

The Daily Helping Episode 299:
Patrick Willis

Patrick Willis: [00:00:00] Just remember, as long as you are breathing, there's still opportunity to do the things that you want to do, and there are many ways to do that. So when you get discouraged, just know that like as long as you're breathing, there's still opportunity.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:00:22] Hello and welcome to The Daily Helping with Dr. Richard Shuster, food for the brain, knowledge from the experts, tools to win at life. I'm your host, Dr. Richard. Whoever you are, wherever you're from and whatever you do, this is the show that is going to help you become the best version of yourself. Each episode, you will hear from some of the most amazing, talented, and successful people on the planet who follow their passions and strive to help others. Join our movement to get a million people each day to commit acts of kindness for others. Together, we're going to make the world a better place. Are you ready? Because it's time for your Daily Helping.

Thanks for tuning in to this episode of The Daily Helping Podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Richard. And we are on location at Athletes' Voices, an event, empowering athletes who are changing the world. There's a series of these podcasts. This is one of them, and I'm really excited about our guest today. His name is Patrick Willis. The 49ERs' Hall of Fame Linebacker played all of his eight seasons, the NFL, with the San Francisco 49ers earning seven Pro Bowl nominations named NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year in 2007 and is a two-time NFL tackles leader.

He played his collegiate football at Ole Miss, where he was an all-American SEC and the 2006 SEC Defensive Player of the Year. Now, he focuses on his foundation, the Whinker's Mind Youth Fund, to help transform communities through the potential of youth. Through the Whinker's Mind Youth Fund, Patrick helps youth grow stronger in mind, body and spirit. Patrick, welcome to The Daily Helping. I am so excited to talk to you today.

Patrick Willis: [00:02:12] Dr. Richard, thank you for having me. I'm glad to be here.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:02:15] Oh, we're going to have so much fun today and we're going to help a lot of people, but I'm really excited. You know, the beautiful thing is we just captured your collegiate career, your NFL career, but I don't talk about before. So

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were you from go, like you knew football was your thing? Tell us your superhero origin story. I want to go back and find out.

Patrick Willis: [00:02:39] Yeah. So originally, I'm from Tennessee and not just from Tennessee, but I'm from a small town in West Tennessee. Bruceton, Tennessee was the school that I went to. And when I was growing up, I only had three channels growing up. And on those three channels it was 7, 11 and 16. And on Channel 7 would be all the sports. And of course, back in the early nineties, the only teams that would come on those three channels were -- one of those three channels would be the Dallas Cowboys, the Atlanta Braves. And I can really only remember the Dallas Cowboys and Atlanta Braves, but I grew up love watching Monday Night Football and probably like most kids, had the aspiration to become a professional athlete.

So with that, like all the kids, you play the sports and I really just enjoy playing sports. I mean, I was -- growing up in the South on the very rural area where I grew up during the summertime, being out of school, stayed up my grandmother's, most of us did, so from 8:00 to sundown, we would play outside nonstop. Anything that we could, any ball, whether it's football, basketball, baseball, kickball, hide and go seek, whatever it was, if it had a ball to it, we just get out there and we try to go at it. And then, of course, like I said, watching, the NFL teams one night, you always had your favorite players that you wanted that you inspired to be like.

And so yeah, just throughout the years, I think it was about the sixth grade when I had that, sixth grade was one of those moments that I felt like, man, I just saw something, that it was a vision that I had. And it was -- I'm sorry. I was watching Monday Night Football one night. So when I was a kid, about eight years old, my step grandfather had a stroke. And I never forget, after he had that stroke, us getting them to the house and my grandmother asking my brother and I, because we live closer than most of the grandkids, she said, baby, I'm going to need you all to help grandmother put granddaddy in bed every night.

And I never forget the most fun nights were Monday nights, because that's when Monday Night Football would come on. And what made this night very interesting was because where I grew up, that was a bunch of lightning bugs. When I grew up, there was lightning bugs everywhere in the country. And I never forget I used to always,

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whether we're catching them in jars or whether we be running through, and you might mess around and eat one but I just remember running through and just seeing all the lightning bugs.

And it was one Monday night that I'm watching the football game and I never forget the ball was kicked off. And back then in the early nineties, mid-nineties, Monday Night Football was like the Super Bowl is now when it came on TV. And I never forget watching the ball being kicked off and all those flickering lights going off. And I had a moment where I was like, wait a minute, what's the difference between running through these lightning bugs and then being in front of all those lights? If I'm running through the lightning bugs and I'm like, I'm Emmitt Smith, I'm Michael Irvin, I'm this player, I'm that player.

And so that was one of those moments that I felt like I was watching TV and I was wide awake. And it was like a vision. It was a vision that I saw. And I remember being like, wait a minute, I wasn't dreaming. Like I was wide awake. And so that was a big moment for me. So, yeah, there's plenty of others but I'll stop talking now.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:06:39] No, it's great. It sounds like you said, if I recall about the sixth grade is when this kind of solidified for you. And so when a young person says to their friends, their family, I'm going to be an NFL player, I'm going to be an astronaut, I'm going to win American Idol, whatever it is. I'm curious, what was the reaction? What was the support like? What was that experience like for you, once you basically said to the world, this is my goal?

Patrick Willis: [00:07:07] Yeah. There was a moment that something like that really happened. I was in the eighth grade. I was getting ready to go into my freshman year. And when you're in eighth grade, going into your freshman, that's when you now start to pick whether you're going to go college or whether you want to go to university, dual path and or technical path. And I went to a majority. My school is really small. I only graduated with 40 people and that's how many people I graduated with. I think the business class might have been 60, so I was one of the smaller classes.

But this particular day wherein we were getting ready to pick our elective, whether it's university, dual or technical. And I remember looking around and in the 40 people is

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probably about six of us African American kids. And the teacher said, she asked you -- I raised my hand because I wasn't sure which one was which. I just noticed when she said, when she asked university and technical and dual, the technical, most of the black kids raised their hands and then some in the middle. But nobody, no black kid raised their hand for the university path.

And I just remember being like, well, I want to go to the university. Like if all of them can go to the university, why can't I? And I never forget, I raised my hand to ask her a question because I've always been the one to ask some 101 questions, even if I think I might know, I still ask just so I can get like be clear about what it is. And so I ask her, and she says, well, what do you want to do? I said, well, first -- and she didn't give me a chance to say the second part.

I said, well, first I want to be a professional athlete and then second, but she didn't -- but before I could get into the second, and maybe she was just doing her job, she said, well, you know, less than one percent makes it to the NFL, so you're going to have to. And when she said that in front of everybody, I felt like she was like belittling me. And again, I understand now and looking back at statistics like, but she said less than one percent. And I said in front of the whole classroom, I said, well, I guess I'll be in that less than one percent. And that was that day from then on that I was like, you can't say this in front of the whole classroom and be this confident and not give everything you have to obtain it and just man, through grace and hard work and luck and help here and there, the rest is history.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:09:50] Out of curiosity, have you ever crossed paths with that teacher again?

Patrick Willis: [00:09:54] I haven't crossed path with her. Like, well, we get to make eye contact, but I have been in the same place as it. But for me, it was one of those things where, again, there were many, I understand now and looking back. And I'm also one of those type of people that I may feel it inside that you was able to prove yourself right and maybe someone else wrong. But I'm not that type of person and go in somebody's face and say, look, I told you, this is what you get, none of that. So I just kind of smiled with that. With that, I'm humbled.

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Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:10:29] So I love that. I love that. So I want to jump forward now. We're going to fast forward in time. You had your successful career at Ole Miss and that's understating it, obviously. And now you're in the NFL. So you're living your dream. You're no longer seeing the bright lights or the lightning bugs, you're getting the flicker, right? You're seeing the flash of the crowd. You're a diner.

At what point? Because I know the shelf life, so to speak, of a professional athlete, particularly an NFL athlete, is very short. And you played statistically longer than most play and at a very, very high level. At what point did you start thinking about, two things. One, what's next? But let's start there. At what point did you start thinking about life after football?

Patrick Willis: [00:11:15] Really, I had always thought about it, I thought about it my rookie year. And the reason why I say that I thought about my rookie year was because before I ever became an NFL player, I'd always heard that NFL stood not for long. And so for me, I was like, man, like, well, how do you know how long to go? How do you know when to retire? And I remember in my rookie year and just going up to some of the old heads, there were three of the older guys on my team, veteran guys on my team. And I was asking them a question. This is my first training camp practice and they looked at me like I was crazy before practice even started. I said, how do you guys know when it's time to retire?

And after I asked three of the guys, nobody gave me an answer that I was looking for. And so I said, well, Lord, I guess it would be when I no longer have that passion to play and give my teammates, give myself, give my teammates, give the organization everything I have, I said I think it would be time to step away and go figure out the next phase, because what I didn't want to do was what I had saw in older guys that I admired, that I felt like they had just stayed and was just getting knocked around and pushed around.

And I was just wondering like, man, why do you all want to go out like that? Why would you not go out when you're on top? So I just told myself you just have to be honest with yourself. And I always play the game because I was really, I loved it. I enjoyed sports. I enjoyed everything about it. And I just told myself one day it's going to end. And when it does, you have to figure out the next phase of life.

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And so I'd always had it in the back of my mind, but it's like being young, you don't ever think. It's like being young, you know one day you're going to pass, you're going to leave this world, but you don't think about it a whole lot until you get on older and or some things happening. And so that's kind of how it was, early on, you just going at it, going at it. But then the last couple of years, I started to feel, man, I think I feel the sun setting.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:13:24] So yeah, that's a great response. And I think that you came into the league with the, not that you were counting on it from day one, but in the back of your mind, you knew this was going to be short lived. And so my next question that I wanted to ask you, you're doing so much in the world of philanthropy and we're going to talk a lot about that, Patrick. But when did you realize? Did you know coming into the league that, okay, now I'm going to have a spotlight here, I have to leverage that to help a lot of people? Or did that kind of organically develop over time?

Patrick Willis: [00:14:00] Yes, Dr. Richard, it was actually organic. Coming from, I didn't give a lot of context earlier, but I was raised a single parent. And being raised a single parent, it was four of us, two and then it was four of us. It's a little bit more to the story, but being raised by a single parent, things were -- we didn't always have a whole lot and barely had what we needed. And doing it with that, there were times that different organizations, different people, whether it's hand-me-down clothes, whether it's a toy drive, whether it's a Thanksgiving angel tree, providing a turkey for my family around the Thanksgiving time, those things I was very appreciative of and I was very grateful for that person or those people.

And so I just always told myself that along the way as I live, and then hopefully one day get in that position to be able to just well you know you can just do as much as you like to do that I would do that. And so that has always been something that I have carried with me. And when I got to the Niners, I never forget it was one of those things as soon as I found out on our off day that the Niners done a whole lot of charitable work and giving back to the community here and there. I was like, man, this is a no brainer. This is the things that helped me at times when being hungry, not having a whole lot of this or that, that I want to make sure that I'm able to give back, give that helping hand back and the way it was given to me.

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Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:15:56] I love that response. It's so different when you in -- only a person who experiences adversity can really understand it. It's one thing, you know, you shared a bit about your upbringing and the challenges that your family faced, but unless you've been in those shoes, it's really hard to understand. And so I'm wondering, as you realize that you were in this spotlight, this position that very few people ever get to attain, what was the spark for what you're doing with the Whinker's Mind Foundation? Because I want to really spend some time and talk about why you're so passionate about it. And let's start there.

Patrick Willis: [00:16:44] Yes. So the spark that really started the Whinker's Mind Youth Fund Foundation was really it's something that I've always carried with me, not so much the name, but more so just understanding that fitness was that one thing that really helped me to become confident in myself. When I was growing up, I had my -- I grew up with a lot of siblings. I had a lot of siblings, had a few siblings, but I had a lot of cousins as well.

And what I noticed growing up was, excuse me, I was slightly made fun of because I wasn't the shape or the size of some of my other cousins around me or whatnot. They had abs. They had like the muscles. And I used to ask God, like, how come I don't have muscles like that? How come you gave me, you know, kind of chubby a little bit and just all the things that just being young and insecure, I suppose. I don't know what you call it when you're that young, I just know that I just felt the way I felt.

But I just remember it was a sixth grade that I just started doing pushups and I started doing sit ups and pull ups at the gym. And anywhere I could have space, I would do whatever I could to try to just, man, get some kind of muscles, get something. And so now I get to be a -- sorry. So now here I am with, Joanne, what she had told me. She said, hey, there's this event happening in Palo Alto. If you don't have anything going on, we would love for you to come by and check it out, be a part of it if you had the time. And I was just chilling at the house at the time, I was like, you know what, Joanne asks and I'm like I have to go check this out, you know?

And so I did. And I never forget seeing this fitness zone and where it was set up, what it entailed. And right then and there, it hit me that, wow, this would be something that no one could have an excuse at why they cannot get active and or stay fit. And when I say

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no one, I mean no one. Because this fitness zone, it is accessible to anyone, whether you're paraplegic, whether you're a youth, whether you are young and or old, you can get out and you can use this machine because it's a weightless machine. So you're not intimidated by seeing somebody that's do a whole lot of work. This is really just you working with your own body weight. And I'm a firm believer that you must be able to work with what you have first really well, to really be able to thrive in things that are outside yourself. And so, yeah, this fitness song was one of those things that I felt was very universal and everyone could use.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:19:55] So the foundation is a -- is this a foundation that you started or that it existed already, and you just really put your energy towards growing it?

Patrick Willis: [00:20:05] Yes. So the Whinker's Mind Youth Fund -- I'm sorry, the Whinker's Mind Youth Fund Foundation is a foundation that I started myself. But it's predicated off this fitness zone. It's pretty much predicated around this fitness zone that's accessible to all.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:20:26] So are you building these fitness zones in different places? Is that the mission of what you're doing?

Patrick Willis: [00:20:33] Yes, sir. Yes, Dr. Richards. So what I'm doing is -- so the motto behind the Whinker's Mind Youth Fund Foundation is it's about building and transforming communities where the will is to rise, and the opportunity is provided for all. And these fitness zones are primarily for underprivileged areas that need that spark, that need that outlet, that needs that plays to where, again whether you're -- I mean I just did one with, I just collaborated with a former teammate of mine, Eric Reid. Shout out Eric Reid. But him and I did one for Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where he's from.

And what I loved the most about it was, though it appears to be for handicap, I mean paraplegics, youth and also elderly, it's also accessible to the programs such as the Salvation Army was telling me that, man, we're so excited. We're already setting up programs for our alcohol and for our substance abuse program. We want to be able to have a place for them to take 30 minutes or hour to go work out. When they started talking like that, it made me smile that much more because now it's even more than just what it was about before.

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Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:22:13] So tell us about the name. The name is interesting.

Patrick Willis: [00:22:16] The Whinker's Mind? The Whinker's Mind Youth Fund. So the Whinker's Mind is something that I named myself. And what it is, it really is two words put together. And what is it? So it's two words put together and the Whinker's Mind. So in Old English, they have -- and the reason why I spell it W-H, is because in Old English, I was reading one time -- I like to read now, especially. After I retired, I started reading a whole lot more.

But I remember I was reading this Old English and they had these words from hence I come and from whence I come, and I'm like, man, what is this whence, hence? What's the origin behind it? And I learned that hence is talking about here, from here I come. And from whence, it means from where I come. And I'm a type of person that I was really studying the mind and everything around those time. I still do now. And I was like, man, what are these thoughts that I have come from? Like why do I think the way I think? Like where do they come from? And I realized that it was from here. And so I just able to take two words and put them together and just kind of go from there.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:23:41] I'd love for you to share a story, some of the coolest things that when you put these great endeavors out into the world, that there are these ripple effects, these unexpectedly amazing things that happen. Give us a story, a success story, an unexpected blessing, a gift that came out of the work you're doing.

Patrick Willis: [00:24:01] Yes, Dr. Richard. So I've only done two so far. I've done one for my hometown, and I just collaborated and done one with Eric Reid. And in both of those, what I enjoy most was after you put something, after you put up a project, then it's all about, is it going to be used, or is anyone going to use it? And I never forget, when I done my first one in my hometown, I let some hours go by. I saw some other people and then I say let me slide back through where we put it at and see if anybody is even out there using it.

And we did. I drove back past there, and I stopped. And when I stopped, I was looking out there and I saw a classmate of mine's brother and his kids out there, and they were using the machine and having a great time. And then I was just smiling. I was like let me

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just go my hand and mess around with it. And all of a sudden, I saw this young kid and his mom and their sister playing on it. And he and I had done some, we'd done some set ups on it or whatnot. He'd done some pull ups. And I was just like, let me push up. I mean, I'm going to tell you, pull ups, you can do it. And he'd done a pull up. And just so it was just knowing that you put something up and it's being used for a great cause, I mean that's more than enough.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:25:22] I love it. Patrick, our time together has flown by and I've enjoyed every second of it. I always wrap up my show by asking my guests this one question. And that is, what is your biggest helping, the one most important piece of information you'd like somebody to walk away with after hearing you and our conversation today?

Patrick Willis: [00:25:44] Yes, Dr. Richard. The biggest thing that I could probably share with anyone is just remember, as long as you're breathing, there's still opportunity to do the things that you want to do. And there are many ways to do that. So when you get discouraged, just know that like as long as you're breathing, there's still opportunity.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:26:09] I love that. Tell us where people can find out more about your foundation online and how they can contribute.

Patrick Willis: [00:26:17] Yes. If you'd like to find out more, you can go to www.thewhinkersmind.com and you can see on there the Whinker's Mind Youth Fund.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:26:28] Awesome. And for those of you who are in a fitness place right now, we've got you covered. We're going to have everything Patrick Willis in the show notes at thedailyhelping.com, including the link to the Whinker's Mind Foundation so that you can check it out and hopefully contribute. Patrick, thank you so much for coming on The Daily Helping. I have loved our discussion today.

Patrick Willis: [00:26:47] Dr. Richard, it was an honor to be on The Daily Helping. Thank you.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:26:50] Thank you so much, Patrick. And to each and every one of you who took time out of your busy day to listen to this, thank you as well. If you

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