



Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame

15 West Third Street - Jamestown, NY 14701

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: A graduate of Jamestown High School and Princeton University, Cleveland Browns tight end **Stephen Carlson** wrote the following essay that he recently posted to Twitter.*

10 Guiding Principles

That Have Kept Me In The NFL



I never would have thought I'd be a professional athlete one day. Am I deserving of the ability to play in the NFL or did I just get lucky in the circumstances leading up to my career? I continue to struggle everyday with what some call "imposter syndrome." What has helped me along the way is acknowledging the values and principles I learned growing up which now reveal themselves today. It would have been impossible to get where I am today without the help of others. I have everyone to thank for making me the person I turned out to be. How can I continue to play at the

highest level of professional football? Continue to do what I have always done. Fall back on the guiding principles of who I am as a person. When tough situations arise in your life, you have to know who you are and what you stand for so you have the strength to rise above. **I think these transcend football and can be used by anybody.** Here are my 10 principles:

1. HARD WORK

The most basic building block of every task. There is no substitute. I would not be anywhere near the position I am in without a work ethic. I could go through a million examples of the hard work required to get to and stay at the level I am at. My mother, as a single parent, was constantly working to make sure my brother and I had everything we needed, but never too much. She made hard work a priority and instilled that in us. Jason



Witten, one of the greatest players at my position, made a post during his retirement that said, “*The secret is in the dirt.*”

This could not have

resonated more with me. The “*secret*” to success is putting in the work first, something I have always tried to do. So much that my college friends call me Dirt. Although they don’t call me this solely because of my work ethic, it inspires me to stay grounded and do the work.

2. DISCIPLINE

Hard work goes hand in hand with discipline to me. There are probably many people who can work just as hard as you, but can they work as hard and be disciplined enough to keep it up? Being disciplined is hard. An ability to do something is nothing if you are not disciplined enough to stay the course. “*I don’t care what other kids are doing, they’re not you.*” — Mom, every day of my childhood. My mother didn’t allow me to do as many random activities with friends growing up — sleepovers, parties, just hanging out. I hated that when I was young. Now I realized it has allowed me to go against the grain my whole life. I don’t need to follow everyone else. I can do my own work.

3. RESPECT

Respect and discipline overlap to a certain extent. Discipline can be showing up early, following instructions, listening. These habits are amplified through respectfulness. Respect to coaches, administrators, and staff goes far to keep up a reputation. People appreciate respect and will be more likely to reciprocate the admiration. Respect doesn't help much on the performance front. You should always have respect for opposition, but at the end of the day you are fighting for your job just as they are. Why shouldn't you come out victorious.

4. PREPARATION

Sports have taught me the importance of preparation. The importance of practice was a crazy realization to me in college football. There were weeks where practice didn't feel the best, it was sloppy, guys weren't serious. Reflecting on the game, you could tell. Although it didn't always mean when we had a lackluster week at practice that we were going to lose, you could tell. You knew, *"Wow, we had a bad week at practice and it showed."* And the inverse was certainly true. We had weeks where guys were flying around, the energy was contagious, people were excited to work,



and we go into the game and play great. It made me conscious during practice, if things were sloppy, we better pick it up or we're going to lose this game. Before the game even happened, I could feel, *"Man, we didn't have a great week of practice. We have to lock in and make plays to overcome that,"* or *"Man, we're feeling great, just go out and execute what we practiced so hard during the week."* There is so much preparation that goes into 60 minutes on Sundays. I make sure to prepare extra for practices — getting my body right and studying the scripts of plays that we will run way too many times. There are weeks during the season where, for whatever reason, I don't watch as much film, or don't triple check every play on the call sheet, and it makes the game harder. Your brain is working more or you are not as focused on little details, and you make more mistakes. When I have weeks where I watch the most film I ever have, I walk into Sunday feeling so confident. I can take on anybody, make any play necessary. When you see from week to week how preparation affects the outcome, you want to do everything you can to prepare the right way and win games.

5. DOUBT

I have been doubting myself since high school. I didn't get moved up to varsity teams as soon as my best friends. I think I barely made it on to Princeton's recruiting roster because of my size and good grades/standardized test scores. They hadn't talked to me at all until February of my senior year (very late)! Am I really supposed to be here? Why did I deserve a chance to play in the NFL? I had never played TE before. Was I just lucky in the fact that one team took a chance on me (and only one team even wanted me out of college) and the roster pieces worked out a certain way to allow me to slip onto the Practice Squad and eventually, due to a teammate suffering an injury, the roster. Will there be a time when I'm no longer needed here in Cleveland and will be done playing football forever? At a certain point you can't care about all that. Yes, doubt creeps into me constantly, but that makes me want it more. Doubt makes me work harder. I knew I wasn't going to make the team my rookie year, I didn't even know if I could make it on the practice squad. I kept telling myself, "*If I can just slip onto the practice squad, I will be set.*" I knew I would work hard enough to be where I am today. If I didn't even get the chance to be on a practice squad, I think I would have been done. "*Realizing*" I'm not the most talented makes me work harder to make up for that and be where I want to be. I don't think of doubt as a negative.

6. DO WHAT YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO DO

In many scenarios, there is a right and a wrong. Everybody has their own moral compass. This doesn't mean that everyone in the world can agree on there being a right and wrong to every situation. Everyone is guided by their own morality. Have the discipline and respect (for others and yourself) to care enough to do what you're supposed to do. In a football context, you have a job to do. You have to know what to do and you need to execute that job. Obviously, you will forget plays, you'll get beat — that's part of the game. Off the field there are plenty of opportunities to do what you're supposed to be doing. Would it be right to skip a set of a workout? Should you be on time to treatment? Are you supposed to study plays and watch film tonight? This is not to say there is one way to live life or that I am perfect and always do right. Am I supposed to zone out in a zoom meeting? No, but we've all done it. I usually know my role going into a game — special teams and in on the multiple tight end sets we run. I'm supposed to know every TE position on every play, even if I may never play a snap of offense during the game. So I make sure I know every play even when there is about a 0% chance I will be in. You never know when someone is going to go down and I have to fill in. I am supposed to be prepared so I am, every single game.

7. BE ABLE TO TURN IT ON AND TURN IT OFF

Be in the moment. I work when I have to, and I relax when I don't. Obviously not that simple, but it works. The NFL season is so long and tiring, everyone needs time to relax.



When I go into work, I'm 100% about it. I'm ready to do whatever it takes to have a successful day. When I'm doing work, I think about work. I am present in the moment. I don't waste energy on non-important things because that takes away from my goal. Lift hard, run fast, draw up every play from practice in my notebook, but when I'm done, I'm done. I turn my brain off from football altogether most nights. Instead of stressing myself out, thinking about how difficult practice is, or how many plays I need to learn from the playbook, I clear my head. Then in the morning, when it's time to turn it back on again, I'm ready. During a game, I can't be thinking about the big meal from McDonalds I'm going to have after the game. But once the game is over I am so ready for those fries. I love being an athlete because the things I need to do to be a good athlete correspond to loving a healthy lifestyle. Workouts can wear you down though. There's no way I would eat unhealthy and skip workouts in the period

leading up to the season. But after the season, I turn it off and stop the workouts and indulge for a little. It's what is best for me. I never take myself too seriously except when I am on the job because business is business.

8. HUMBLENESS

Being humble always receives more praise than the opposite. Of course, I am proud of my achievements, as everyone should be. And I will use what I am good at to build my brand. There is a certain point where pride turns to conceit and ostentatiousness, which no one likes to see or appreciates. A sense of humbleness is necessary to get better. I can always be a better football player, as long as I recognize that I am not there yet. It is hard to take coaching or criticism if you are not humble. I am not the best. I have to work to get there.

9. THE FEAR OF LETTING SOMEONE DOWN

Not the fear of failure. Admiration. Trust. Whatever you want to call it. During the summers in high school, my friends and I would do double workouts, going from basketball summer workouts to football summer workouts. My sophomore summer I skipped out on the latter half of the football workout, the running. I got a call from our head coach later that day saying he was disappointed in me. That's not what we were about in our program. I realized I had let the entire team down, and I hated that feeling.

Despised it. I think I cried about it after, like how could I be so soft in my own head to let down people who were counting on me and wanted to see me succeed. My college experience was the same. During preparation for my pro-day, my Princeton strength coach gave me and others the option to do pro day training at Princeton. It was the best-case scenario — I didn't have to pay anything out of pocket, I was comfortable with the coaching, and got to be pushed by my best friends. My coach made a workout plan from scratch that was perfect for our needs. I trusted him to train me for my goals. He had



been so central to my work with the football team leading up to pro-day training that I knew I could trust him. I would have done anything he told me. Anything, because I knew he wanted me to succeed. We had the same goals. And it ended up being the best choice I could have made. It was fun, waking up at 6 a.m. everyday and working out harder and earlier than anyone else with my best friends and a coach who loved to push us. Then finish up and go through a normal college day after that. Trust is big for me. I hope that my teammates have trust in my abilities and I never let them down. I would do anything for someone I trust. I actually have a deep fear of letting someone down that I trust. Trust is earned by a mutual relationship and commitment to each other.

10. DREAM

I love the word. I love the concept. It encompasses a bigger picture. It's like a goal, but it can be so far-fetched. No matter how big or small, it can inspire us to be great. Dreams can inspire us to be the best version of ourselves to reach them. Dreams are powerful. We should encourage dreams, to lift people up. I wasn't a big dreamer growing up. I had heard all the statistics about who can be what and who can't. I had my doubts. I can only hope my dreams get bigger from here.