

The Just Word Podcast

Transcript of Episode 14 – Life After Hockey

Pat Bolland 00:01

Ryan, great to meet you virtually. I got to say it's a real pleasure. I don't often get to talk to an ex-captain of the Habs.

Ryan Walter 00:11

Thanks, Pat, good to meet you, too.

Pat Bolland 00:13

You started your career with a bang, so to speak, you had a rough and tumble kind of style, a physical style, with the Capitals, I think for about four years, then that big blockbuster deal with the Habs. And I want to talk about all of that, obviously, but I also want to get your thoughts, if we could, on the latest run by Les Canadiens in the Stanley Cup, what do you think?

Ryan Walter 00:33

Yeah, that was a great run, it was awesome to see a Canadian team finally in the finals. But it, you know, and I think that it's always disappointing when you get to a cup final and lose. And I've experienced both of those emotions, we we lost a cup to Calgary in in 1989. And what I learned from that is just the no-brainer idea that it's a lot of expended energy. Right, it almost feels like a waste to get to a cup final and lose. On the other hand, I think it's going to be a great opportunity to mature some of the young players. It's great experience. When young players can learn not only how to play in the NHL, but also how to play in the NHL playoffs - that's a different level. That experience pays off. And and so you know, in losing they're gonna win some things

Pat Bolland 01:42

Okay, but you have to admit the strength of the team this year was an outstanding performance in net, Price was unbelievable. Is that repeatable?

Ryan Walter 01:53

Yeah, I think it is I think, Carey Price is a very mature NHL goalie right now. And is he, you know, the general manager there is going to have to decide, is he is he sort of, you know, on the top cresting and on his way down or can he continue that game? So I believe that from a goaltender point of view as long as he stays healthy that you know, a guy, a player like Carey Price will stay on his game. And so it is, you can replicate I think that type of performance. If you look at the grid, of the playoff though this year, you have to look at a my goalie - if my goal is better than your goalie, I win.

Pat Bolland 02:47

Yeah

Ryan Walter 02:48

That's the concept at the NHL level right now. And so you know both goalies in the final were really good. And the goalies, the teams that had success, even into the semi-finals. had to have good goaltending.

Pat Bolland 03:05

Yeah, that's the old Lou Lamorella style, to build from the goal out. Get yourself a good goalie, decent defenseman, and the forwards you can rotate through. It's an old style play, I guess it's kind of coming back.

Ryan Walter 03:18

Yeah, it works at every level, for sure.

Pat Bolland 03:21

You know, you had a tremendous career, including, as you point out a Stanley Cup victory, although I think you're injured for a good portion of that season, per se. What do you see as your own personal highlight in your hockey-playing career? And then I'll bring it past the hockey-playing career.

Ryan Walter 03:39

Yeah, I think Pat because I always wanted to, be portrayed and have the reality of my career be about team. That it had to be that team win. I mean, I only was able to, I broke my ankle with three games to go in that season in '86. and came back to the last five games. So I'm so thankful to have been part, a small part of that team. But I think because hockey is such a team focus that, my mind goes right away less towards, you know, me winning, whatever, whatever, and, and our team, accomplishing goals and doing stuff together. So both '86 and '89. were powerful years that that I really have focused on. The other thing that I loved about the 80's and playing in Montreal was there was so much pressure there. And so, pressure to win. And so, I learned a lot about myself in those years. And I think what's fun, Pat, is that that experience and that learning really has become what my wife Jenny and I do now from a leadership-development point of view. You know, the ... we've had to learn some lessons back then. And we're really curious from a research point of view on how to share those lessons and train people. And so it's really spawned, you know, another side, a down-the-road side, of our life also.

Pat Bolland 05:20

Okay, so I love this focus on team, because when I was in the investment industry many years ago, I only hired people who had come from a team environment. They understood everybody's role and their function within that particular team. And it applies to the business world, how have you been able to translate your team experience in hockey to your business career?

Ryan Walter 05:46

Yeah, that's, that's a great question. I think it's not as easy as athletes think, for whatever reason. It's because the cultures are different. And sometimes, I love the principles that transfer, certainly leadership, personal high-performance, team feel, culture, words, we have a couple of concepts that we hang our team stuff on, like, simple concepts around ... language creates or defines reality. So that team language is incredibly important. And, we try to have influence as leaders around that language. But what I found was that just as the Washington Capitals had a different culture than the Montreal

Canadiens, and that the Vancouver Canucks at the end of the year, my career, so do each of the teams that, are in business. And so what I found was, it's hard to take one brush, one red brush and say, 'Okay, this, this works across all team'. So I found it actually interesting, Pat, and at times a little difficult.

Pat Bolland 07:11

Yeah, I'll bet ... and walk me through an example of what you call language I, I'm not thoroughly understanding what you mean, is it the words? Or is it the feeling?

Ryan Walter 07:24

I would add, a great catch, both. It's all parts of language, obviously, body language. I'll give you a quick example where we're working with leaders these days, in a very interesting area. I have found over the years, and I'm sure you have also, that maybe by accident on purpose. So sometimes things just happen. Sometimes we're really intentional. But by accident on purpose, I have found that great cultures, and great leadership often gets defined by what we say about people when they're not in the room.

Pat Bolland 08:08

Interesting.

Ryan Walter 08:10

That is such a powerful piece, right? Because when we talk down people, when they're not in the room, what are we saying to the person that we're talking to? What's in their brain is 'I wonder if that's what he does. When I'm not in the room?'

Pat Bolland 08:34

Yeah,

Ryan Walter 08:35

And they ... right? it creates a cycle.

Pat Bolland 08:39

Yeah, okay. So I'm going to extend the conversation because I know I coached the women's hockey, young girls, my daughters, and then they grew up and, and I've coached at a high level in lacrosse for women in particular, and I found that they're very different to coach than males, for instance. And you had, or I wonder if you've had, a similar experience, because you did the Canadian National Women's team.

Ryan Walter 09:06

Yes, wonderful athletes, incredible people. I think the one difference that I noticed was that they they actually did what the coach asked them to do. They were way better at at, if you said hey, you know, go in the corner, battle for the puck, and then get the puck back to the defenseman at the blue line to get a shot on net ... for let's say, it's a drill in practice. You know, the ladies executed perfectly and they would do it the exact thing that you asked, the guys were much more, they would create things ... so okay, if

the past was open to the D, they do that or they would maybe do something different. So I loved coaching The National Women's team, brilliant athletes, amazing people. And that was a great experience.

Pat Bolland 10:07

Yeah, I'll go back though, because my experience with coaching women is that you have to kind of have structured social time, if you will, at least a looser time that they can socially interact with each other. And it goes back to your language conversation and culture, doesn't it, allowing them to have and create their own culture?

Ryan Walter 10:29

Love that idea? Totally. And the idea that, the words that we focus on, actually accelerate that cultural definition is powerful. So we're working with a lot of leaders right now. And, simple stuff, like, what words do you want to show up more in your in your culture? Is it patience? Is it? Is it, camaraderie? Is it, friendship? is it energy? Is it performance? And the words that we focus on often not only show up, but then get talked about more.

Pat Bolland 11:13

Yeah, So, I have two questions out of that, on the business side of things, how do you get your business? And I guess that we can save that. But I want to get this one out of the way, if I may, because you've got three boys as well. What's the most important lesson that you send them off in their life with?

Ryan Walter 11:34

You know, I Yeah, great question. I think that I think that, I had a chance to coach all three boys in minor hockey. And I think that those ... the driving the boys to the 5am practices in the morning. You know, it's funny about teenagers, especially, in the the best conversations we ever had with our kids, was when we were driving, because the driver is looking forward, and the passenger is looking forward. You don't have to look at each other. And you sort of talk about anything. And those were great conversations. And I think just that time, right, that alone time that, that connected time, that coaching time. You know, certainly from my perspective, they were times that I loved with our kids. I'm not sure that I have one thing, that I sort of sent them off with, I learned some lessons through hard knocks. And the one thing that that, whether I've done this, Jenny and I have done this well or not, is we've allowed our kids to experience life. And my mum and dad, let me leave home at 15 years old to play Junior hockey. And I tried to not, unless the kids asked for advice, I tried not to give too much. You know, let them experience it. If they if they run into a wall or something, I'd love to be their backup plan. And so I don't know if that's right or wrong Pat, but that's sort of what happened in our life.

Pat Bolland 13:19

Yeah, I think a lot of people go through the same kind of an experience. Now to the other part of the question the business side, if you will, how do you get your business because you know, you went from hockey and ownership in Abbotsford obviously, broadcasting was part of the equation there as well. How do you get your current business? How do people know about your motivational efforts?

Ryan Walter 13:40

Yeah, thank you, we do a lot of leadership development and a lot of coaching these days over Zoom. That's been a big transition, being going from in-person to over Zoom in the COVID environment. In a nutshell, people can go to RyanWalter.com that's probably the easiest, just quick way and I love talking to people so, I ask people to go to RyanWalter.com and just get a hold of us, contact us. And then we love to have conversations and the whole goal is how do we best add value to people?

Pat Bolland 14:23

Right, you know, and I hope they do come and visit your website and I so look forward to this conversation. But the, the other aspect of this is, of course, you went from, you know, Montreal Canadian hockey player, the A-list celebrity, if you will, to slightly lesser, do you also help former hockey players or former high-profile people move into slightly lesser roles? Is that also something that you do?

Ryan Walter 14:51

Well, that's a great question. We should do that. We don't seem to have that as, as a client focus. But that is certainly part of our experience. And that transition out of, being an athlete into being something else is, is not an easy transition. And so yeah, good, good business model by you, Pat.

Pat Bolland 15:18

We'll set up something together.

Ryan Walter 15:20

Yeah

Pat Bolland 15:20

I wonder, through all your years of playing professional hockey, how many of those guys had bad experiences moving from the professional athlete model to the non-professional athlete, if you will, and how many had great experiences, you know, if you had to ballpark a percentage, if you will,

Ryan Walter 15:38

You know, I don't, I don't have a, we should have stats on that I don't have. Maybe the NHL Alumni Association would have a better feel. I know lots of guys struggle. And, and I understand that pain of, of not transitioning, you're transitioning away from something that you've done for 20-25 years, into, something that's very new. And a lot of guys don't, they see their skills as on-ice skills instead of in-life skills. And they don't make that, don't hang on those principles at work. I think the other side, though, is, it takes a little bit of creativity, in a, I'm gonna just pick on us hockey players, hockey players point of view to, come out of the game, and then find your next passion, your next purpose in life. And so it does take time at times. And yeah, I would like to say, 80-20, 80%, don't do as well as they were hoping, but I don't know if that's an accurate percentage or ratio.

Pat Bolland 16:55

Wow. Okay. But that's actually much higher than I would have expected at 80-20. So then, for that, 80%, they might struggle. What, if you had to give one piece of good advice, I mean, creativity is one thing to say, but what would you have him do?

Ryan Walter 17:12

Yeah, that's a great, I don't know. I mean, I think there's a struggle time. Where, I guess what happened to me is I would have them try different things, I would not be afraid to go into broadcasting and see if that's something and then move on, go into business go into coaching, like try some things because I think we often come out and we get button-holed or pegged into a, you know, it's sort of like a, you know, a square peg in a round hole. You say, 'Okay, I'm a hockey player, I have to do this, I have to coach'. But you know, some people aren't built, they don't, that's not their passion. That's not their purpose. I think maybe those two words would be what, I would ask, you know, people players transitioning to focus on is, is not so much about what should you do? But how can you best help humanity?

Pat Bolland 18:14

Wow. And that kind of falls into my next question is you are a leadership coach, you are forward-looking, you are trying to help humanity in the ways that you can, but do you also keep in touch with your past, you know, those guys that were on those, all those Montreal teams or Vancouver or anywhere else?

Ryan Walter 18:34

We do ... Not as much as I'd like to, I tend to be a today-tomorrow guy, so I keep moving forward. But I've got some really good friends out of our time, in the NHL. A recent example of that would be Bobby Smith, who, Bob and I've got a long career together, we, we, played in the world juniors together, and then he was drafted number one overall, I was number two overall. We both ended up in Montreal playing there. And Bob now owns the Halifax Mooseheads in the CHL. And I'm, Bob and I are in a ... why I guess what you call a study group together. We also, I've been doing some stuff with with his executive team, so I've been doing some, sort of executive coaching. So, yeah, so it's, we do stay in touch with certain people. But you know, what's fun as one of my best friends coming out of the game of hockey is Mike Gardner, who has had a terrific career through NHL hockey. And Mike and I, it's funny how these things happen. You know, we don't get to see each other very often. He's in Ontario. We're out in British Columbia. But your friends and I'm sure you have many of these, paths where you just pick up like you spend a couple hours together and isn't it true ... all of a sudden you're, you're back to where you were and in you're advancing your friendship. So yeah, we have many people, many players that I'd love to spend more time with, and in some that, you know, are in that place of develop friendships.

Pat Bolland 20:27

Well, Ryan, let's hope that this is a developing relationship. Thank You Pat. Ryan Walter joined us ... ryanwalter.com. I think he said, Is that right Ryan?

Ryan Walter 20:38

Yeah, that's perfect.

Pat Bolland 20:40

Okay. Talk to you soon. Thanks.

Ryan Walter 20:43

Thank you.