

Episode 1: What's Next Podcast

Willen Sin

[Snip-it's from Podcast] WILLEN: And it definitely was difficult because I think there is that, you know, that's stargazing, period. When you see folks, you're like, oh my God, I've idolized you. Back in the day, it was like Mike Barrett's, Antonio Harvey, Bill Schonely. I mean, they were just walking around the office like it was their day to day job. And I was like, oh, my God, I've, I've watched you on TV for years and years and years on the radio, whatever the case maybe and heard people talk about you. And here I am standing in that same kitchen, getting coffee, you know. And so a part of me is trying to...

[Bouncy theme music plays.]

[INTRODUCTION] Welcome to the What's Next? podcast. Let me just start off by saying. Not everyone has the same background. There is no roadmap for success. Life begins at the edge of your comfort zone. Leaning into your curiosities. It does suck when you grow up. We're all still figuring out who we are. You can't just sit back and be silent. Black Lives Matter. It's the little stuff that makes the biggest difference. Do you have another hour? [Laughs]

[Bouncy theme music plays.]

CODY: Hello, Beaver Nation, welcome to the What's the Next? podcast.

A new podcast by OSU Next. An alumni group focused on helping young alums stay connected to Oregon State as well as foster new connections. As we all figure out, the new normal, navigate the real world, careers, finances and all that comes along with those things.

I'm your host, Cody Stover. And while we usually host in-person networking, speaker and social events, I'm excited to be joined today by our first ever guest on the What's

Next podcast? as we, along with the rest of the world, have moved our content onto the digital space.

Our guest today is a 2013 OSU grad with degrees in marketing and international business. He was a Blazers fan growing up and turned his love for Rip City into a career now working in game operations for the Trailblazers organization. Without further ado, Willen Sin, thanks for being our guinea pig and first ever guest on the What's Next pod.

WILLEN: Thanks for having me, Cody. I'm always on board to be a guinea pig.

CODY: Hey, listeners. Cody, jumping in here real quick as Willen shares about the Trailblazers 2020 season being shut down due to COVID19. I just wanted to share that this episode was actually recorded in late May. And so at that time, we didn't know about the MBA's plan to restart in Orlando at the end of July. Just wanted to give you that context and timeline. Now let's get back to the interview.

CODY: How's everything going? I know, um, its, part of the question you're getting most right now, but seasons on, on pause. How's everything in your world?

WILLEN: Yeah, I mean, it's, it's a very different. You know, I don't think anyone expected this. No one could ever really say, hey, this is how life was going to be. You know, I was going a hundred miles an hour. It was games and the season was in you know, in full flex and we were trying to go for the playoffs and then it just came to a screeching halt. Um, and everything kind of just stopped. So for us, you know, it is May so it was kind of like an early off season. So we're just preparing for next season. But obviously a lot of unknowns. So we're just trying to take it day by day. Stick to the science and facts and hope that basketball and sports in general come back soon.

CODY: Yeah, definitely. And I'm guessing you've been living the work from home life as most of the world has.

WILLEN: Yes, I have, I have, I have living the work from home life.

And, you know, it's, it's not easy to adjust to because my life was very much nightlife and not in the fun. In regards of going out, it was more so just working the games and being at the Moda Center. And that was my second home. So being home 24/7 is definitely an adjustment.

CODY: I want to go more into your experience with the Blazers, but I thought first we'd start somewhere I think that probably many of our listeners have common ground on. And that's your time at OSU. So if I'm correct, you were at OSU from 2009 to 2013.

Is that that is correct? That is correct.

CODY: OK.

And so I want to quickly go back just for some context. What, what kind of brought you to OSU in the first place?

WILLEN: You know, I wish there was some sexy story to that, but the reason I went to Oregon State was a lot of my cousins and family went to Oregon State and I knew I was going to stay local.

You know, I grew up in the Pacific Northwest. I grew up here and didn't want to go too far. And I applied for U of O, OSU and PSU. Those were three colleges I applied for and at that time, I didn't risk. So I didn't know I was going to get in sports. I just knew I was going down the business path and I did campus tours like any other senior high school, as you know. Just to get an idea. And I visited Eugene first and I have nothing against U of O and the campus. I just absolutely did not like Eugene. [**CODY:** Haha – laughing] I mean, I just the, the vibe. The... I mean, I just, there was just something that my gut was saying, like, this is not the place for you. And then I visited Corvallis and I was like, okay this is more like home. I could see myself being here for four years and going here. And absolutely loved it. It was true. I mean, the campus was beautiful. The city was beautiful. And I just I just felt more comfortable. And obviously, PSU is PSU and nothing against them, but that's why it just, it just kind of was steered. And I had some obviously family pressure that was like I mean, everyone else around say, why can't you go to Oregon State as well. So it kind of just worked out that way.

CODY: I actually had a similar story. I toured U of O and Oregon State and I was a third generation beaver. I'm actually fourth generation. At that time that was potentially going to be that. And I remember we toured U of O and my dad said, you know, this is great. I won't, won't blame you if you go here. But I just, you know, I might not visit you that often. [**WILLEN:** Laughing]

But, you know it, I ended up going to OSU. So it all worked.

WILLEN: I never got that from the family. It was always just, I mean, that's, that's funny though.

That's you know, I mean, even to this day, I think even when I've gone down to Eugene for football games, it's still the same vibe. [**CODY:** Yeah]

I'm just like, yeah, this has not changed one bit. [**CODY:** Uh-huh] And again, I mean, nothing, nothing to the Ducks. [**CODY:** No, no it's a fun rivalry.] I consider myself... Yeah, exactly. It's a fun rivalry, but I'll always cheer, you know, against the Beavers. I'll cheer for state of Oregon. Right. If the state of Oregon does well, then we all do well.

CODY: Exactly. And I think my dad was joking as well. [**WILLEN:** Laughing] But he, he was a he was born in Corvallis, so who knows.

WILLEN: Well, that's true. That's a true, a true one right there.

CODY: OK. So you came to Oregon State and actually the first time I met you was I know you were involved with SIFE, which later which was students in free enterprise, which later rebranded to ENACTUS..

I wanted to just get a quick overview of how was it being involved with that and how did that kind of shape you as you figured out your business career?

WILLEN: Yeah. I mean, I was super involved in high school and business clubs. And so when I got to college, I knew that was kind of the second tier, you know, of being what,

what was next. And SIFE was kind of that entrepreneurship club that was very similar to FBLA, which was what I was in high school. And I've always been a big believer in extra extracurricular activities. My parents have always taught me that it's not going to be about the textbooks, it's not going to be about the classroom settings. That's going to set you apart from other students. It's about what to do extra, what you do differently. And so being a part of those clubs significantly, I would say shaped who I am as an individual, professionally and personally, because you develop all these soft skills that I think that people don't really take into account when you grow up into the big world.

So, yeah, there's, there's all the technical skills, but soft skills, I think, especially in today's day and age, is so important how you interact with people, professionalism, handshakes, posture, body language, all that stuff was through these professional settings. Right. Being around corporate executives, doing presentations, interacting with co-workers and collaborating with teammates. I mean, all those things are crucial to your day to day when you actually establish a career, you know, and, and it's better to learn that stuff early. I think personally than later, because sometimes the biggest opportunities are missed. You know, when you when you're and you develop late in those in those skills.

CODY: Yeah, that's great. And I also using that as a segue, I saw that you also spent some time studying abroad. Where did you go and, and what did you kind of take from that experience or why did you decide to, to dive into that?

WILLEN: Yeah. So I went to Hong Kong for my study abroad program. And I and I think I knew, you know, pretty much when I was a freshman sophomore that I wanted to do that just because I, I'm a travel bug. You know, I love to travel, but I knew that it was important to understand different cultures and different backgrounds because, you know, this world is getting smaller and smaller with, you know, like we talking about right now with digital and more so down the future and how people stay connected. And, and not everyone has the same background. You know, not everyone works the same way. And I think being able to see different people's backgrounds and their experiences and their education just widens my knowledge and my wisdom about people, about the world and how we can do things differently, because I think it's important to provide different perspective.

Whether it's an idea, anything that we try to innovate, you know, specifically with my job or any job in that matter. [CODY: Yeah.] It's important that you provide what's especially with all the diversity, inclusion, you know, work that everyone's like companies are doing now.

It's so important just to learn that. And again, that's something that people just say, hey, this is how Hong Kong does or this is how Austria does it. This is how Japan does it. Like, you have to live and breathe it to really see it and get it, get it, get a better understanding of it.

CODY: Mhm. Yeah. And I'm, I'm a big Blazer's fan and big NBA fan, and it just seems like I just actually finished watching the Last Dance documentary - Michael Jordan, Chicago Bulls - and it's just like apparent. How global the NBA and teams and players have all gotten in in the last, you know, decades. And so that that seems like that would be an incredibly valuable experience to have in college and then as you transition into career.

WILLEN: Yeah, I would definitely recommend it if anyone's ever on the fence. I mean, yes, I think other people might say it's expensive or might not have the funds do it I get it but figured out, you know, because I think you being in college, it's a perfect opportunity, right? Not saying that people don't have responsibilities, but it's the biggest opportunity to get away not feel like you have to be tied down anything. And who knows who you're going to meet, you know. The connections and network that you meet internationally are huge. I still talk to some of my colleagues that I went to school with that are all around the world today, [CODY: Yeah.] because of those relationships that we built back then and who knows what kind of opportunities come from that down the road.

CODY: Mhm. That's great. OK. Last thing on the OSU front before we dive into more trailblazers stuff. I also saw your final year, OSU you got involved with KBVR and the Beaver News as a news anchor, is that correct?

WILLEN: Yes, I was a news anchor.

CODY: What, what prompted that? Why did you give the broadcasting side a try?

WILLEN: Yeah. Yeah, you know, I mean, that's you really you're digging down in my resume. I don't even really remember much of. But I appreciate it.

Ummm... It, it you know, it was I've always been like I said before previously, I'm a big explorer. I like to try new things and I'm never going to say no to an opportunity. And I felt like this was another thing that just try to see how I would do. And again I was still trying to figure out who I was, you know I, I was in marketing. I was in business. But that was so vague, you know. Coming from education standpoint, I was still trying to figure out what I wanted to do in my career, what worked, what's, what didn't work, what I was good at, what I wasn't, you know, and I had friends and family say, oh, you should give this a try.

And I literally just stumbled across a flyer, you know, a walk in the MU, and I saw that. And I wouldn't have thought of it. I didn't see it. But then you kind of go, OK, well, why did I come across this and why did I stop, you know, this one time? And it literally didn't even cross my mind the first, first two years of college. And then they held auditions and I did it and they said, let's give you a go [**CODY:** Yeah.] and I said, yeah, let's do it. And it was it was a super fun experience. And I just I think I was just trying to one puff up my résumé from a personal standpoint, but I just needed something new to do. I was trying something around and it was a good time. You know, obviously hasn't fostered what I did, but it was a great experience. I learned a lot from it. And it's, it's fun to think back about what I did because there's definitely some terrible videos that I would personally would not recommend you look but I'm sure they exist somewhere.

CODY [Chuckling]: They're probably on the KBVR YouTube archive.

WILLEN: Which is terrible because it's been eight, eight, nine years. [**CODY:** Soft chuckle] So they should archive that stuff. It's terrible. So, yeah. But, you know, it's and that's what it is. That's college. You're trying new things. And I would recommend that to any student. Just, just step outside your comfort zone.

CODY: Yeah, that's great.

It makes me think back to I took a soil science class at Oregon State, I think my junior year, and I was on the business marketing track as well. And I had just had this. I loved the class. I had no idea I was going to love the class. And I was on this kick where I almost switch and did a minor in soil science. I still sometimes wish I would have, but I think to anyone listening who is kind of maybe a student or who's a young alum who's figuring out, you know, what do I want to do next? At least for me and it sounds like for you to Willen like those experiences can't hurt you, you might as well try it out. You might as well try something new.

And if anything, you'll probably see it pop up later in life is something that you can relate to with someone or, or something else.

WILLEN: Yeah, I'll, I'll second that for sure, Cody, because if there's anything that people always go through experiences is everyone tries to look for things they like.

But it's OK to try new things and not like it because guess what, you learned a valuable lesson and some of that you know for sure you don't want to do so you're not going to waste your time. Not necessarily waste your time but but know that you won't go down that path down the road right? You bet it's easier to learn that when you're young than when you're older.

[Bouncy theme music plays.]

CODY: Hey listeners, sorry for the quick interruption here. The What's Next podcast is brought to you by OSU NEXT, an alumni network in partnership with the OSU Alumni Association. One way to stay connected with OSU is through the Beaver Lodge. It's online hub, for bringing Beavers together from around the world. That's over 200,000 advocates, professionals and lifelong learners. Plus, the latest OSU events, news and activities. Sign up today by visiting osualum.com/BeaverLodge. Alright, let's get back to it.

[Bouncy theme music plays.]

CODY: Ok, I lied. We have one last OSU segment before we transition over. We're calling this segment back in my day. So when I was on campus at OSU, we had cranes all over the place. I think there was fifteen plus buildings that went up on campus. So we're kicking this back. And maybe you've heard a relative or older colleague say this, you know, back in my day, but we want to hear from you back in your day Willen, what was your go to spot at OSU or Corvallis or what's the biggest change that you notice when you come back?

WILLEN: Oh, man, go to spot. I mean it depends on the day and the time.

I can't. I wish Monroe was everywhere. I mean, I'm like the ease of going just walking down the street and having, you know, four or five options that you could just ease yourself into and know that you're, you're probably going to run to a colleague or a peer or friend is something that's so underappreciated when you're in college. I mean, because you can you can walk campus all day and never run into a friend. But if you're on Monroe or you know at Reser stadium, you knew the fact that you could run into someone. It was just such a warm feeling because it's it does suck when you grow up and, you know, all your friends are now not even that far away, but it's just it's just harder, right. And so some of the best memories and spontaneous experiences happened because you saw someone at Dutch Brothers hanging out and then all of a sudden you both had nothing going on. And then you go on this ridiculous adventure, whatever it is, right. Even if it is going back to a house or having a great game night or whatever the case may be.

Some of the best memories are from, from that street. So not that Monroe's changed a lot, you know, I had a few restaurants come and go during my time there. But when I was on campus, it was different. Like, I, I had Panda Express. I use all those Carl's Jr. coupons [**CODY:** Oh, yeah.] on the back of football tickets left and right. So, you know, you say back in my day. But who knows? I hope that's still thing. And that's how, that's how I survived, [**CODY:** Uh-huh] man. I mean, those three dollar, three ninety-nine famous stars were [**CODY:** Yeah] super legit and super convenient to, you know, grab and go. But I mean, one in my last year, like you, I wouldn't say 15 buildings, but all the rec centers were being renovated. So I was I was more bitter, honestly. I was like, I

can't, and I can't experience this. This is all going to be done when I'm gone. Like, look how cool this place is. And but again, super happy for all the future beavers.

CODY: Yeah. Did you get one year in Austin Hall or were you. Did you miss Austin Hall as the new business building?

WILLEN: I missed Austin Hall.

CODY: Oh

WILLEN: It literally opened the next year after I graduated.

CODY: You were a Bexell guy.

WILLEN: I was a Bexell guy, man. And you know, you know, you say back in the day. But I mean, Bexell is Bexell and I hope that that building lives forever [**CODY:** Yeah] because I know that there is some history in the making for Oregon State right there. But I've been back to Austin Hall and oh my goodness, they the students nowadays don't have, they have no idea how good they have it [**CODY:** Yeah.] in that building.

CODY: It's a great, great step though. I mean, like, if you're us. I'm imagining my, my 18-year-old self coming to visit OSU and walking through that Austin Hall and I mean it, that that would be the inspiration to just be like, all right, I'm going here.

WILLEN: Which was our Weatherford for us. Right. [**CODY:** Yeah] During my time. [**CODY:** True] So when I started, Weatherford was the icon of the College of Business. And again, it was it was it was it's a ridiculous storm. Beautiful inside and out. And it still is. And it and it's just it's all shifted, which is great, you know, for, for the greater good because Austin Hall [**CODY:** Yeah] is a masterpiece.

CODY: That's awesome. Yeah. And I think one thing I would add to that, to your point about Monroe Street and just like the high odds you have of running into somebody.

I think when I moved up to the Portland area, I assumed, oh, if I'm gonna be living in Hillsboro and I've got buddies who are gonna be living now in Gresham, you know, we'll probably run into each other all the time. We're both moving up there. And then you realize there's hundreds of thousands of people, even millions of people. And you do kind of take for granted the fact that you could walk down Monroe or walk across campus and your odds are pretty good of running into somebody and saying hello. Whereas you have a little bit of a transition to move to a bigger metropolitan area.

WILLEN: Yeah. Odds are slim up in Portland.

CODY: Ok. So to wrap that segment, we're gonna kick it over real quick here to one more segment before we dive into the full Blazer's rundown. Which we're excited to dive into. But this one is called 'Welcome to the Real World.' So as you transition Willen from being a college student to life after college, we want to ask all of our guests, what was your welcome to the real world moment?

WILLEN: [Exhaling] I mean not, not finding a job. Honestly, I was I was stressed, man. I graduated and I'm not going to dive into to the specifics because I know you're probably going to ask more questions, more. But, I mean, I was I was unemployed for two, three months after I graduated. And I was like, so this is it. I mean I mean. I, I thought I was pretty qualified coming out of college and not be able to find a job after how involved I was and the experience I was bringing, I was like, this is gonna be tough, you know? And. Again, it was. I'm not saying it was good, but it was like to have, you know, other colleagues and peers going through the same troubles, it was kind of refreshing. But still, you could kind of sit back and going, like, what did I do wrong? Did I, Did I go? And you start questioning yourself. And so that that that was probably one was probably the peak of the moments about welcome to the real world. But I will say that everyone has to go through that moment. It's a, it's a, it's a, it's a test of grit and grind, because it's really and it's really an experience that you've got to go through and then learn to appreciate when you do have an opportunity to work and have a job and stay out and say employed and, you know, have a salary and that kind of stuff. That stuff, you know, you take for granted when you're in college because it just seems kind of hunky dory and you're just having a good time. And getting out and being, like not having an idea or a plan or not knowing what's, you know, what's next to come. There's no there's no you

know, you can set up an advisor meeting. [**CODY:** Yeah.] You know, to talk to whoever to kind of plan out your life, you know, so. [**CODY:** Right.] You kind of have to figure it out yourself.

CODY: And I think to anyone listening to whose, who is just coming out of college or who's in between jobs right now, I think that we want to express to that that's normal.

I think in the moment you might like, like you said, Willen, and you might go from the high of, oh, my gosh, I'm graduating. I'm finally doing this whole thing. And then suddenly there's no game plan or there's not a game plan that's readily making itself apparent. So you're not alone. Those are our situations that we've all been in. [**WILLEN:** Yep]

CODY: OK. So let's dive in to the Portland Trailblazers.

I think a lot of us who grew up in Oregon, Blazers fans or those who have come from other states have become Blazers fans. It's a big organization. And, you know, for a lot of us, I think, thinking about that job at the Portland Trailblazers sounds like something that would be a dream come true for a lot of people. And especially coming out of college or being a young alum.

That's one of those organizations, especially in the Portland area, that a lot of people would love to get involved with. So I'm interested to hear a little bit about your journey, but I want to first just hear a little background on, on you as a as a Blazers Am I adequate to say super fan or how, how did how did you grow up? How did you know that before college? Before the career. What was the Blazers to you?

WILLEN: Growing up, I wasn't really exposed to sports. It was very much education in my household. So it wasn't until probably high school when my friends started really talking about the Blazers. And then once, because I think I was deprived of it for so long that, like my quote unquote, addiction was higher when I finally latched on. And so I played basketball for fun and then really kind of growing then, then kind of watching basketball in my high school high school days. That's when the, the, the itch was there.

And then and it just kind of it was just an incline from them from there til now. And so high school all the way through college and try to watch every single game that I could. I was a huge fan of the team and have been, been win or lose, you know, whatever the record is. And I was the guy that, you know, if there was a game on, I probably wanted to stay home and watch the game with friends and family. And if they lost, then my friends knew not to talk to me because I'd be pissed the next day. If they won, then I was I was for the life of the party. So my mood swings were very much predicated on whether or not the Blazers did well or not. So you say super fan, but I know there's other people that are probably more dedicated and excited than I am. I'm not, you know, collecting memorabilia left and right, you know, that kind of stuff when I was younger but I definitely try to be a loyal fan and cheer them on when I could. There were some ridiculous games and playoff runs during those times.

And it was, it was, it was a joy. And so that's that was kind of the joke in college. I was like, be so awesome work for the Blazers. But I also was a kid that just was like dreaming of that [**CODY:** Mhm] and didn't even think was a possibility.

CODY: Did you have a back in the high school years, you said when you started following, did you have a favorite player at that time?

WILLEN: I wouldn't say I had a favorite player at that time because Brandon Roy, kind of stuck to my heart when he came to the Blazers and, you know, that was kind of a middle ground of, of, of high school going into college. So I'd say, Brandon Roy was probably my favorite player and probably still is. The guy was just unbelievable. And, you know, a Pacific Northwest, guy can't you can't go wrong with that, you know. So.

CODY: OK, so you go from high school to college and then start to get to the end of college, moving towards career stuff. How did you get on the Blazers radar in and actually land the first job with the organization?

WILLEN: Yeah. So I wish there was some secret formula to that, but I just applied. Right. I was like I said before, I was unemployed for two, three months after I graduated and realized that I was at a point where I needed to start from ground zero. So I literally Googled Portland internships and the place the Blazers internship was the first option. It

was the first thing that I saw, and I was like, oh, my goodness, like I would have never thought to apply here.

Like what? What am I going to do? And how? And it's very naive now to say that back then I just thought it was like the players, the coaches, ball boys [CODY: Mhm] and a few ticket sales people. And now I know that there is so much more to an NBA team than those three or four jobs. [CODY: Right.] But I was just naive to it. I knew I had no idea. And so I applied for all the internships. And so I actually applied for three internships when I first saw the link. So I applied for the marketing internship, a group sales internship and a community internship. And so time passes and I slowly get rejected one by one by those, by those postings. And it wasn't until somehow, like two, three weeks later, they posted another one that I got a notification for that was a corporate partnership internship. And I was deflated. I was like, man, they're going to hire me. Like, why should I? Why should I even try?

Something pushed me and willed me to you know, just submit it man. Just press the button, you know. And so I did. And then thankfully I got, got a response that they wanted to bring me in for an interview. And so prior to that, though, during this whole phase of applying for, for Blazer's, I was just a kid trying to make an impression. And so at the time they had a trailblazers H.R. Twitter account And I just liked every single posting they had. Hoping that they would like catch my eye. Not that like me liking a post does anything, but, you know, whatever the case may be. I just was like, this is the Trailblazers HR account. Hopefully the person that's managing this account hires all the jobs. And, you know, it was such a naive, unique way to think about it.

But you know that story for another time in regards. But what it is, was I got, got the got the interview obviously studied all night about Blazers history and all this stuff [CODY: Uh-huh] and didn't get much sleep the night before. And got into the interview and, you know, just in my mind, I think I killed it. You know, they ask some questions. I answered like I would and tried to impress them. And they actually hired me on the spot. They, they said you said you're hired and you're this is great. And so that's, that's how I got started. That's, that's how I got into, got to the Blazers.

CODY: That's amazing. What, what was the feeling like when they, they said, yeah. You got you got the gig. [**WILLEN:** Ahh, man.] What was it that was a real or you kind of like taking that in?

WILLEN: I was taking it in and I thought she was kidding at first because I wouldn't everything that someone would hire someone on the spot. You just don't comprehend that. You always feel like there's an interview, there's a callback. They have to discuss it to assess all the applicants, that kind of stuff. And maybe I brought it out to be a bigger picture than it needed to be. But it was like, yeah, yeah, this is great. And so the funny story about that was the offer to me. And they said it handle all the paperwork and that kind of stuff and they get back to me in like two or three weeks or hear back from someone because the season hadn't started yet. I mean, we were interviewing in September and they don't need me till like beginning October. And so, like, two weeks I didn't two, three weeks. I didn't hear anything. And I was like, oh, I just I just got I just like was like telling myself, dang it, you just got screwed. Like, they probably found someone else. Like I was losing sleep. I was like, they probably found someone else.

No, they're not calling you back. Like I call them the person I talked to. And she didn't respond me, I think. And she said she eventually got back to me, but she was like, oh, I was out of town or I was on vacation or busy, whatever. [**CODY:** Yeah, something normal.] Yeah, something normal but you're as a as a naive college kid, you just picturing all these terrible scenarios [**CODY:** Every hour. You don't hear something is.]

Oh yeah, I was [**CODY:** more things are going wrong.] Exactly. And then.

But I again I was just like I was nervous and then like questioning myself. I'm like, oh wow. Their totally just going to leave me in the dark like. But it worked out so.

CODY: Ok. So you get this fantastic gig. And how, how do things start as you dive in, are they what you expected or is there a learning curve or how is it all go?

WILLEN: Yeah, it's a huge learning curve. I mean, I don't know a thing about corporate partnerships. Right. And in that retrospect, I think my qualifications for what I did

college, did translate over. But I mean, I was new. I didn't I didn't know any better. You know, you just kind of day by day, you, you just take the task.

But I will say the first task, and I'll never forget this, that it was my first day. And for, for adamant Blazer fans you know, about the chalupa [CODY: Oh yeah] promotion.

[CODY: Uh-huh] So when you get a hundred points, you get a free chalupa. And this was the year when they just were done. So it was it was the season ended. Taco Bell had left as a sponsor. And my manager goes, hey, I know this is I'm not saying every single tasking to be like this, but I just need you to help with something. I need you to shred all of these boxes. And I mean, there's like twenty five of them and they're just like, you know, kind of miniature standard kind of coupon boxes. And I'm like, I don't know, what this is but sure. So I open them up and there are just hundreds of thousands of chalupa [CODY: Oh my goodness.] coupons. So free chalupa, free chalupa, free chalupa.

I'm like. Oh, my goodness. Like a part of me as a fan was like, I cannot shred these, like I have to sell these or I have to go use them for myself. [CODY: uh-huh, laughing]

But obviously, I didn't. But I am shredding like literally hundreds of thousands of chalupa coupons. And it was it was, it was a devastating thing. But obviously, it needed to be done. But a part of me was the fan inside and he was geeking out, was like, I have so much power with me right now. [CODY: Uh-huh] But no one else really cared [CODY: Uh-huh] and probably felt the same sense that I did. But that was my first assignment as an intern.

And obviously, as time went by, I was learning, you know, the job and kind of figuring out what the world of sports is, because, you know, the way you see sports from a fan perspective is completely different from a business side. And so it was it was an adjustment period for me to just even calm down a little bit, because, I mean, one of the biggest things that we share in sports is you're not there to be a sports fan. You're there to be an employee. You're there to show your passion about the work that you do and get the job done.

And it definitely was difficult because I think there is that you that's stargazing period. [CODY: Mhm] When you see folks, you're like, oh, my God, I've idolized you. And back in the day, it was like Mike Barrett's, Antonio Harvey, Bill Schonely. I mean, they were just walking around the office like it was their day to day job. And I was like, oh, my God, I've, I've watched you on TV for years and years and years on the radio, whatever the case maybe and heard people talk about you. And here I am standing in that same kitchen, getting coffee, you know.

And so a part of me trying to keep that professional side, you know. If you walk, you know, walk that fine line of being professional and not being a super fan, I think was really important my intern year which some people aren't good at. I mean, they just don't know how to control their emotions and especially with social media during that time, it was like, let's take a selfie or let's take photos. And I was like, I don't do any of that stuff. But I definitely has interns do that. And I think that might have hurt their chances in the long term because you never know when people are watching.

CODY: Right. I just wanted to add to. Are we safe to say that you were possibly the last person to ever touch a Trailblazers Chalupa coupon?

WILLEN: [Laughing] I mean in the office, probably, but I'm sure there's plenty of fans that have kept their coupons over the years and then have them framed somewhere on the wall [CODY: Haha, that's true] [Laughing]

CODY: Ok, great. So... Start out in corporate partnerships. And that brings us to what? 2014/15, somewhere in there? That that's the first gig out of college then?

WILLEN: Yeah. [CODY: Mhm] So my first season was 2013/2014 [CODY: Okay.] And that was the year that Dam hit the game winning [CODY: Oh yeah] against the Rockets. So that was my first year as an intern.

CODY: Ok. And then so how. And now your current title is game operations and event manager. Is that correct?

WILLEN: That is correct.

CODY: OK. So what's what was kind of like the trajectory then moving your way up and continuing to grow in the organization? What did you kind of find things that you liked and didn't like and then kind of say, hey, I want to go this direction or that direction? Or how did you figure things out from there and decide what path you wanted to go on?

WILLEN: Yeah. So, I mean, it's interesting you talk about path. I think it, it really very varies for a lot of people. For me, core partnership and game ops actually has a lot of similar traits to it and responsibilities more so than when I was in partnerships when you're looking for, assets, you know, to sell in arena to help engage the brand, that kind of stuff, and then game ops just helps execute it on the court, wherever the case may be, concord's, et cetera. So it was kind of this perfect match where it just blended in a hybrid role because I was doing the partnership side and I'd done that for about four, four seasons and I was like, OK, what's, what's next? All right. And our president, Chris McGowan, always says, hey, if you if you want to do this business right and you want to learn, you have to step outside your comfort zone [**CODY:** Mhm] and step outside, learn about what other departments do. And so I'd always I'd marketing one because marketing was my degree and I was like, okay I could see myself being in that department. Just expand my knowledge, learn a little more, because in the partnership world, I was helping, you know, the partnership side. But then sales was that kind of next step. And I wasn't really intrigued in sales.

That's not something that I wanted to do. And so when the opportunity of game operations, which falls under the marketing department, I felt like it was an opportunity for me to just kind of expand my role and learn a little bit, because to some extent I don't know if it was necessarily a upscale promotion when I moved over to the game operations. It's definitely more of a parallel jump. But I learned a completely different side of the business. To me, you know, I'm not about promotions. For me, it's just about learning the business, expanding my knowledge and learning as much as I can. And so making that jump was a great opportunity because now I can see both sides of it. So I know the arena side and the partnership side and that kind of blend has helped me even just be more pivotal in certain conversations, because when partners come to us and say we want to do X, Y and Z, I have the idea and the knowledge say, you know, that's I get where you're coming from. But this is where game ops comes from. And

that's really kind of helped shape my role in being able to be a facilitator to some extent.
[CODY: Mhm]

CODY: You said that it's not about the promotions. It was about going outside your comfort zone and learning. Do you think that that's kind of an essential mindset to anybody who's who maybe you, you want to grow and you want to move up and you want to see yourself at X, Y, Z position in 10 years? But is that kind of an unhealthy way to approach every position of like I want to get to the next one? I want to get to the next one?

WILLEN: Yeah, I wouldn't. I personally, that's my take. I don't think it works for everyone. And I think everyone's different in their own career path because I think certain roles and certain companies require you to do that, to be a little more aggressive, to just say that you want to stand out and get promotions. Every company has a different culture. But yes, for me, I preach what I, you know, what I'm trying to do. In that regard it is that important to have that mindset, because especially in this. You know, and I'm a millennial, you know, we hear things about generational gaps and GenZ and different things like that. Specific to millennials you know, people say at least, you know, experts, they're saying like we're, we're too needy. You know, we have complacent. We just expect everything to be handed to us.

And so I've always told when I have these conversations with, you know with my peers, whatever the case may be, we're not working with millennials. You have to you have to adjust your mindset and your behaviors to the managers and the bosses and the executives of their, of their judgment and how they express their thoughts. And so they don't look at someone go, oh, my gosh, you keep asking for a promotion or raise or X, Y and Z. That's not how I did it. So that's their reflection. And so you have to be able to adapt to their, their style. So, yes, I, I, I agree. I think if you were at Facebook or a younger startup and your boss is twenty seven. [CODY: Mhm] Great. I mean do that, do you. Because that's going to work that way. [CODY: Right] But in a company, an organization where there are senior folks, people that have been around for a long time. More tenured. That's not how they got there. That's how they earned their director title. That's not how they earned their manager or their promotion. They spent years and years and years gaining experience to get to where they are. So I think they reflect that

on you. And so when you come in as a millennial or whoever and say, hey, I deserve this after one year, they're like, no, actually, you don't. And so you have to earn your, your time. And so I think, yes, it's important that you adjust your mindset to who you're working for and the culture that's around you. That's what's going to make you successful because you can't come and say, hey, this is how my peers are doing it. And that's the worst.

I mean, that's the thing that I think bites everyone in the behind, is that when you go - Well, my friend got this or my peer did this or so and so [**CODY:** Right] I got this from this company. It's like, well, they're two different companies with two different values [**CODY:** Mhm] and different cultures and structures. You can't compare those apples to oranges, apples to apples. So now I think it's important that younger kids know, even GenZ know that. You have to adapt to your around your surroundings and not and not assume what you know [**CODY:** Mhm] is how it should go.

CODY: Yeah, that's, that's great. Thoughts on that. And I think one tidbit that I would add to is I think it's during the time when you graduate and you go into a first job and then even during those first. I mean, maybe we could even say first 10 years you're, you're seeing things pop up on. And I think the world of LinkedIn and Instagram and Facebook has made it so that you can keep this really large view of people that you may be had in a class or, or, you know, know professionally or socially. But either way, you're getting these alerts that say, hey, so-and-so is moving up or so-and-so is moving up. And it's I think it's easy to be in the back of your mind processing those and thinking, well, you know, I, I it seems like I should also. But so, for one, though, those platforms made it have made it great to stay connected to people. But I think to in my own experience, it's always if, if you're happy where you are and you're somewhere that you want to be for years down the road, as long as you're, you know, providing value and you're looking for ways to tackle challenges that are coming up, those things are going to come at exactly the time that they should.

You know, of course, if you feel like you're undervalued or you're under appreciated and there's a problem there, then of course, like be communicative to talk to your boss. But I think as long as you're, you're doing the things you need to do, and those things will fall into place later. And you don't know the story behind your, your friend or your, your

person that your acquaintance. You don't know the story behind their promotion. Maybe that's just something that happens in their role every six months, you know. Maybe it's just a set thing at a big company. So I think you have to do it. Like you said you have to know the context. It's not. It's not. Its apples to oranges.

WILLEN: Yeah. And today's, today's world, where everyone's seeking out to glamour their selves with titles and names and that kind of stuff. I mean, you know, it's just you just type it and then you can you can edit. [**CODY:** Right] I mean, yeah, I can I can add whatever I want. [**CODY:** Uh-huh] Know to my LinkedIn job title and just do it. You know, no one's going to go... Wait, I'm sorry. You're breaking the law. You can't do that, you know. And so how much can you trust social media and what do you put out there? They're going to put themselves out to be something that they're not. And then, you know, that's OK. Some people do some people don't, but always be cautious.

And you bring up a very valid point is that you have so many other things and be appreciative of than just a title and, and money and value. Right. And your boss is great. People listening to you, you being heard. I mean, all those things are so, so vital to you of the job beyond, you know, if you're a manager, coordinator, senior director, whatever the case may be and how much money you make.

CODY: Yeah, a couple things before we dive into our last couple segments here.

One thing I personally wanted to ask is... We lost the Blazers owner Paul Allen back in 2018.

And I think someone who, as an outsider looking in, seems like they really helped to bring the Blazers from when he bought them in the late 80s and all the way through the 90s, that big period of growth and NBA went international and all the way to where the league is today. And did you get to know Paul or if whether or not you did, what impact did you kind of see from him in in the organization?

WILLEN: Yeah, I mean, I didn't personally interact with Paul much. He obviously came to a lot of games and I'd, I'd see him.

All I know is that Paul was a huge fan of the Trailblazers. You know, anything in regards to him about trying to sell the team or move to Seattle, I mean, that was never the case. And I think when you bought, bought the team, he wanted to bring a championship to Portland. And I don't think that's undersold, you know, in the media.

And I don't think you wanted to necessarily have that, you know, and say, hey, this is the case.

But at the end day, we knew him as a very passionate owner. He was very involved with the players. You know, we drafted how they did and he seek to get to know each and every one of them. And so we were fortunate to have him as an owner. And, you know, it has, has... To have his name still associated with Trailblazers is great. As you can see, sometimes around the league an owner can, can change the culture and dictate a lot. And we're very fortunate to have him as, as our owner.

CODY: I've been watching during the last couple months NBC Northwest, with the lack of live games, has been airing some past Trailblazers games. So I've been seeing, seeing games from a bunch of different eras.

And it's, it's amazing to see the just the progression you can see when you have it cut up like that. Like, here's a game in the late 80s. Here's a game in the mid 90s. Here's one in the mid 2000s. And then here's, you know, Dam's shot from last year just to see just the differences in the vibe. You can you can see in the arena and just around with the broadcast.

And of course, that's, that's a fan's perspective but it's interesting looking in.

WILLEN: It's amazing. I mean, to your point, it's changed so much on so many different scales. But at the end of day, it's Blazers and its Portland.

And, you know, the fans, you know, we don't we don't talk about our fans enough and how they support the team. I mean, you look across the league, you could have a killer team that's, you know, ranked number one, two or three in their conference and still not be able to sell out. And yet we can have whatever teams on the floor. But, you know,

they're a bunch good guys. It's on the court and they're going to produce, you know, the book, you know, Blazer mania, you know all. All of Rip City is going to show up. [CODY: Right.] Which is great.

CODY: A consistent thing across all, all eras.

WILLEN: Yeah.

CODY: Great. Willen well, thanks for telling us all about your experience with the Blazers. There's a couple last segments I wanted to hear before we wrap up.

So one of them and this is just a fun one, but whether you're a Netflix guy, Hulu guy, podcast, super fan, maybe you're a voracious reader. I don't know what your preferred form of media is, but we have to know what's got you hooked?

What's that form of content that you just can't get enough of right now?

WILLEN: Yeah, so I'm not I'm actually not a big binge watcher. I don't I don't really necessarily dive into the shows. Have the accounts that I and I'll be honest, I watched Tiger King [CODY: Laughing], just because everyone else was talking about it. And that was unfortunate. You know, I feel like I was a little more educated on Florida, but that's about it. But for me, I mean, I like to read. I'm definitely, I like to read autobiographies.

So right now, I'm actually just started, I started a long time ago to Steve Jobs, one by Walter Isaacson and like halfway through on that one right now. So those are always fascinating for me. I don't comprehend books and remember them as much. I like have to read them like, like a few times just too really kind of sink in the information. So because I'm always fascinated with people's stories so that, that's, that's currently on the docket. I need to get Bob Iger's the Disney CEO's book. He, he had one come out a few months ago. I'm probably gonna get that on Amazon and dive into that one a little more because I'm all I'm all about the leadership stories and how people get through crisis and that kind of stuff. So how I past the time. For me, I mean, I'll, I'll, I'll take walks and that kind of stuff for, you know, around the neighborhood and that stuff. And I'd love to golf. Haven't gotten as much as I love to, but that's kind of helped pass the

time a little bit. And, you know, like you, I've re-watched a lot of sports just to just to keep it kind of there and remember what it what it feels like. But I watched the Last Dance. I'll dive into those. But I, I, I'm a casual guy and nothing, nothing to I like to sit around too much so. So watching TV for hours and hours [**CODY:** Mhm] is not my style.

CODY: Are you an e-book guy or are you a paper?

WILLEN: No, I'm a paperboy guy. [**CODY:** Mhm Old school.] Yeah. I'm, I'm old school man. Because, because I like to write notes and like put post-its in it, that kind of stuff.

CODY: Ok. The next question. What are you munching on? Social distancing has us all chilling at home. Most parts of the world, is there a favorite, a takeout spot you've been hitting up frequently?

WILLEN: No, not really, man. I actually I've been trying to cook a lot, actually.

I've been learning to cook. I was not, I mean, I knew a handful of dishes, but now I've kind of ping the parents to share their, like, their secrets and, and see if I can kind of give it go what they what I've been growing up eating. And so I haven't bought, like, any recipe books and that kind of stuff, but I've just called up my parents and asked them what's going on. And if I'm doing this right and that kind of stuff. So I've tried to try to be smart and, and eat healthy and be at home. So. But I've made quite a few sandwiches for lunch because I'm lazy unless I'm at dinner time and definitely trying to work up some, some nice agencies and restaurant recipes and that kind of stuff. So but take out I would say I don't even remember the last I got last. My last day at was Costco pizza. [**Cody:** light chuckle.] I was that was about a week ago, which was a bummer because they're not they're not given out to Combo Supreme right now, [**CODY:** Oooo] which is my favorite one. I had had to make do with pepperoni [**CODY:** Oooo] but it was still really good because I hadn't had pizza in a long, long time.

CODY: That's great. And to all the listeners out there we have Willen, who is not bingeing, a streaming service. And he is learning recipes to cook at home. So model, model citizen here. If you are bingeing four hours of Netflix a day and munching on a lot of takeout, it's OK. There's different ways to do it. [**WILLEN:** Chuckling]

All right. So last one before we wrap up. I know you said earlier that part of the reason you went to study abroad is you have a enjoyment of travel. So this last segment is called Globe or garage. Whether you're an avid traveler or a proud homebody, when it's safe to travel again what is one place currently on your travel bucket list? Or if you're the homebody type, what is a project or hobby that you have currently?

WILLEN: Yeah. Yeah. So it's, it's definitely going to have to be travel.

And I was, I was, I had a plan to go to Japan post the Olympics [**CODY:** Mhm] this summer and obviously that's gone. So I think I've tried to make do with that one. But then the goal was to go after Olympics so it would die down. No one would be going there, it's less busier. But now that it's been postponed a year, I might revisit that. But Japan was definitely on my short, short list of places that I want to go to that I haven't been to. Just as I've been to a lot of different Asian countries but surprisingly, Japan hasn't been one of them. So I just want to cross it off my list.

CODY: What have been some of your favorite Asian countries or global countries that you you've been to already that you would highly recommend?

WILLEN: Oh, I would recommend Thailand in a heartbeat, man. If I could if I could live in Thailand, I would. It's places beautiful, very casual and fun place to be, you know. And I love good tropical environments. And they just they just do it right. They know how to they know how to have a good time and everything is super cheap. Food's good. You can't you can't go wrong with street food, man. I, I'll, I'll have a two dollar, you know, fried rice or whatever they make a pineapple fried rice on the street there for nothing. And it's some of the best food you'll ever have. So I would definitely recommend Thailand. But again, I think you can't go wrong going anywhere man, because you just learn new things and try and you try new things. If you're adventurous and want to get out, go anywhere besides where you grew up. Because even if you went to Washington [**Cody:** Right] or California, you know, don't just steer away from the, the tourist spots and find some hidden gems. That's, that's, that's when you realize how beautiful this world is.

CODY: Yeah. I think one of the biggest things I also enjoy travel. And then what it's made me realize, too, is I've met a lot of people in different countries and they've said, they've asked me about a ton of different places in the U.S. that they went on a road trip to or they've been to.

And it made me realize, like there's a lot here to do also and a lot in North America. So whether you're looking to get all over the world or just, you know, around the states, around Oregon, there's, there's a ton, there's a ton to do.

WILLEN: I 100 percent agree. I mean, I barely explored enough of Oregon and I've been here my whole life and I feel like I've got a good chunk of it. But then I'll see something online. I'm like, I've never heard of this place. Oh, my God, you're beautiful. Or...

CODY: The Oregonian published their Oregon Bucket List. If you've lived here, you've been all these places you go. I need to catch up.

WILLEN: Yeah. And it's and it's like they find new trails or new wonders, Wonderments, like every other month. And it's like, where was this to like a year ago.

CODY: It's funny. Well, Willen, that's all we got today.

But really appreciate you being on the pod, sharing your experience going from college career and then, yeah, figuring things out with a big name organization, the Portland Trailblazers here in Oregon, and then, you know, working your way up by continuing to learn through, through all the different experiences that come your way. So appreciate you coming on, sharing your story on the What's Next? pod.

WILLEN: Thanks for having me, Cody. I appreciate it. Always great to be a guinea pig like I said before, and hopefully people got some little good advice. You know, I always remind people I, I'm just a normal kid and then live a normal life. And, you know, obviously super blessed in certain ways, but I'm, I'm all about paying it forward and helping the next, next kid out because I went through everything that everyone else is

going through. And I want them to know that it's going to be OK and you'll, you'll make it.

CODY: That's, that's great advice. And to all our listeners out there in Beaver Nation. Thanks for listening. And we will see you next time.

[Bouncy theme music plays.]

Our goal at OSU Next and the Alumni Association is to build community, and that includes creating connections and sharing these unique stories with the rest of Beaver nation. If you found this episode of the What's Next podcast valuable, you can help us achieve this goal by writing a quick review, leaving a rating and subscribing to the showing your preferred podcast player. We're thankful for your support.

[Bouncy theme music plays.]

-END-