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5 things football can teach about business

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If you want to know the similarities between Friday night lights and running a business, talk to Chuck Tabor.

The 47-year-old Mooresville resident spends his days running Tabor Roofing with his brother, Ron, and his evenings coaching high school offensive linemen.

And to him, the two are inextricably linked.

He was a star tackle and guard at Independence High School, before playing for the University of Missouri and North Carolina.

He was on the practice squads for the Dallas Cowboys and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, and then he spent two years as a team captain for the Charlotte Barons, a team in the now-defunct Minor League Football System.

Then he turned to small business. For decades, Tabor was a guy to whom struggling restaurateurs would turn to make their dwindling asset profitable again.

And in 1998, he started his own: Chucky T's Beer and BBQ in Charlotte, selling it for a handy profit four years later.

These days, he has a team of eight roofing subcontractors, dozens of Lake Norman High School football players who depend on him, and a handful of principles he lives by, both on the turf and in business world.

ShopTalk spoke with Tabor about what football taught him about entrepreneurship:

1. Connect with your community.

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Sports teams and businesses alike stand a better chance of succeeding if the community is invested in them, Tabor says.

When he played for UNC, the team would visit the children's ward of the university hospital every Friday before a home game. And as a coach, he takes his players to volunteer at soup kitchens and community clean-up efforts.

Tabor says every business should help out their local schools.

He learned that when he was marketing manager for a Sonic drive-in outside Kansas City, Mo. With a little bit of effort, he says, the restaurant became a community institution.

They decorated a corner of the restaurant with the high school's team memorabilia, and held pep rallies before home football games. They even hosted school dances. (You might remember Tate Stevens, who won Season 2 of the reality TV music competition "The X Factor." "He started by playing in a band at my Sonic," Tabor says.)

Tabor organized school field trips to the restaurant, where students could cook their own onion rings, and he had young students color on Sonic paper bags that Tabor later gave to customers.

And every day, children got free ice cream cones.

"I thought outside of the box," Tabor said. "I built a lot of regulars."

2. Engage by showing appreciation.

A critical part of building a team, whether it's on the field or in the office, is creating a sense of unity, Tabor says. And unity comes easily when all of the players – and employees – feel appreciated.

So after every win, Tabor treats his offensive line to pizza or burgers. And at work, he celebrates every birthday, even those of his subcontractors' employees.

That \$12 cake, \$3 card and a gift of \$25 in cash goes a long way, Tabor says. A mere \$50 makes them more invested in their work and in the business. And, consequently, at all of his businesses, turnover was low.

Tabor says he also shows clients his appreciation by writing thank-you cards, even for projects he just bid on.



“Who doesn’t like to be thanked, or to get a little something extra for their efforts?” Tabor says. “People appreciate it. ... You get referrals from it.”

3. Be on time. Better yet, be early.

Football players everywhere can vouch for this: Coaches hate latecomers. And they punish for it, usually with wind sprints or an equally torturous way to start practice. Many coaches will make the whole team participate – not a good way to make friends, Tabor says.

So if a coach said to be there at 8 a.m., Tabor got there at “quarter-till.”

Now he does that with his appointments as well.

Sometimes people will invite him in early, and sometimes he’ll just sit at the road in his car until the predetermined time. But either way, Tabor says, you’re eliminating a common source of frustration clients have with service-oriented industries.

“People like promptness,” Tabor said. “If you’ve got an 8 o’clock appointment, and you show up at 9, you don’t lose a job faster than anything like that.”

4. Make responsible decisions.

It was the only time Tabor had seen his dad cry.

One night after summer football practice, Tabor was driving around with two of his teammates. Then they started drinking.

Tabor was uneasy and asked them to drop him off at the nearest convenience store, where he called his dad from a pay phone. His friends made fun of him, but Tabor didn’t waver. The next morning, Tabor’s father told him his friends had been in a car accident. One died. The other was paralyzed from the waist down.

Tabor says he still thinks about that night all the time, and it helps drive many of his business decisions, too. Don’t do something just because it’s easy, he says.

Some roofing companies will do a cheaper roof than the insurance paid for, and split the difference with the customer, Tabor says. And sometimes an employee doesn’t want to go through the hassle of strapping on a safety harness before climbing onto a roof.

But Tabor says he won’t settle for shortcuts; that’s how people die. That’s how some go to prison. “We’re going to go through protocol,” he says. “It’s not worth a little bit of money to get in big trouble.”

5. Push for perfection.

Every football coach has an arsenal of clichés to pull out for pep talks at critical junctures: “Go the extra mile.” “It’s not over till it’s over.” Never give up.” But those mantras are worth repeating as an entrepreneur, Tabor says, because there’s more than a game – and pride – on the line; your business is your livelihood.

Tabor says one of the best business decisions he ever made illustrates the value of a little extra effort.

It was 1998, soon after he opened Chucky T's Beer and BBQ on Old Pineville Road. Tabor was greeting a table of four 40-something women, when he noticed one was in an especially bad mood.

"Are you all right?" Tabor asked her.

"Not really," she replied. She'd had her heart set on crab legs, but a nearby restaurant had run out. The service was poor, so they left and came to Chucky T's.

Tabor brought her a drink, on the house, and then called the business next door and asked the chef to make an order of crab legs.

When he brought the ladies' orders out, the angry woman was dumbfounded.

"She said, 'How did you do this? Crab legs aren't on the menu,'" Tabor recalls.

His reply: "I went and got them for you."

That lady was a loyal customer for years, always bringing friends and always recounting the crab-legs story, Tabor says.

"Just going that extra little bit, spending \$40 to turn a lady's day around" can make a big difference in your business, Tabor says.

"You always have to set yourself apart from everyone if you want to be on top. Never be satisfied with average. ... Push for perfection."

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