

# The National Football League's Bill Parcells on winning, leading, and turning around teams

Interview by Ellen Fagenson-Eland

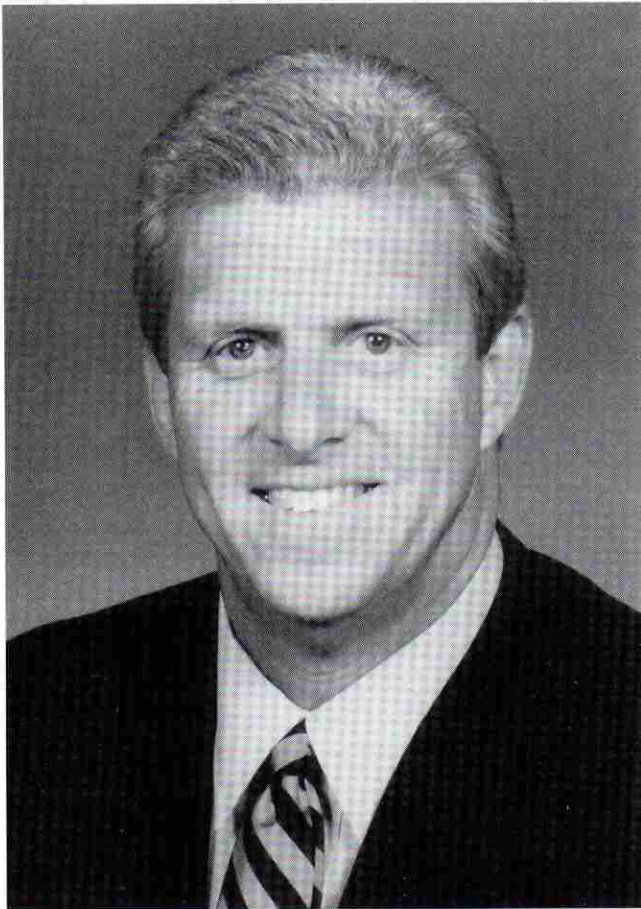
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## Executive Overview

*Bill Parcells is a football legend. He has turned around three National Football League (NFL) teams, taking two of them to the Super Bowl and one to the American Football Conference (AFC) Eastern Division Championship. A recipient of 10 Coach of the Year Awards during his NFL career (1982–2000), he is considered one of the greatest coaches of all time, and is often compared to Vince Lombardi, legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers. Parcells's winning percentage is one of the highest in the history of professional football.*

*Parcells transformed three NFL teams from losing teams to champions in record time. In eight years as head coach of the New York Giants (1983–1991), he led the Giants to Super Bowl victories in 1986 and 1990. After a two-year hiatus as a football analyst for NBC Sports, Parcells resurrected two more troubled NFL teams. As head coach of the New England Patriots (1993–1996) he took a team with a 1992 record of 2 wins and 14 losses and transformed it into a 1994 AFC playoff team with 10 wins and 6 losses. In 1996, the Patriots' record of 11 wins and 5 losses brought them to the American Football Conference Championship title and a berth in the Super Bowl. Receiving a record-breaking contract in 1997, Parcells left the Patriots to become chief football operations officer and head coach of the New York Jets, the worst team in football, with one win and 15 losses. Within a year, the Jets' record was 9 wins and 7 losses and they were in contention for the AFC Eastern Division title until the final weekend of the season. In 1998, Parcells led the Jets to their first AFC Eastern Division championship in 29 years. Parcells retired as the Jets head coach in 2000, but continued in the position of chief football operations until 2001, when he retired from football. Parcells attended college at Colgate and Wichita State, where he was a star linebacker. He was drafted by the Detroit Lions, but instead took a coaching position with Hastings College in Nebraska. He held defensive coaching jobs at Wichita State, West Point, Florida State, Vanderbilt, and Texas Tech before becoming head coach of the Air Force Academy in 1978. Parcells is the author of three books, his autobiography, *Parcells—The Biggest Giant of Them All* (1987), *Finding a Way to Win* (1995), and *The Final Season* (2000). In this interview Bill Parcells demonstrates his acumen not only as a football coach, but also as a manager and leader. His name is synonymous with winning.*

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Bill Parcells

**I'd like to start this interview by asking you about what you are clearly legendary for. You are known for being able to take teams with losing records and turn them into winners. You have done this for three teams—the New York Giants, the New England Patriots and the New York Jets. How did you do it? How did you motivate these players? What type of leadership style did you use? What are the keys to leadership and motivation in turnaround situations?**

The first thing that you have to do to turn around a team is to envision the process. When you take over a team you try to implement your management techniques, create a structure and an organization. In other words, you've got to know what you want it to look like. I think some people have problems right there because they don't really have the portrait in mind. They're just kind of going along and being a little reactive and seeing how things are. I think that, if you envision the process and have a philosophy that allows you to create or recreate that vision you have, you can sell people on it. Okay, I know

what this is supposed to look like, here's what we're going to do to try to get it to look like I want it to look. I have experience in the area and you're going to have to buy into the fact that I do know what this is supposed to look like. I've had a championship team and I know what they look like, I know what they act like, I know what they behave like, I know the price they pay, and I know how they conduct themselves and go about trying to accomplish these tasks.

I think that's a key ingredient, that you need to be able to convince people that you can see the vision in front of you and you try to direct them to see that same vision eventually.

**How do you convince people of your vision?**

**Given your reputation—when you went to coach the Jets [the team with the worst record in the National Football League before Parcells took over] it must have been easy to convince them since you were already very successful coaching the Giants and the New England Patriots. But when you started out, was it much harder?**

No, no, it's never easy, because your reputation precedes you. It did with me, and that was both a positive and negative in this respect. As my reputation preceded me, there were some people who readily accepted it. Well, here comes a guy, who will help us get better. He's going to help me be a better player and we're going to have a better team.

Others took my reputation as maybe being a little belligerent or a little caustic or a little abrasive, and they used that as their excuse for not being part of what I could bring. In other words, they didn't want to accept me, and they used my reputation as an excuse for not accepting me. They didn't want to give me a fair shot to try to implement my philosophy. They'd say, "Well, this guy's too tough. He's too this, he's too that. He's too abrasive. He practices us too hard." Anything, so that they didn't have to take responsibility for their failure. "It's him. We just don't like the way he does things."

**It's hard to imagine that you would not be accepted, given your record.**

No, it's true. Some are going to accept you and some aren't. What you have to do is figure out which ones want to try to work with you and which ones don't, as quickly as possible. You may have to live with a couple who don't want to accept you for a while until you can find someone to replace them. If you just make a blanket statement, "Okay, I'm getting rid of this group," that may temporarily hurt the group that is really

working with you, because you don't have anybody to take their place.

**You said you tell your team what it should look like. Do you spell it out and tell the team: "I want us to make it to the Super Bowl"? Or do you start with small goals?**

What I say to them is, "I want this team to play consistently to its potential." My challenge as a coach is to organize it, structure it, give the team a good enough design and the motivation to allow the team to play to its potential, as I perceive the potential to be. I'm not out there trying to please the media or what other people's perception of their potential is. I have my own idea about what that potential is, and that's the one that I'm using as the standard. In other words, I want them to play to their potential as I perceive it to be, because I think I'm a better evaluator of that potential than the layman or the media or the people outside the organization. I basically determine where we can go, and I want them to make every effort to reach their potential. And if they do, then I deem them to be successful in that year. And if they don't, regardless of what the record says, I deem them to be unsuccessful. I've had teams with winning records that I thought were unsuccessful, and I've had teams with losing records that I thought were pretty successful in terms of fulfilling their potential.

**Did you operate with a consistent managerial style as you moved between teams—from the Giants to the Patriots to the Jets? What adjustments did you make?**

There were some things that were the same and some things that changed, as I grew as a manager myself. The philosophy always stayed the same. You have to have a philosophy and try to integrate the philosophy into the organization and find people that fit into your philosophical parameters.

I would say that as a young manager I was much more confrontational, became distracted more quickly, and paid attention to things that I learned weren't quite so important. As I became more of a veteran manager, I eliminated things that I knew didn't make any difference. I wouldn't go off on tangents, I wouldn't get distracted from my goal, and I wouldn't confront people on issues that weren't important. But as a young guy I did do that.

**You mentioned that it is important to have a philosophy. What is your philosophy?**

The organizational philosophy is that I'm trying to play for a championship. This is not a business

where we have quarterly reports, or earnings are up 10 percent. This is a black-and-white business: you either win or you lose. I want to do everything I can to give my team the best chance to win, because that's the parameter we're going to be measured by, winning and losing. There isn't any gray area. There isn't any, "Well, you kind of did okay." You either won or you lost.

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So the first thing I would talk to a team about was trying to improve where they were. Most of the teams I took over were very poor from a record standpoint. I'd say to them: "Listen, we've got to improve this. This isn't acceptable. I will not accept losing. We're going to get to work, and we're going to work hard and we're going to prepare. We're going to condition ourselves and we're going to do everything we can to give ourselves the best chance to win. I'm going to try to give you a design that will allow you to do this."

As a young coach I made more mistakes than I made as an older one, but you always make mistakes; it's never mistake free. It's when you start making the same mistake five or six times in a row and you know better that you've got to hit yourself on the head and say, "Hey, wait a minute."

**You said you used the same philosophy when you coached the three different teams. What did you do differently with these teams and why?**

The landscape in the industry changed. When I first coached the Giants it was basically that you grew and developed your own players. It was very much an in-house kind of thing. You had your organization. The players didn't have freedom to move from team to team.

When I went to the Patriots, the landscape had changed because free agency [free agency allows players to sign contracts with any team] enhanced mobility. It also created a lot more transition in teams in the league and that made the job more difficult. You knew right away you were going to be confronted with attrition. Besides your natural attrition, you were going to have some contractual attrition as the years went on.

When I was coaching the Giants, there maybe would be only a 10 percent change in the roster on a yearly basis. By the time I got to the Jets, there

was a good chance that there would be a 30-percent or 40-percent change on the roster almost every year. Some of the reasons for that were the league parameters changed and the economics of the business changed.

**Is there anything else you want to add about how you turned around teams?**

I don't know anything else! Just get a philosophy, put it in place, and find the people that are willing to do it with you. Envision the process and do it as fast as you can, because patience isn't a virtue in this business.

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**In your autobiography you stated that, "When you're losing, you coach better." Why is that?**

It's because you scrutinize things more closely. You're paying attention to more and more detail, because when you're losing you're trying to give your team every little edge that you can to win. You do every little thing you can to improve them. When you get into the environment where you are losing, you want to try to change it. You put a tremendous effort into paying attention to every little thing that might do that.

**We have all watched your players think on their feet—in the midst of chaos, a successfully executed unplanned play results (like a fumble occurs and one of your players picks it up and laterals it to another player successfully). How do you get players to think logically in the midst of chaos?**

First of all, you try to anticipate. Now that involves quite a bit, because you are not only integrating your offensive and defensive systems and your special team systems, but you are also trying to educate your players during the year as to the situations that could come up in a game and how you're going to behave in those situations. You try to have the players rehearse those situations, even though there's a good chance that the situations may never occur. You're rehearsing a lot of things that you're really wasting time on, because they don't apply during the year very much. But when one of those 10 things that you prepared for comes up in a game and you are prepared and you exe-

cute it properly, it gives you, as a coach, tremendous credibility with your players because they say to themselves, "Gee whiz, he had us ready for that and we probably wouldn't have been ready." I could give you an example of that.

**Please do.**

In 1996, I was coaching the New England Patriots and we were playing the Jacksonville Jaguars in the AFC Championship game. We had rehearsed a situation for four years at training camp, usually once a week during the season. In that time the situation had never come up, but it came up, coincidentally, in the AFC Championship game right at the half. Our players knew what we were going to do, because we had rehearsed it for four years. We did it, we executed it, and we wound up getting three points out of it with about 10 seconds to go in the half.

**What was that play?**

The situation was that we had the ball on our own side of the 50-yard line. We were approximately 55 yards from the opponent's goal line, there were 20 seconds to go in the half, and we didn't have any time outs. We had a chance for basically one play and to try to get out of bounds. We had rehearsed the play we would run in that situation for four years. We executed it and it worked. We got out of bounds at the 15-yard line with about 7 seconds to go and we kicked a field goal. The players all knew that that was four years' worth of work for just one play, but it coincidentally came up at the most critical time of their careers.

**Unbelievable!**

Yes, it was unbelievable!

**In your book you talk about antagonism as a motivational technique. Do you think antagonism is good for motivating and coaching players? Can you explain this motivational technique, how often you used it, and any others you have used that you think work well?**

Sometimes I would say something to a person on purpose that I know is going to sting a little bit, but I'm not doing it to sting the person; I'm doing it to see how he reacts to the sting. In other words, a line I would use with the players would be, "You know, maybe my expectations for you as a player are higher than your own, and if they are, you and I are going to have a problem." That would be a way of telling him that I'm expecting more than

maybe he's expecting. I've said that to many players during the course of my coaching career, and several have responded, "No, coach, my expectations are much higher than yours," which is what I wanted to hear. I would then say, "Let's try to make your game such that you can get it to where you want it to go." If they said that they hadn't thought of it that way, then it gives me the opportunity to say, "Well, I think you need to elevate your expectations, because I see more potential in you than you see."

**It doesn't sound like you are being very antagonistic. You are being what we call in the management discipline, a "transformational leader"—someone who can help individuals perform beyond their own expectations.**

I think some people get offended, but if I see something in a young player I will say, "My expectations for you might be higher than yours, and if they are we're going to have a big problem."

**Do you recall which players you have said that to?**

There have been several of them: Carl Banks, Mark Bavaro, Sam Gash.

**What other motivational techniques have you used?**

First, I think motivation has to be self-starting. I don't have the ability to motivate anybody that doesn't want to do it. I think people sometimes confuse motivation with proper direction. If I'm pretty sure the player wants to do it, then I've got to guide him properly toward where he wants to go. If that's called motivation, well, it's motivation, but I don't look at it quite like that. I think that sometimes people confuse proper direction with motivation.

There have been other cases where you just have to call someone in and say, "This isn't any good. I'm not happy with it, you're not happy with it, the organization isn't happy with it. Where do you want to go from here? Do you want to go forward and upward and try to accomplish something, or do you want to just try to maintain what you're doing, because that's not going to be good enough around here for very long." That's a form of confrontation. You're not belittling the person, but you're telling him that what he's doing isn't good enough.

You have to draw a fine line between people that just don't care and those that just need direction. Some of them won't be able to express to you which

one of those things is bothering them. You're going to have to determine that yourself by watching them. If a guy is overweight, lazy and in poor condition, then I pretty much can determine that this guy doesn't really care that much about being good at what he's doing. On the other hand, if he's in tremendous condition and is a good practice player and is working very hard to get better, then I've got to think, "Well, I need to technically direct this guy better because he obviously wants to do it."

**It sounds like you really talk with each person.**

I try to talk to them, yes, absolutely. I don't think you can manage or lead from some ivory tower. I think you've got to be in the mix. You can't be sitting in the bleachers. I hear this in companies all the time, "Oh, that came down from upstairs." Well, something gets lost in the translation.

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**So, you are very hands on in your approach.**

I want to be hands on. My name's on it.

**How much input do you think an owner should have in the game?**

Since he owns the team and it's his product, I think he has a right to have as much input as he wants to have. I would not mind taking my marching orders from an owner, provided he knows what's going on. Sometimes we have new owners that come into the league, and since this is a different business than the one they've been involved in, it takes them a while to learn about this business. While they're learning, they can make a lot of mistakes that are detrimental to the organization. By the same token, there have been new owners that catch on pretty quickly, and add positive things almost immediately to the organization. Sometimes new ownership is needed to clear out some of the stagnation that exists.

**They shake things up?**

Yes. I think an owner should be giving me his marching orders. If he has a vision for what he wants, then I want to hear it. If it doesn't make sense, then I'll tell him that. If it does make sense, then you have to have the ability as a manager to say, "Hey, it's a pretty good idea. I think I need to consider it."

**How would you feel about an owner getting involved in the coaching part of the game? That's kind of your area, right?**

It depends upon how I felt about what he knows. If it was someone like Al Davis, who has been in the league and was a coach, I would certainly listen to him more readily than I would to someone who doesn't have any experience at all.

**Al Davis was a mentor to you, wasn't he?**

Yes, he was. I mentioned him because he was one of the few that was a coach and then an owner.

**In your autobiography, you wrote very fondly about the owner of the Jets, Leon Hess. It sounds like Mr. Hess used a very different leadership style with you than the leadership style you used with the Jets' players. Do you think a coach should treat players the same way the owner treats the coach?**

Mr. Hess was a wonderful man. He was very old when I went to work for him, and, as it turned out, he didn't have many years left. He gave me very distinct marching orders that people don't really know about. He told me, "Listen, I want to do everything I can do to win right now. If you've got to sign free agents—we don't have many draft choices—do it. Do whatever you've got to do, because I don't have much time left." That's what he said and we tried to do it that way.

**And you did do what he said. You quickly turned around the New York Jets from a team with one win and 15 losses to the winner of the American Football Conference East title in only two seasons. Would you say the style Mr. Hess used with you was the style you also used with your players?**

Mr. Hess used positive reinforcement with me all the time. Now, I'm not always that way with my players because that doesn't always work. You can't say, "Oh, I'm sorry, Joe, you know you dropped seven passes in a row here, but we're going to let you go drop the eighth one." I'm not doing that! I would lose credibility with my other players if I did. This is a game where you have to be able to play under pressure, and it doesn't make any difference if you know the reasons why you are failing. If you can't correct them, or have someone else correct them, then there's no place for you on the team. That's very important.

**How do you coach players, some with multi-million dollar contracts, others earning a great deal less, in a sport that demands team performance?**

I try to ignore it. I try to coach them all the same. I tell them, "At the end of the day, this game isn't about money. You're not going to remember the money you've made. The money may make you feel comfortable and it may give you a better life, but you're going to remember what you achieved in the game. The game is also about doing something collectively together. Ten years from now, nobody is going to know you even played or coached. It's all about this group of people who were thrown together and eventually bonded to form this team. How this team achieves is going to be what you remember."

**Do the players treat each other the same way you treat them? Do they ignore the salary differences?**

They play for different reasons. Some play for notoriety. Some play for the money. I want the guys who are playing to achieve. You can be playing to achieve and getting a lot of notoriety too—I don't mind that—as long as you've got a priority about achieving. Some players want to achieve because they can become superstars or icons and it brings them other things. Others want to achieve because they're competitive. As long as they're trying to accomplish what I want to accomplish, I'm with them.

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**You were the New York Jets chief football operations officer (CFOO) before you retired from football in 2001. What are the major differences between coaching and being the general manager or CFOO, and how did you like that job?**

I didn't like it that much. Once you've been on the front lines, it's hard to go back to the bunker. It's not the same, the competition isn't the same.

When I was doing both jobs, [Parcells was the head coach and chief of football operations for the Jets from 1997 until 2000] I enjoyed them because I was challenged on two levels. Just being the general manager didn't hold my interest enough. I'd rather be out fighting the battle. I don't think that's a weakness. It's just that I'd rather be down in the arena than sitting in the bleachers somewhere. That's all.

**I remember reading that you didn't think you made a very good general manager.**

Just specifically being a general manager, no. I think I was fine as long as I was involved in coaching along with it. But I was bored when I wasn't.

**What does your halftime speech in the locker room sound like when the team is doing well and when they are not doing well?**

I did very little at the half. I would say what I thought was important, but that's not when I did most of my work.

**When was it?**

I did it sometimes after the games, the next day, or the day before the games, or two days before the games, or during the course of the preparation. I tried to get my team mentally where I wanted them to be at all different times. And halftime is not usually the time you can do it.

**Was there any type of motivational speech that you would give if your team was not doing well versus when they were doing well during the game?**

Oh, sure, definitely. If we weren't doing well, I would tell them, "Hey, look, we still have time to win this game if we could pull things together here," and I would try to give them a short-term goal. "Let's just make a good drive here in the third quarter and let's see if we can change the momentum." Now there have been times when I was just disgusted with the team and I would tell them that: "How long are you going to take this beating before you start fighting back? If you just want to get beat, well, let's just go get beat. If that's what you're going to do today, let's just go do it, and just take a beating, but don't try to hide it. Admit that's what you're doing. Don't say, 'Oh, we tried hard,' or 'we played a real smart game,' when we all know we're not doing that. I'm not going to let you fool the public."

**How was that received?**

Not too well, usually!

**I can imagine! Do you think you can take a mediocre player and coach him to be great?**

Great is a very much overused word. I think you can take a mediocre player who has a lot of intangible attributes and make him play above his potential. If they are committed, dedicated, smart, anticipate well, and understand concepts, yes, I think you can do it.

**And you have. Would you say?**

With some; I've failed with others too.

**What type of loss did you find it more difficult for you and your team to recover from—a blowout or a very close loss? Why is that? Does it matter if it is a close loss to a terrible team? How difficult is it to motivate a team after a close win versus when you have "killed" your competitor?**

The psychology of results is very important in athletics and in business. There are really four things to consider:

The first is you play well and you win, or you have a great year in business and you make a lot of money. Now what you're fighting is complacency. "Hey, we're doing great. Did you see what we did? Look how great we are." You've got that fat-cat thing that you fight. Or, you play well, but you lose. "We played as good as we can play and we're just not good enough." You fight that. "We played really well, but we couldn't beat those guys anyway, so we're not good enough." Or, you play poorly, but you win. So now they say, "We can turn it on when we want to. We're just good enough, we don't have to give it the maximum effort, we can still win without trying that hard." That's what you're fighting as a coach. So you see the coach is always fighting everything. Now, here's the last one. You play poorly and you lose. Now you're demoralized. A coach has to fight all four; winning or losing, he still has to fight all four. There's negatives to all of these.

**Yes, absolutely. Any suggestions you would have to managers in these kinds of situations?**

The time you can be most critical is when you play poorly and you win, because people's sensitivity level isn't that high, because they won. They know you're not yelling and screaming because you lost the game. You won the game, but that gives you the best chance to really illustrate to them, "Hey, look, if we keep this up we have no chance to be successful. We were just lucky this time." That's

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when you can really crack down. When you play poorly and lose, and the team is demoralized, I don't want to demoralize them more. I'm going to say something like, "I know we can do better than

what we did. I know because I've seen us do better than what we just did here. I did a poor job and you guys did a poor job but we're going to do better this week, because I'm going to make sure of it."

Now if you play very well and you lose, I would try to point out the little things that turned the game, the minute details that meant the small difference. I'd tell them, "Hey, listen, if you just correct these few little things, you're going to win instead of lose." Now if you play great and you win by a big score, then I would say, "Fellas, I'm happy for you, you did everything I asked you to do, you're doing very well, but unless you keep the same kind of commitment and effort, the circus doesn't stay in town for very long." And that's what I would say there most of the time.

**It sounds difficult—to keep the team's performance at a high level.**

Yes, it is. But, it doesn't take too long in football to get knocked down. It's one of the great things about the game, someone can always knock you down! You get humility after you've been playing the game a while. You remember that feeling.

**What would you say was your greatest win?**

The two Super Bowl wins were, from an importance standpoint, great wins. But there were two other games. One was the 1990 National Football Conference Championship Game against the San Francisco 49ers. We [the Giants] had our backup quarterback playing, and the 49ers were kind of the team of the 90s and they were trying to be the first team to win three Super Bowls in a row. We had to play them in San Francisco, and we beat them 15-13. That was one of the greatest wins.

**I can see that the odds were against you.**

The other one was a Monday night game in, I believe, 1989. It was the opening game of the year in Washington, D.C. We kicked a 52-yard field goal at about midnight to beat Washington 27-24. That was, I think, one of the great wins.

**Bill, what are your short- and long-term future plans, dreams? Can you live without football? You have been quoted as saying that you can't. Do you want to continue on the executive track in sports or another field?**

That's a good question, Ellen, and I wish I could give you an answer. Right now, I've been out of work for a few months.

**How does that feel?**

It feels okay. It's a little disconcerting because I don't have places to go, things to do, or responsibilities. I've refused quite a few chances to stay busy. I've turned down some speaking engagements and things like that. I've just kind of been laying low here, but I'm going to have to find something to do eventually. What that time period is, I don't know. I don't necessarily think it'll be back in football. I'm not thinking that way right now.

**You can leave football? I ask because you once said you couldn't.**

I don't know. I think, maybe if I give myself a little time to adjust, I'll be fine. Things change very quickly in this world and three months from now, five months from now, I might feel a little differently than I do now.

**Makes sense. Bill, I want to thank you for the interview, but I also want to thank you for all the thrills you gave me when I watched you over the years.**

Oh, you're welcome. And you're very kind to say that.

**Acknowledgment**

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**Ellen Fagenson-Eland** is an associate professor at George Mason University. She received her Ph.D. from Princeton University and was a post-doctoral fellow at Columbia University. She is the *AME* executive commentaries editor, and has published on careers, leadership, and diversity. She has been an avid football fan since the age of seven, when her father took her to her first professional football game. Contact: [efagenso@som.gmu.edu](mailto:efagenso@som.gmu.edu).