NEWSLETTER



WELCOME TO THE JAGUARS 30TH SEASON!

Wherever you fall in the history of the NFL's 30th franchise we're glad you're a part of it and thrilled to have you among the Jaguars Legends.

In this episode of the Jaguars Legends Newsletter, we're front and center with 2024 Pride of the Jaguars Inductee Tom Coughlin who shares his experience building not just the football team but an entire football organization. You won't want to miss Coughlin's observations and insight about the Jaguars and Jacksonville.

Jaguars broadcaster Jeff Lageman has been with the Jaguars and in Jacksonville since signing on with the franchise as a free agent in 1995. By my count he is the only player to play then stay in north Florida continuously and he's done more than just stay. He's built a family, a thriving tree farm and the reputation as a tell it like it is former player on the Jaguars radio broadcast.

Offensive tackle Leon Searcy is back in Jacksonville and his deep baritone voice is also heard on the radio where he's both entertaining and enlightening. He's also a published author with an amazing and inspiring story to tell of the pitfalls of bad decisions but also his rise from those ashes thanks to some of his Jaguars Legends buddies.

Former linebacker turned pastor, author, speaker and coach Bryan Schwartz is off and running with a new venture and has some advice from living with and raising seven children. Worthy Opponents is a worthy use of your time and his story is one with a takeaway for everyone.

And finally former linebacker Jeff Kopp's story of working through his post-football career in a number of successful endeavors takes a leap of faith when at age 49 he attended the Police Academy and is now involved with one of the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office most important endeavors.

As always we seek to tell a good story and to tell it well, and if you have one to share we'd love to hear it. Reach out to Jason Trosclair or to me and let's catch up.

Go Jaguars,
Brian Sexton



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LEGENDS PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES

The Jaguars and the NFL provide Legends a variety of programs and opportunities to leverage quality of life through benefits, resources, discounts, grants and more.

NFL Foundation Grant Opportunities

Legends may apply for a matching grant to a youth or high school football program of their choice. There is a grant to help fund youth football camps conducted by Legends for a turnkey solution or receive financial funding to support their free camp. If a former player is coaching youth or high school football, they may apply for up to \$5,000 for their respective program. There are also grants to assist Legends with their own foundations or nonprofits in which they work full time. Social justice and community grants recognize the contributions of alumni working to better their communities.

Legends Programs

Legends programs are designed to assist and engage Legends in their post football careers. Everything from coaching and scouting to owning and running their own successful businesses. There are workshops and special educational events conducted specifically for Legends.

Legends Discounts

Former NFL players can take advantage of the many discounts on products and services that include vehicle rentals, golf equipment, NFL merchandise, gifts and more. Please note that some discounted opportunities require an active NFL Alumni membership.

Legends Benefits

Health Care Benefits and Mental Health Resources are listed on our Legends website at [Jaguars.com/Legends](https://www.jaguars.com/legends) under resources. Whether you need general medical assistance, disability benefits, or struggling with substance abuse, there are multiple resources that we encourage you to explore and take advantage.

If you or someone in your family are ever in need of help, call the NFL Life Line (800) 506-0078. This is an extremely valuable resource that is secure, confidential, and independent. This line is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, all 365 days of the year.

For more information on Legends programs and resources, contact Jason Trosclair at trosclairj@nfl.jaguars.com

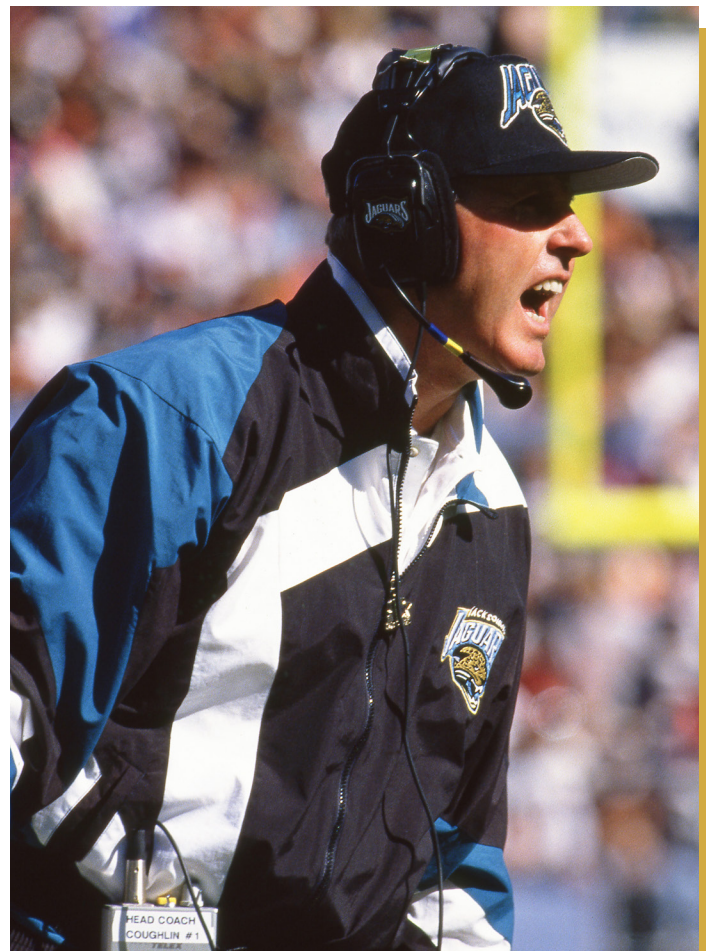
TOM COUGHLIN

Tom Coughlin's life in football spans decades, crossing from playing to coaching and from high school through college and into the professional ranks where he's worked for some of the most storied franchises in the NFL; the Packers, Eagles and Giants but also the Jaguars where he invested more than time and talent, he invested his heart.

"Mr. Weaver owned the franchise, but I told him the football team was mine," he said with a slight smile. "I showed up here in February of 1994 and trudged through mud up to my ankles to a single trailer, that didn't even have a place for me to work! David Seldin's secretary pointed me towards a table where Wayne sat when he was in town. Imagine that today, I was maybe the 5th employee, and I honestly wondered at that moment what I got myself into leaving Boston College. There was nothing here and I went about bringing coaches and personnel people in to help me build from the ground up. It will forever be important to me."

The coach was also the general contractor, so to speak, which is a role that most coaches know very little about. Most coaches are not Coughlin. He picked up

the phone and called Tom Landry who built the expansion Dallas Cowboys in the early 1960's and the legendary coach offered his learned opinion. He also leaned on coaching relationships with Bill Parcells and Bill Belichick and they were helpful but honestly, neither man had ever tackled a project as big as an expansion team. Coughlin's first job out of college, at the Rochester Institute of Technology back in



1970, ultimately helped him the most in building the blueprint from which to get started. Tom, who converted the Tigers from a club team to the NCAA literally did everything from the gameplan to painting the field. Those years built the foundation and prepared him for the enormity of the job that he had in Jacksonville.

“Some people just want to coach, that’s all they want,” explained Coughlin. “But to me the chance to take a blank slate, if you will and take everything, I had learned from everywhere I had been and build something lasting was too good of an opportunity. You think about how we put it together and the people that we brought to Jacksonville to help lift this thing up in less than 18 months and it was a challenge that we all took on and succeeded in together. You can’t help but have a sense of ownership even all these years later. I have always wanted the Jaguars to succeed, I always will.”

Tom’s passion hasn’t ebbed at all and we’re more than thirty years after he put his feet on the muddy ground outside what is today EverBank Stadium. Neither did leaving the franchise after the 2002 season and landing in New York where he led the Giants to a pair of Super Bowl victories. It hasn’t changed since 2019 when owner Shad Khan went a different direction after three years with Coughlin as the teams Executive Vice President of Football Operations. Reliving those early, challenging days and recalling players and plays and people along the way it’s clear that his energy for the Jaguars won’t ever subside.

“Because I started it, because I started it and that transcends all of the disagreements and separations,” Coughlin explained. “This community and the people who are so passionate about our team, about the Jaguars and what it means to





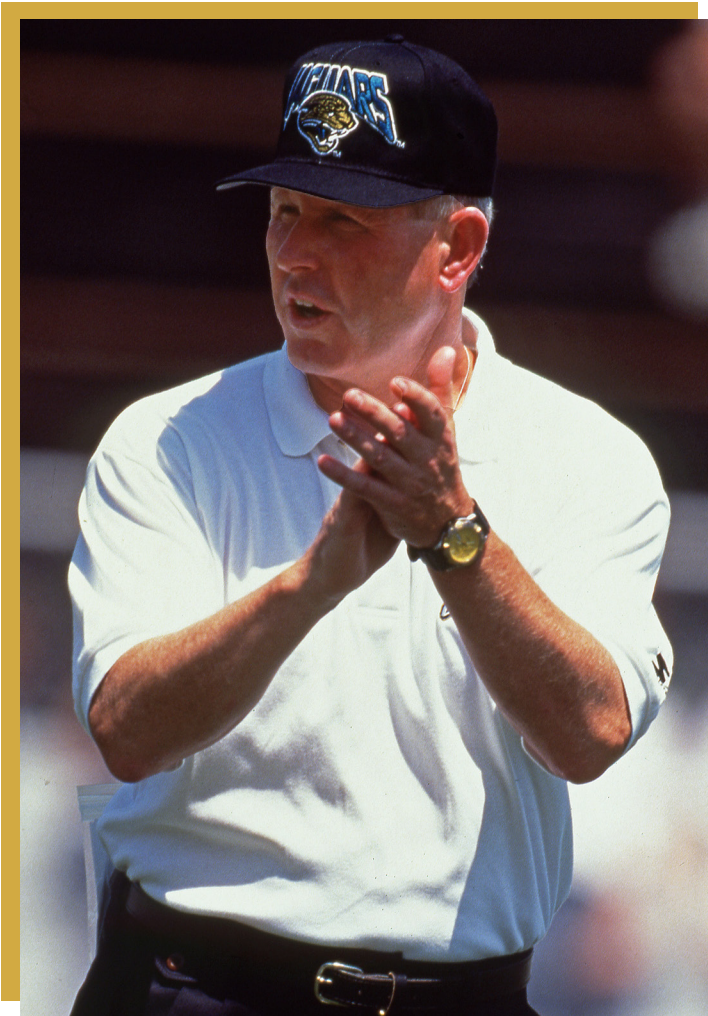
have an NFL team in north Florida. We became a big-league city; we had one of 32 teams, and this is a town that loves football. Things change, you know that, but the team and the town and the people became one, woven together and the Jaguars represent something bigger than just Sundays. Look around and see the players like Tony Boselli, Pete Mitchell, Kevin Hardy, Don Davey and so many others who have made this their home and settled in and built businesses and raised their families and become part of the community. I am a big fan of the Jaguars, and I think Shad has put this team in a position to do some tremendous things on and off the field. My connection with the Jaguars will always remain strong, it's part of who I am."

Coughlin's no-nonsense, football first ways grated on many of the players he coached both in Jacksonville and New York. What's interesting is how all these years later those same players express such profound admiration for what he did for them on the football field and how he influenced their lives off it.

"He was tough, he was hard-nosed, but man

did he care about football and winning," offered linebacker Jeff Kopp who played for three seasons under Coughlin. "Now I can look back in it and see how much he loved his players and his team. I think I had the blessing of going to other organizations and then seeing how the locker room was, what the leadership was, what the coaching style was, and multiple organizations after the Jaguars. As tough as it was, he cared about you, kept that team together, and we won. So, I look back now, and I go, man, what an amazing experience. Was it tough? Yes! And can you tell stories about, you know, the 2 days that you had, we can tell them all day. And it was brutal. But how do you get a team to come together that quickly and to be tight? That teams those teams were tight and that's why we rebounded from 4-7 in 1996 to make the AFC Championship Game in only year two and the Jags had a great run through 1999."

Coughlin famously tells the story of that 1996 team which became so tight with a self-deprecating sense of humor. "They were tight, close knit because they all hated me," he deadpans. He often told his players that if they were late to a job at IBM they'd



be fired by the third time and all he did was fine them. Everything he did, even the most nitpicky of rules, he did for a reason and those players can now see that the reason was more than just about winning a football game. The relationships which he has with so many of those men offer him a profound sense of gratitude for the years he spent with them in the locker room, on the sidelines and in the community.

“That means the world to me,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper and clearly touched by the feelings of his former players. “We went through a lot at the beginning, and we had to set a

high standard, had the opportunity at the beginning to define ourselves and we wanted excellence, to really be the best. So many guys wanted to be a part of starting something and even though it demanded a lot from them it obviously gave them a lot also. They understand it now because, and don’t forget I am a teacher by trade, but I wanted to demand the same qualities that I knew would make them great football players but also translate to being a great man, a great husband and father that will make the world a better place.”

These days Tom is as busy as ever, just not as focused on one thing as he was when he was the football coach. His four grown children and his 12 grandchildren keep him moving from sporting events to graduations and recitals from Florida to New Jersey to Michigan and back. Then there’s his passionate collaboration with eldest daughter Keli to keep growing the Jay Fund which has raised and donated millions and millions of dollars in support of families with children suffering from childhood cancers.

“It’s growing and growing and we’re working to make sure it keeps growing,” he said with emphasis. “The more we raise, the more opportunities we create for families to give it their best in their fight for their children’s health. How would you like to be a 2-income family that becomes a one income family that has two other healthy siblings and one child gets sick and everything changes? How are you going to

put gas in the car and keep food on the table and deal with everything else in life?. It's a massive challenge and it's what drives the Jay Fund. We're going to keep people in their homes and we're going to help them feed their families. We're going to try and help them have a sense of normalcy because believe me, going all the way back to Jay McGillis, the child knows when he or she is a disruption to the family, and it becomes an obstacle to healing."

The coach is doing a bit of healing of his own these days. He's kept himself busy since his beloved wife Judy passed away in November of 2022 and the kids and grandkids are a huge part of his world, but it is different without Judy's beaming smile and gregarious personality which always filled any room she was in.

"How am I?" said the man whose response that question for ages has been 'never better.' "You know what? I'm good. I'm good. People ask me if I'm looking for a job and they're probably kidding but I am not. I'll always be there for Antonio Pierce, and I was up with the Lions this summer and Doug Pederson has been great to me and I'll always be available to the Jaguars and the Giants. If they ask me my opinion, if they want the benefit of my experience, I will always share it and if they don't, I won't

say a word. I could always do more but how many times can you come back and be the leader of the band?"

In 2005 Waterloo Central High School named its football stadium 'Tom Coughlin Field' and in 2016 Coughlin was inducted into the New York Giants Ring of Honor and there's a call from the Pro Football Hall of Fame likely to come in the years ahead. In 2024 he joins Wayne and Delories Weaver, Tony Boselli, Fred Taylor, Jimmy Smith and Mark Brunell in the Pride of the Jaguars and Coughlin puts it right there with the greatest of honors from his legendary career.

"It's way up there to be honest with you," he said. "The reason it's so significant to me is the road we travelled, how we came to Jacksonville, what we did here and why we're still here, okay and how this came to be home. I started this and I'm a historian of the game as you know, and I'm honored to have had a meaningful role and a meaningful place in the history of the Jacksonville Jaguars."

Meaningful, significant, substantial, choose your adjective but what overrides all the words are Tom's actions which built the foundation of a franchise for north Florida with a very promising future.



JEFF LAGEMAN

Jeff Lageman hasn't suited up for a game since Opening Day 1998 in Chicago, but while Sundays aren't quite the same as they were back then they are just as meaningful today, 26 years later. Lageman is a mainstay in Jacksonville, one of the first 'big-name' free agents to sign with the expansion Jaguars in the spring of 1995, he is 30 years later the team's analyst on its' radio network and the only player from that Inaugural Season who has been in north Florida and engaged with the franchise since the beginning.

"At the time it was simply a business decision," Lageman recalled. "I set up my contract (with the Jets) so that I would be a free agent in 1995 because I knew two expansion teams would create a lucrative market. But I was also looking for something that was fun again, a situation where the love of the game would return because New York just wore me out. I came down here and saw all this water and you know how I love to be outdoors, I was like, 'this is really nice.' I fell in love with the small city feel and the southern manners that I grew up with and I never considered leaving, which is amazing because I love fall weather and Virginia, but this place was and still is amazing."

Lageman tore a biceps tendon in that game in Chicago which cost him the entire season and after a decade on the field and in the locker room he made the decision to walk away from the game. But while he wasn't going to go through the rigors of training camp and a season, he also wasn't going to get too far from the game, though he didn't know it would go this far for this long.

"At the time I was just living in the moment, I was enjoying where I was at," said Lageman. "I was doing the End Zone with Sam Kouvaris but when I retired the Jaguars asked if I would be interested in doing their show and of course, I was. Then I added the pre-season games and weekly radio and eventually jumped into the radio booth. I just thought; 'What else am I going to do?' I think if you talk to anyone who is out of football the hardest part is not being in the locker room and part of a team and this gave me a rare opportunity to stay connected without having to go through camp and get beat up over the course of a season. It was a soft landing and to still have my hands in the game all these years later has been the perfect scenario for me."

You don't last in the football business unless you can push yourself to be better tomorrow

than you were today. It's not that different in broadcasting where the pressure is on to have something meaningful to say and to say it with authority. Lageman has done that and is the unquestioned voice or authority on what's happening on the field. He clearly loves the role he's in and the way in which it allows him to leverage his passion and knowledge of the game into a post-football life.

"Let's face it, my schedule is still set to football," Lageman said. "It's ridiculous, but I still wake up on Tuesday morning and think it's my day off, you know? It's crazy how your schedule is in your mind, and it doesn't really change. That's probably because I know have a broadcast routine that kind of mirrors what the team is doing. I can tell you for certain that I go to bed on a Saturday night and wake up amped to get to the stadium and get plugged into the rhythm and the energy that surrounds an NFL gameday, the National Anthem, the fly-over, I still get tears in my eyes! When the ball is kicked off, I am fired up for the next few hours."

Jeff grew up a fan of the Washington Redskins and fan might not be the right word. He listened every Sunday to the game broadcast on the radio and hung on the words of NFL Legends Sonny Jurgenson and Sam Huff which is probably why he enjoys working with Hall of Fame left tackle Tony Boselli. They've become the 'Sonny and Sam' for Jaguars fans in north Florida.



"We had a great relationship when we were players, despite the fact that I nearly ended his career before it began," deadpanned Lageman when he recalled the training camp injury that cost Boselli two months of his rookie season. "Our relationship has evolved, we kind of had to settle in and at first we were fighting for airtime but now we're very comfortable with what we do and how we do it. I love nothing more than getting to the regular season to be able to hang out with him, we'll go do sponsor dinners and it's just cool. We get to spend time together as broadcasters and as friends."

Jeff isn't all football, though during the season it's tough to find time for much else. When he can get away you'll find him on the water where kayak fishing has become a passion for him and wife Tera and there is also a one thousand acre retreat in rural Glenwood, Georgia where he raises pine trees and engages in farming which is as much a part of who he is as football.

"My mom's side of the family was from Langdon, South Dakota and we used to go up there and spend time and it was the greatest place for a kid to be," he explained. "I couldn't wait to get to the farm. Growing up I wanted to be a farmer and even though I got distracted by football it wasn't too long into retirement that I started looking for a farm. Through some friends I learned about tree farming which made sense because I wasn't going to be able to be a day-to-day farmer and having a crop you only harvest every 15-20 years made sense. It was a natural fit, I love the outdoors, and I could hunt and I built a pond and stocked it with fish. It's been one of the great joys of my life next to family and football and we find as much time as we can to get up there and get

away together. Someday we'll spend most of our time there but for now it's our happy place."

Lageman is excited to be on-board for this 30th season of Jaguars football and his expectations for this edition of the franchise are measured, he's never been one to be too hyperbolic about one game or one season. Though he does have great memories of one season which anyone who watched it, lived it with those players.

"1996 was magical," he remembered. "We were such a tight knit group and because we were the underdog, we were the Cinderella story. There were no expectations for us that season and we were able to play and be free. It was a magical ride and brought the team and the community together, it was beyond special."

He didn't say it but he didn't need to. His choice of Jacksonville three decades ago has given him a life and a lifestyle that could be described with many of those same sentiments.



LEON SEARCY

Leon Searcy loves. The former offensive tackle once renowned for his powerful style of play is today, driven by an equally powerful love of family, football and exceptional cigars.

His deep baritone voice almost reaches through the screen and punches important points of the conversation. He is a gifted storyteller who can reminisce with the best of former players which is probably why his is a highly sought after opinion when the subject turns to football. Searcy works a local radio program on 1010XL and he pulls none of his once famous punches when talking about the game he loves.

"I'm going to be authentic, which means I'm going to be honest because what's the point if you're not going to tell it like it is," said Searcy. "I learned that from my father. He had no filter whatsoever. He was just straight up who he was. I watch the tape, man, and I've been where a lot of those guys are at so it's a unique opportunity for me to tell the listener what's going on out there and why. If you're good I'm going to pat you on the back and tell you you're good. If you're bad, you're going to get spanked. It may offend some people but I don't really care because that's my perspective and how

I see the game."

Radio created an opportunity for Searcy to not only stay connected to the game it afforded him the chance to be part of a team. Working alongside Joe Cowart and Matt Hayes isn't quite the same as lining up with Tony Boselli and Fred Taylor but it requires a certain level of friendship and camaraderie and of course teamwork which many players say is what they miss most about the game.

"I always talk about the offensive line and what it's like to be part of that group," Searcy said. "The offensive line is probably the closest group on the team because we have to work together and working with Joe and Matt is kind of like that. I love the camaraderie that we have and the way we bounce ideas and opinions off one another. I really like that we all have our own, strong, opinions, nothing says bad radio like a bunch of guys who agree on everything. But we know what we want the show to sound like and our listeners have responded well to our style and different points of view. I like what we're doing."

Radio isn't the only medium where Searcy's stories are told. In November of 2020,



Leon published *Fourth Down and Damn; A Lineman's Story* and opened the door for an important conversation about his struggles after a life in professional football.

"I was in a really dark place, probably the darkest place I'd ever been in," reflected Searcy on the decision to tell such a personal tale. "I was living in a motel room by myself, I was broke and alone, no one was calling me. The only companionship I had were my dogs and I used to cry myself to sleep every night trying to figure out how and why I had fallen so far. I made some really bad investments, not just financial investments but investments in people and it led me into a long downward spiral."

A voice within woke him one morning with the idea that his story was one that must be told. It would help him work through a

healing process to be sure but it would also serve as a beacon to other former players who were struggling and perhaps to young players just getting started on the rocky areas of life to avoid.

"It (the writing and publishing process) brought me back from darkness to light and really back to life," he said. "The process of writing the book gave me purpose and motivation and each and every day that I worked on the book I got stronger, I got better and that's the message. First off try and avoid the mistakes in the first place but since you're going to make some understand that you can get back on your feet and find a new direction for life."

These days you can't miss the smile on Leon's face and hear it in his booming voice. He remarried and he jokes that the thrill of the chase of Brenda, a medical massage therapist, reignited the passions in his life that he hadn't felt in years. You might also notice the sweet smell of a cigar when you encounter the big fella, he'll tell you he's not an expert, but he admits to being an aficionado.

"When I was playing ball, I used to smoke a celebratory cigar now and then," he explained. "But it wasn't until I was in Miami walking down Hurricane Row that I met a guy who gave me a great cigar. When I asked him where it came from, he told me he made it. His name was Alex Menendez, and he lit a fire in me."

That fire became Howard G Cigars a few

years later after a trip with Menendez to Nicaragua to see and taste and learn about the industry. Today, Searcy and his business partner offer 11 different blends from the Black Moses to his personal favorite, The Big Searc. You'll find them in cigar stores in 22 states and in 89 cigar lounges from coast to coast.

"We came up with cigars that we wanted to smoke and that we enjoyed smoking," Searcy said. "We bought ten-thousand sticks started sharing them with people and pretty soon we had a logo, the box and started shipping them across the country."

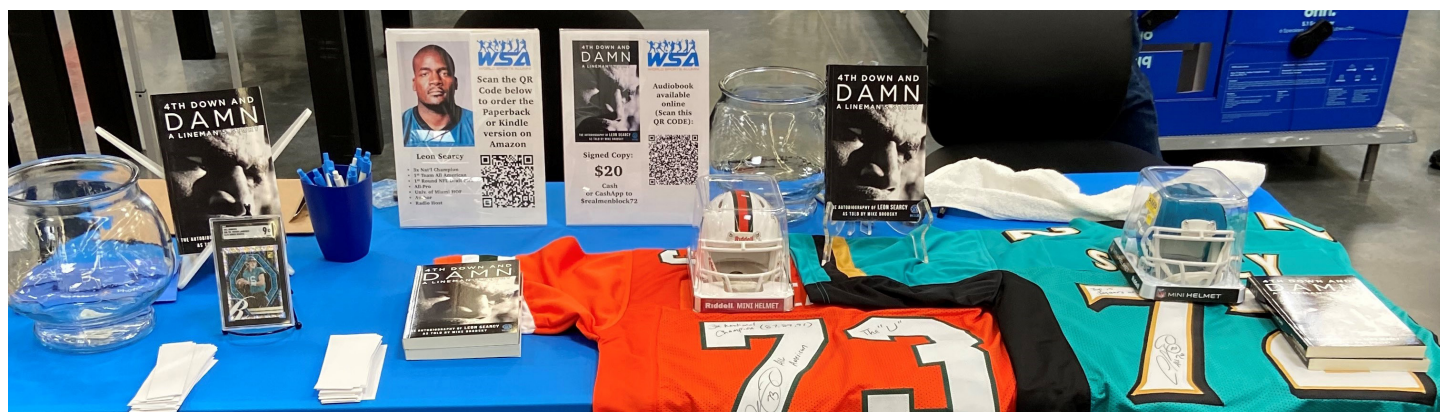
Searcy knows the business thanks to years of listening and learning but he also knows what makes a great cigar and why it's become such a passion to him and millions of Americans who enjoy.

"It's like a fine wine, there are so many choices because everyone knows what they like," he said. "But it's not just the flavor it's the culture. When you have people together enjoying a good cigar they're probably also engaged in a great conversation, telling stories, sharing helpful ideas and trying to

solve the worlds problems. When you're smoking a great cigar, you also become a good listener and you know we need more listeners in this world than talkers these days."

Like nearly everything Searcy says there is truth and wisdom in those words, though it is a bit ironic for one of Jacksonville's great talkers to speak about listening. Still when the subject returns to football he is willing to give up the mic a bit and allow others to share a story about their time together and he revels in the relationships that he believes make him a very rich man.

"That's the important part of life, right?" he asks. "Those guys I played with are my brothers and they're always there when I need them, and I will always be there if they need me. Tommy Mac, Big Sofa, Beasley, Tilski, Widell. We won together, we lost together but we were always together. That's the most important thing to me and I will be forever grateful for the guys I played with in Miami, in Pittsburgh and in Jacksonville. I don't know that I appreciated them as much when we were playing as I do now...and I really appreciate them now."



BRYAN SCHWARTZ

Bryan Schwartz doesn't believe in work-life balance which seems strange for a busy father of seven and grandfather whose new book, *Worthy Opponents*, has created a new speaking and coaching endeavor which in turn has him busier than ever.

"I've eliminated the word balance from my life," the former linebacker said with a wry smile. "I think balance is an illusion. I use the word rhythm instead. We always had a system or a process to handle everyone and everything they were doing, and we learned to be fully present in the moment we were in. I think that's a good way to live life in general and not worry so much about what you just finished or what is next. How do we live in the only moment we have, be very adaptable, very spontaneous."

The idea of becoming an author, it turns out, was one he had been playing around with for years. Different people at different times mentioned to him that he had a story to tell. A former NFL player with a strong, successful marriage and seven kids, yeah, that sounds like a really good story to tell. He tucked it away in the recesses of a busy mind and it wasn't until two years ago that the idea took hold and became real.

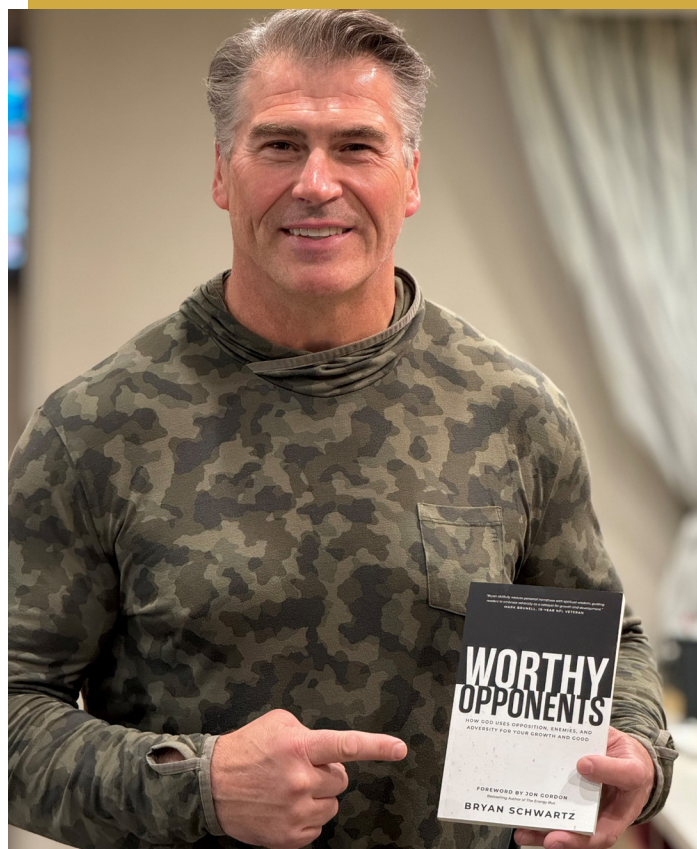
*"I'd never met Jon Gordon, I knew he was a very successful, best-selling author, but I didn't know him personally," recalled Schwartz. "We actually live not too far from each other and met at a party and started talking. I shared my concept about *Worthy Opponents* and how strong opposition can be beneficial. He had never heard it presented like that and a few weeks later he called to tell me he had shared the thought with (Clemson head football coach) Dabo Swinney and he agreed that I needed to write the book. Before I could even blink Jon had me connected with Streamline Publishing, I had a ghostwriter, and we were pushing ahead with the project."*



Gordon, a well-known speaker and best-selling author of more than a dozen books lent his considerable influence, and the buy-in of a publishing company plus the assistance of a helpful ghostwriter certainly made Schwartz feel as if the job was doable, but as he soon discovered, writing a book, even with all that help is far from easy. But it was in the difficult moments of writing *Worthy Opponents* that Bryan learned more about himself and how to help others.

“I’m not going to sugarcoat it for you,” he said. “The process was tormenting. You tend to be hardest on yourself and as we were working, I kept wondering why anyone would want to hear what I thought, that everybody already knows what I’m trying to tell them and I would get down and want to put the whole thing to the side. But it was actually that ebb and flow of confronting my own fears about the book, about rejection that I realized that the story, all the different things that I had been through had value, God gave those to me. Other people might really benefit from hearing that and only they can decide if it has value to them. I couldn’t stop writing because I thought it wasn’t that good or important.”

Schwartz coached himself through the book endeavor and is now helping others with his experience. Growing up in the game of football taught him how to persevere and to partner with the pain to get the job done. It also gave him the kind of *Worthy Opponents* that helped inspire the book he uses to help



other people dig deep and embrace the challenges they face every day.

“When you look at anything, whether it’s writing a book or playing football you either learn to persevere or you don’t make it,” Schwartz said. “You’re never going to feel perfect in life emotionally, mentally, physically. And if you’re waiting to get to a place where you feel like now you’re ready it’s going to be too late when you actually get there. That’s resistance, right? Football taught me that resistance wasn’t an indicator of failure, it was actually an invitation to go further.”

Bryan encounters the challenges in his own life, seven children and a busy speaking

and coaching business offers plenty of those. But he also finds them and ways to overcome them with his coaching clients.

“This is where it gets really fun,” he said. “I have a client with several restaurants in the Kansas City area. He was expanding and fast and needed help with preparing his team, overcoming the anxiety of construction and loans and fear of the unknown. People get stuck. I was once stuck. They have the capacity to break through, but they just don’t necessarily know that and they need someone to come alongside them and help them see beyond where they are or what they’re doing but instead to see who they can actually be. That potential is what excites them and me.”

Schwartz is a really good coach; you can hear it in his voice and see the expression on his face as he shares the principles that guided him in the journey through Worthy Opponents and throughout his career in football. He talks about simplicity and practicality and building a framework and seeing through the right lens and finding the map to get where you’re going. Obviously, his list of mentors is long and distinguished.

“The most important people in my life helped me to understand that pressure is a privilege,” said Bryan. “It’s inescapable so you might as well lean into it. Coach Coughlin taught me how to navigate that pressure and many of those lessons I still carry with me today. Mark Brunell was a huge influence on my spirituality as was

Pastor Russ Austin who helped me grow as a husband and father and my wife Diane was probably my most important mentor. She helped me to understand that I am loved and how to receive love and to give love. There are probably too many people to name who taught me that the value of being vulnerable and that I didn’t have to be Superman.”

Faith is the driving force in the life of Schwartz, a man who has spent time leading and mentoring in the Church as well. He is unabashedly Christian and leans joyfully into the lessons his faith has taught him to get to where he is today. He believes his journey to this moment in time was divinely inspired.

“Football was the tool that God used to change my life,” he offered without hesitation. “When I was young and growing up on a dairy farm I wanted to get out, I felt small and wanted something bigger from life. Football was the opportunity to get off the farm and into the NFL and it helped me develop a mindset of breaking through obstacles and overcoming challenges that led me to a complete transformation. Football opened doors, to Jacksonville and to relationships with people who have helped me become who I believe God wanted me to be. It is an awesome platform because football is such a big deal in society and I’ve used it and am still using it to help myself and others tackle the Worthy Opponents in life.”

JEFF KOPP



Jeff Kopp is right where he wants to be which is either interesting or ironic or maybe both because the 51-year-old former NFL linebacker is a cop. Specifically, the Jaguars Legend is a detective on the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office Gang Investigations Unit, and he isn't just right where he wants to be he is right where he believes God wants him to be.

"Faith is everything to me and it played a big role in my making the decision to enter the police academy at age 49," offered Kopp. "A lot of people seek comfort in life, and I get that but that's not me. I like to be uncomfortable and to stretch myself and grow but I couldn't do it if I didn't believe God is working in my life. My very first day on patrol I'm in the emergency room with a 5-year-old girl who died, and they believed was the victim of a homicide, on my first day. At one point it's just me and this little girl who was deceased sitting in the room and I questioned whether that was the right place for me, did I make the right decision? Well, I asked to not be comfortable and right out of the gate I am in the most difficult and uncomfortable position I could imagine. I couldn't have done it at age 23 but I'm not 23, at that time I was 49 and God put me in a position where I could use my life experience, my police training and my faith to try and make a difference."

Kopp studied criminology while playing football at USC and so when an NFL career beckoned it only made sense to go and give it his best effort. Jeff played for five teams and as he points out was cut five times which only helped build his comfort level with being uncomfortable.



“Getting cut is probably the worst day for any football player and it’s not even close to that first day on patrol in the emergency room,” Kopp said. “Like, nowhere near that bad. I got cut five times and after the first time I realized that’s how the game worked and I was going to go to as many teams as I could and get as many games under my belt as possible and then whatever happens, happens. I was all about stacking paychecks and stacking seasons towards my pension. I not only realized how quick an NFL career can be I learned that football is not who you are it’s just what you do.”

Post-football life began for Jeff and his wife Alycia and their family in southern California, but it didn’t feel right, even for the California natives. Jacksonville was where they had their best years in the NFL and the most friends and so northern Florida beckoned them from southern California and in an instant, they made the decision to give it a go. They’ve never looked back.

“We’d been all over the place; Miami, Jacksonville, I did a stint in Baltimore and New England and finally to Seattle. I loved it, loved football, loved playing and wanted to get as much from my professional career as I could,” he offered. “We came back to Jacksonville for a visit and realized that life in California in 2003 was just crazy. We looked at each other and decided we didn’t want to raise our kids there and I asked her if she was open to return to Jacksonville. So, we did it. On a total whim we moved back here, and we said if we didn’t like it after a year, we’d find someplace else to go. As you can see, we never left. We love life in Jacksonville.

Kopp needed to find something to replace football and so he signed on with former Jaguars teammate Don Davey and worked on building a financial services business and he had some success. After picking up the cycling bug from Davey, a noted triathlete, Jeff opened a Trek bicycle store in Jacksonville Beach and tried his

hand at coaching at Providence where he encountered a chance to join the ministry which led to an offer to lead the Prison Ministry Team at the Church of 1122 which led him to JSO.

“I started going out on ride-alongs and I was introduced to Pastor Garland Scott and that opened my eyes to what was going on,” Kopp said. “Pastor Scott and the gang unit would identify kids who they thought they could get out of gang life and then go into the home and talk to the family and the kids and tell them; ‘look we’re not police and we have an opportunity for you but you have to decide you want out and if you do the success rate is really high.’ I think I went on something like 40 calls and at that point I knew this was something, this was the thing I wanted to do.”

Most middle-aged men, which is where Kopp was at age 49, are thinking about when they get to retire not about jumping from ministry to a dangerous job working the streets as a police officer. But as you’ll recall, Kopp is not seeking comfort from life, he’s seeking to make a difference.

“There is a high danger aspect to this job but we’re constantly training,” he explained. “It’s no different than football in that if A happens, we’ll go to B and if B doesn’t work we’ll try C. When weapons become involved, and the danger factors ramp up and everything gets escalated you fall back on what you learned during training. When Alycia and I talked about this we talked

about all of it, the good and the bad and she left the decision to me, but she let me know that she was good with it. I talked to Pastor Joby (Martin at 1122) and he was all about me making the right decision and being the man God called me to be. It’s dangerous, it’s exciting but it’s also about making a difference and I don’t doubt that this is where I am supposed to be.”

Kopp and former Jaguars wide receiver Ernest Wilford are the only two former players currently working for the Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office. He finds himself around the Jaguars on a fairly regular basis; whether that’s through the Jaguars Legends program or working the sidelines for JSO. He can’t help but wonder when’s he out there if there are some future police officers in teal on the field in front of him.



"I think there are some guys who would do it and who would be really good at it and enjoy it," he said. "You have to humble yourself and you have to go through the academy and it's paramilitary training so there's a lot of 'yes sir and no sir and yes ma'am and no ma'am. But any guy who can go through two-a-days can handle the physical stuff just fine. I think in a lot of respects it's a great career for a former player and we need more good men who want to make a difference, and I know there are a lot of them in the locker room who are going to search for a new career when football is over. A ride along, like I once did, could be the difference between a guy who think about it and a guy who does it. I would highly encourage both JSO and the players to investigate it."



Kopp is still built like an NFL linebacker; it helps when you're working the streets in a gang related unit to have a physically imposing physique, add in the gun and badge and the former USC Trojan looks like he just walked off the set of action-hero movie. He's more interested in what he's doing now than acting or football but while the game itself is long in his rearview mirror, he still loves to talk ball and dialed in on everything going on with his favorite football team.

"I just had this conversation with another police officer," he said. "He asked who I root for since I played for five different teams. I was like; 'I root for the Jacksonville Jaguars.' He wondered why since the Ravens and Patriots were both multiple Super Bowl winners. But this is my city and has been, at least in my heart, since we moved here in 1996. Jacksonville has been my home for more than 20 years after we moved back here. I'm happy when they win and I get mad when they lose. I had a nice run here, that 1996 season was magical, and I have a connection to all those players and the guys I've met through the years. I'm as big a fan as anyone you know."

THANK YOU TO ALL OUR LEGENDS

