

MC Forward Podcast
Eric Myren
Transcript

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MIKE

Welcome to this episode of MC Forward, a podcast that focuses on Montgomery College individuals who are leading from where they are. I'm your host Dr. Michael Mills. Joining me today is Eric Myren, Director of Student Employment Services. Eric, thanks for joining me.

ERIC

Thank you for having me, Michael. Excited to be here.

MIKE

So, let's get into leadership through your background as a soccer player. Very accomplished amateur soccer player. 1981 Amateur Athlete of the Week for ESPN. Starting freshmen on the UConn NCAA Championship Team. Tell me a little bit about your soccer background.

ERIC

Yeah, so, actually I grew up in Mexico City. Uh, that was... I spent the first seven years of my life and that's where I got kind of introduced to soccer. And then, of course, when I was young, I just loved... I loved every sport: soccer, basketball, baseball, football. But soccer was kind of came natural to me, and I played throughout high school. I... in high school I was an All High School American, and then, I got recruited by the University of Connecticut, which at the time, you know, back then, soccer was something where you'd show up for the soccer game and... and sometimes you'd have 10 people on the sideline watching the game. And I went up to UConn, and this coach had built this, uh, amazing organization where there was 8,000 people at a game, packed stadium, concessions, media. It was like being in Europe, and it would just immediately, thought, this would be a great... great place to play. And so, that's kind of why I picked there. And then, of course, this coach was just, you know, had all these leadership skills. He was a great communicator. He was a great motivator. He knew how to set up systems for winning. Uh, he knew how to pick talent. He, uh... he knew how to put together all the pieces into a winning puzzle. And so, uh, we ended up having, you know, we won the national championship. Made it to the Final Four a few times and then Final Eight. Um, and, you know, frequently, we're in the Top Ten, you know, uh, in all the polls and that kind of thing. So, it was... it was a really great, uh, experience there. And, um, and, so, uh, you know, just really happy that I got to experience that.

MIKE

With the opportunity to turn pro...

ERIC

Right.

MIKE

Talk a little bit about that.

ERIC

Yeah, so, uh, when I, uh, graduated, uh, right before my senior year, I got... I got selected to the Senior Bowl, which was, at the time, was the top 30 players in the country. And they usually did kind of like a photo op with whatever team drafted you but the Outdoor League folded two weeks before the Senior Bowl, so it was kind of disappointing. And then, they canceled the indoor draft, um, so, it was all kind of on hold. So, at that point, I kind of mentally decided, well, I guess I'm not going to go pro. I didn't want to go to another country to play or whatever, but a year later, I did get drafted by the Baltimore Blast and kind of entertained that, but then decided that I guess I need to... to actually move on and into the real world. And so, that was sort of the end of soccer for me.

MIKE

Well, when you're going through that process and... and you're... you're a freshman on the National Championship Team, there's... there's obviously some leadership skills that you're exhibiting but that you're also learning from seniors. Can you talk about what types of skills you... you've learned that have carried over to where you are today?

ERIC

Yeah. So, you know, at first, I'll say it was... it was very intimidating when I started there because we had this extremely talented team. We had five, uh, players that went pro that year. One was the number one pick in the country and, um, and so, you know, I was a little bit intimidated over my head. I think, um, you know, I... I worked really hard, so I think that's one thing that I... I learned as I... I worked extremely hard in practice, after practice, you know, everything in terms of studying, what we were doing and trying to do, um, you know, to try to... and then try to figure out what I could add to the team in terms of, uh, you know, as a freshman. And, um, um, one of the things I do kind of remember distinctly is it was, you know, those first five games of the season, you know, kind of getting yelled at by the seniors, you know, like... and then, you know, kind of being pushed around. I think there was something that kind of clicked in about the, you know, around the fifth game where I just decided, hey, I'm out here and I belong to be here, and I'm gonna... I'm gonna do my part. And I'm still gonna hear what they're saying, but I'm not gonna let it intimidate me and change... change my game and change what I'm doing. And then, I think at that point, I really started to get kind of confident in... in being out there and what I was contributing. So, you know, I think some of the things that I picked up, you know, early on was, one, hard work and work ethic because that's

something I could do every game no matter what I could give, 120 percent. And... and then, two, is just starting to get a little bit more confident. And, you know, I have my own style, I have my own way of doing things, and... and, um, and I can contribute right off the bat.

MIKE

And soccer is a team sport. It takes everyone working together to... to bring that... that championship back to... to UConn. It's not much different than... than working in... in what we call the real world, right? It's all team... team-orient.

ERIC

That, yeah, that's a great point. The... the team orientation, because really, I was always really like an offensive midfielder, um, in high school. And I... and even throughout the season, but because I worked really hard, the coach thought I was, you know, probably one of the best defenders on the team. So, in the National Championship, he actually just had me cover the best player on Alabama A&M and said, I want you to be a defender for this game. And all I did was mark this player. I ended up getting the MVP of the National Championship game as a defender and... which was really not the normal position for me. Um, but yeah, it was that team orientation. That's what they needed me to do. That's what, you know, he felt that I needed to do in order to contribute the most to the team... to the team. And so, that's the change I made.

MIKE

So, then, you... you fast forward to three years after that freshman year, you're a senior. What kind of leadership skills did you show to the freshman at that point?

ERIC

Yeah, so, at that point, I... I was the co-captain of the team and, um, um, you know, one of the things that I, you know, tried to show the freshman coming in, um, you know, was that I was at the same place they were four years ago. And for a lot of them, they were coming in feeling intimidated and feeling over their head and there's so much to learn and, um, you know, but making them feel one part of the team. So, there was sort of like a... a social aspect of getting them, you know, to feel and part of the team and that, you know, hey, we're not like seniors, excluding them and... and, you know, treating them like peons or anything but they're... they're part of the team. Um, you know, getting them to see, um, what they had to offer and how important that was gonna be for the success of our team. We had freshmen coming in that were really talented, um, and that came in and had an impact right off the bat. And so, you know, getting them to see right off the bat that they were... they were part of this effort and they were really an important part of the effort and we needed to get them up and running right away, you know. I guess which is kind of like now in the NFL with quarterbacks coming in and having to... to perform right off the bat.

MIKE

Forty years later, are those leadership skills still relevant and what have you learned in the meantime?

ERIC

Yeah, I think the things that I've taken away from... from... from the sports thing was, one, is sort of, um, incremental improvement because the... the coach was really, uh, extremely organized and... and, uh, disciplined. And, um, we worked extremely hard but you made little progress every day and... and I think what I realized is that, you know, you don't notice it in the each day, but after six months or a year, you realize, wow, how much further are we along than some, you know, other players at other schools and that kind of thing. Um, so, just, you know, how a disciplined approach, a daily disciplined approach, makes a huge difference over time. Um, that was one thing. I saw the value of having a clear communication from the coach because we always knew where we stood. Uh, he didn't play favorites. Everyone knew what success looked like and, uh, you know, and... and even with that one about knowing what success looks like, I had a... I had a professor at Virginia Tech that I... that I thought was fantastic because on the first day, he didn't have a bell curve. He told everybody this is an A, and if you do these things, everyone in the class will get an A. And it was really motivating and... and everyone just kind of, uh, worked really hard because they all knew what success looked like and they all wanted to be successful. So, I think kind of, uh, painting a picture for people in terms of this is what is expected, this is what success looks like, and I'm gonna support you in getting there, and I'm gonna do everything I can to help you get there. Um, you know, the coach, he worked harder than all of us. And so he... he led by example. I think that's another thing that I kind of took away from that. And, um, I don't know. There's so many... there's so many good lessons from sports that, uh, I can't think of them all now. But I think, there's a lot of relevancy, you know, and just the whole thing of working together as a team, you know. That... that's... that's really, um... you're... you're not gonna... you're... you're never gonna win with individual effort. Um, you know, probably the most satisfying year for me was my sophomore year because we lost all these talented seniors. And we really did not have the same level of talent, but the fact that we got to the Final Four with this group just because everybody worked collectively like a team, I think that was a powerful lesson.

MIKE

As I've been doing this series, one of the things that I continuously hear people talk about is the need for leaders to be good communicators, clear communicators. And yet, that seems to be the one area where leadership fails, you know. Why is clear communication so difficult for so many leaders?

ERIC

Well, I'm not sure, but I'll just kind of take a... a shot at that. I think sometimes a leader first has to know, uh, be clear within themselves what success looks like. And I think if... if a leader has clarity about that, it's going to be a lot easier to communicate that to the

team. I, luckily, I've... I've had the opportunity to work for many great leaders over the years, but there was one leader who, it was very difficult to know what success meant to them. And that was very frustrating. It was like it was always like this moving target and you... [Laughs] It was very difficult to know if you were aligning with... with his vision or strategies or goals. So, I think that's part of just having clarity, the leader having clarity about what success is.

MIKE

How would you suggest a leader go about identifying what success looks like?

ERIC

Well, I'm a big fan of like the whole Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. And... and, um, you know, going through some kind of process once a year with your team to kind of identify, you know, what are worthy goals and aspirations for the unit. And then, kind of breaking them down into kind of measurable, you know, goals that everybody can kind of rally around. And then, for me, personally, I really follow that whole, you know, weekly planning thing. Every week, taking 30 minutes, an hour to sit down and say, you know, bird's eye view of the week. What's the most important things that I need to be focusing on this week to kind of move... to move everything forward? Because otherwise, if you don't do that, I think you just kind of get sucked into the... the crisis of every day. And there's always crisis at the College, right? Coming from all over the place, and... and things that can kind of suck your energy away. So, I don't... I think if you don't really have kind of like some... some guidelines or some... some vision and some... some goals that you're kind of returning to every week, uh, it's... it's easy to kind of get thrown off.

MIKE

What kind of leader is Eric Myren? How would you categorize yourself as a leader?

ERIC

I think I'm a reluctant mission-driven leader, and the reason I say that is I started out in the public workforce system for 20 years and I kind of moved up the ladder there. And I never ever wanted to move up the ladder. It just kind of it would always happen because I would... there were things that I wanted to change. There were things that I wanted to do. And I just felt that I could do it better if I was in a position of authority. And so, it just kind of kept, you know, moving up. And then, I'd have a bigger vision and that would make me want to move into a higher position so I could do more. But, you know, personally, I think my intrinsic rewards come for direct service working with students. That's what I... that's what automatically makes, you know, energizes me. But I... I think I've always kind of just taken on that role sort of from, I can have... I can implement things that I think are going to move the organization forward or move unit forward if I'm... if I'm in a leadership role.

MIKE

Tell me about your work with students? What do you like about it?

ERIC

About my work and what I like about it?

MIKE

With... with students. Your work with students.

ERIC

Oh, I... I think it's just that... that, um, feeling when you know like the light bulb, you know, goes off. And in the career field, you know, if someone's coming in and they're just feeling discouraged, they don't really feel like they have a direction, they don't really feel like they know what they're doing. They're just kind of going through the motions, and over a period of a number of sessions, you see them all of a sudden getting excited that there... there's actually a path for them and it's something that aligns with who they are and they're starting to take actions and you can just kind of see that transformation, and that... that to me is just, you know, so exciting.

MIKE

For a minute, I couldn't tell whether you're talking about students or sports... [Eric Laughs] because the... the metaphor is... is similar, right? And if you're... if you're looking at soccer or football, it's... it's talking about big, you know, the vision. Seeing the entire field, proper spacing, everyone working together. And then, the light bulb goes off, and boom, success happens.

ERIC

That's a good point. I never... never thought of it that way, but you're absolutely right.

MIKE

I... I think there's so many characteristics of sports that we can take into education... into business. So many good things come out of their involvement in sports, and for me, you know, having run track and cross country in college, it was... it was discipline. And... and like you said, the hard work... because if you don't put in the hard work, good things are not going to happen to you. And I think it starts there, and that's... that's where I think so many good leadership skills begin, as is working in a team-oriented sports, uh, space.

ERIC

Yeah, I agree, and I think what you said too about sort of the discipline and effort, I mean, obviously, there's a lot of days where you don't want to do what you're doing or you don't, you know, you don't feel like showing up or whatever, but I think that's what you learn from sports. You just... you show up every day and you keep working hard and eventually it pays off. And I think, you know, I think the same thing, you know, with the work environment, I mean there's days when, you know, maybe the thing that you need

to do to move everybody forward is not pleasant or, you know, something that you want to be doing, but it's.... it's what's going to have the most impact.

MIKE

Leadership isn't always fun, is it?

ERIC

[Laughs] No. Right.

MIKE

It... it takes effort, um, you know, when I... I still run try to run several times a week, and I'll have people tell me have fun, and it's like, no, I... it's not fun for me. [Both laugh] I... I don't necessarily enjoy going out and running several miles. **[ERIC: Right]** I know it's beneficial for me, but it's that discipline that I think is necessary.

ERIC

Right, right. Yeah, sometimes doing the things that other people don't want to do is what makes the big difference, exactly. You know, nobody wants to be... I remember times at UConn where we, you know... practice hasn't even started when you come into the locker room and it says, you know, seven mile run before practice starts. And you're just like, oh, my gosh, we're gonna go run hills and do stuff. But I'll tell you what, when, you know, it was the last 20 minutes of a game and we're running circles around the other team, you know, it... it paid off.

MIKE

When I was running cross-country in college, our practice runs, there were days when they were miles. It's like, **[ERIC: Oh, my god]** So... so, I, to this day, I regret not doing the extra seven miles to do a marathon. And I've never done a marathon, but I thought, you know, 18, 19-mile practice runs are just brutal, but like you said, when you go down to then a five-mile race, it... it just makes a big difference.

ERIC

Yeah, yeah. Wow.

MIKE

So, where does Eric Myren go in his leadership evolution? What... what do you see you happen to work on or continue to focus on as a leader?

ERIC

Oh, I think there's always... there's always things to work on as... as a leader. Um, you know, I think... uh, probably, um, you know, an area that I need to always work on is... is just, you know, when I look at the whole, all the different elements, I..., I can be kind of task focused, you know. And sometimes I need to kind of get out of my bubble and really focus more on, you know, the broader college community and building

relationships across the College. I think that's one area that... that I need to work on. Um, the listening is... is always something that, you know, again, just being present and not task oriented and really connecting with people, I think is an area where... where I can work on. So, a lot of... a lot of growth areas still for me.

MIKE

Well, Eric this has been a joy for me. I really have had a lot of fun with this conversation. I wish you well moving forward.

ERIC

Thank you so much this has really been enjoyable.

MIKE

If you know someone who you think would be a great fit for this podcast, have them reach out to me at michael.mills@montgomerycollege.edu. Meanwhile, keep moving MC Forward.