
A Former Golden State Warriors Center on 'Winning the Money Game' and Finding Balance in a Sports Career

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*Adonal Foyle, a graduate of Colgate University, wrapped up his 13-year professional basketball career in 2009 and has been advocating for fellow athletes ever since. Most recently, Foyle published the book, *Winning the Money Game: Lessons Learned from the Financial Fouls of Athletes*. He talks with KWHS editor Diana Drake about his childhood on a small Caribbean island, money management and what he tells any high school student interested in a professional sports career.*

An edited version of the transcript appears below.

Knowledge@Wharton High School: Hello, I'm Diana Drake, managing editor of Knowledge at Wharton High School. We are thrilled today to welcome Adonal Foyle, one of only seven players in franchise history to play 10 seasons in a Golden State Warriors uniform. Adonal is the only native of St. Vincent and the Grenadines to ever play for an NBA franchise. He finished his 13-year basketball career in 2009, and remains the Warriors' all-time leader in blocked shots with 1,140, while ranking seventh on the team's all-time games played list, with 641.

And while we could talk all day about Adonal's professional basketball career, we also want to learn more about his deep interest in financial literacy, especially for athletes. This year, Adonal published the book, *Winning the Money Game: Lessons Learned from the Financial Fouls of Athletes*. Adonal, thanks so much for joining us.

Adonal Foyle: Thank you for having me.

KWHS: Before we talk money, I want to know more about you. It is not every day that I get to speak with someone who grew up on a small island in the Caribbean. Where is Canouan, and what was it like living there?

Foyle: The best way to think about it is between Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados. It is part of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the bigger island. You have to think a little bit like Hawaii — St. Vincent has about 46 different islands that are attached to it, 26 above water. And Canouan is a very small island [that] is part of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. When I was growing up we had a population of about 500 or 600, which was booming at the time.

What I remember most is that we did not have electricity, we did not have indoor plumbing, and I was raised by my grandmother. I had very humble beginnings, and I think what I carried with me is that less is always more. My grandmother always found a way to help out people in the village. Even when they did not have much, she would take whatever she had and she would share it. I would be so frustrated, and she would say, "We never know what we will need tomorrow." So I grew up with some amazing people who helped shape the way [I think] and the person that I am today.

KWHS: How did you end up with a career in professional basketball?

Foyle: I think basketball was more thrown upon me. I happened to be about 6'8", and I remember going to high school on another island. On that island they happened to play basketball. On my island it was all about cricket and soccer, but on this island there was a soldier who was with the Americans. He learned the game of basketball and he came back and created his own infrastructure and built his own court. So, they had really, really serious basketball on this island. I walked in as a 6'7", 6'8" person, and they were like, 'Oh my God, you have to play basketball!' And I was like, 'What is basketball?'

Literally, within the confines of that first month, I learned the game. They told me, 'OK, well you just grab a rebound, you throw it to me and that's it. That's the game.' I remember grabbing the rebound and taking off down the court, making a layup and I was so excited. I turned around and everybody was hysterical because apparently you have to dribble the ball in basketball! How was I supposed to know that? That was my introduction to basketball. I thought, this is terrible. This will be the end of [me playing basketball]. [But] there was a gentleman on the island who said, 'I could teach you tonight when nobody is around.' I thought that sounded like a good idea. I really started learning the game, and before long I was on a plane coming to the United States on a basketball scholarship.

KWHS: And you started playing at 16, right?

Foyle: At 15, yes.

KWHS: That's kind of late, but you picked it up quickly.

Foyle: I picked it up very late, but one of the advantages is that because I started so late, I felt like I was learning all the way through my career. There was never an opportunity [to say], 'Oh, I don't really need this stuff.' I really needed to learn and continue to grow throughout my entire career.

KWHS: Can you tell us one of the highlights of your career as a professional athlete?

Foyle: Probably one is draft night. Being drafted is an extraordinary thing coming from where I did. And my mom coming to the United States for the first time [and watching me on] national television when we were being drafted. I remember just sitting there and looking at her face, and she was nervous, and I was nervous. I didn't know if I was going to get drafted. That was a big deal, because it was the beginning of [my] career; an opportunity to play at the highest level. The second [highlight] for me [was] being on the same floor with some of the people I grew up with. I remember the first time I played against Hakeem Olajuwon, and I was like, 'Oh my God, he's over there!'

KWHS: Star struck.

Foyle: I know, right? And my coach [said], 'Yeah, you get to guard him!' You carry those experiences with you for the rest of your life. When your hero and somebody whom you respect and admire is on the floor with you at the same time, and you're elbowing each other, and you're running and walking against each other, it's pretty special.

KWHS: During your time on and off the court, you watched other pros burn through a lot of cash: endorsements, merchandising money, salaries. A recurring theme has been that athletes make a lot of money, but they are poor money managers. Tell us a bit about what you have experienced and why you were inspired to write *Winning the Money Game*.

Foyle: I always thought of myself as an advocate for players. And it is not that we [don't all] make mistakes financially. I think the greatest societies, as a whole, make a tremendous [number] of mistakes when it comes to finances. About a month ago, *The New York Times* had an article talking about people over 50 not having the financial know-how to prepare for retirement.

With sports, one of the problems is that it is so immediate. An athlete in basketball, for example, has an average career of 4.7 [years]. For football it is two point something. So you make all this money in a very short period of time. You couple that with the fact that athletes come into the league extremely young. And also that we do not talk about financial literacy in general as a society. We are really behind in that.

You take all those things and athletes become a microcosm of the greater society, in that there is a tremendous amount of wealth. They know how to get rich, but they do not know how to stay rich. For me, just looking at that over the years — over and over — and seeing the patterns that emerged, I wanted to take a closer look. As part of my master's thesis in sports psychology, I got to interview 10 retired basketball players and talk to them about transition and how they have been able to handle it. What [were] some of the challenges they faced? One of the things that [kept] occurring over and over was this issue of financial distress. I started talking to them about [their] experiences growing up and a pattern started emerging. A lot of them had never been around that kind of money; they came from a disadvantaged background. The first time they were learning about financial management was when they had a check for millions of dollars. It was an interesting, eye-opening experience, and I wanted to dive into that area. So I started writing the book.

KWHS: Does one athlete's story really illustrate this point?

Foyle: I call [this one player] Big Baller Tom. I remember one experience I had [when] I walked this athlete over to the bank, and I got him set up with a checking account and everything [he needed]. I was so happy with myself. The next day he went out and [bought] a car with money he did not have in that account. I just remember sitting in my room and [thinking], how could I [explain finances] in a way that he could understand? I started writing a pamphlet. So my thesis and this pamphlet became the basis for this book.

KWHS: What are some key takeaways that might help athletes, as well as all of us?

Foyle: I think most of this stuff is really common sense. One of the first things is being involved. There is a tendency to be kind of skittish around money, especially when you do not feel like you are competent enough to handle it. So athletes tend to shy away from the responsibility of the day-to-day immersion into their finances [that would allow them] to take ownership of them. Most of the time when athletes get taken advantage of, [it is because] they are not monitoring who is involved in their finances and not doing the basic things. Being involved is huge.

The second thing is to assume everybody is in good faith, but anybody who touches your finances should be audited on a regular basis. If it turns out to be a great audit, and everything is good, then your faith is justified. I think we see auditing more as a negative thing, and therefore we do not take the time to do our due diligence to make sure that the people whom we trust are worthy of our trust.

Finally, if you ever truly want to be involved, just write your own check. I mean, just do that for a while, and I think you will see the cost of what you are doing. Sometimes when athletes have secondary people writing the checks and paying the bills, they do not get to see the day-to-day decisions that they are making, and take ownership of those decisions.

KWHS: What is next on your career horizon? You seem to be involved in so many things.

Foyle: For me, it is always about learning, always about gaining more knowledge and being an advocate for players. I think that is going to be my life's mission — to continue to find ways to advocate for players.

KWHS: Do you feel that through your advocacy, as well as the advocacy of others, that athletes are improving in terms of their money management? Have you seen a change from when you started to now?

Foyle: The change is that we are talking about it now in a much more meaningful way. It is not swept under the rug. It's

not, 'Oh my God, we don't want anybody to know.' I think athletes are now being open to the idea of [talking about their finances]. We saw an article where Tim Duncan [a player with the San Antonio Spurs] came out against one of the people he was investing with. He said, 'This guy took money from me.' I think you will see players saying, 'I'm no longer going to hide and be ashamed that somebody took advantage of me. I am going to come out, I'm going to talk about it, and hopefully it will empower the next generation and help them.' I think that is very encouraging, and it is [a good place to start].

KWHS: What advice would you give to a high school student who might be interested in a pro career in basketball or some other sport?

Foyle: If you are 6'10", it is really a lot easier! But no, I will say more than anything to follow your passion. And always understand that sports is about balance. Go out, work hard — it is about taking the time and spending it in the gym, getting better. There is no substitution for working. I tell all the athletes I work with, 10,000 repetitions of a skill makes you an expert in that skill. You have to go out and really, really work at it. But also remember to have balance. You want to have a duality between sports and academics. Try to create that balance where you have something to fall back on. Do not define yourself with a career that is only going to last a few years. You need something that is going to define you for your entire life, and that is education. Balance the two together.