

Dean Blandino on Family, Career, and the Sandwich Generation

Introduction and Guest Welcome

Candace Dellacona: Welcome to the Sandwich Generation Survival Guide. I am your host, Candace Dellacona, and my guest is a bit of a departure from the standard Sandwich Generation Survival Guide lineup, but not outside of my world in two ways. As many of our listeners know, I'm an estate planning attorney by trade and a good portion of my practice I work with athletes.

Professional and collegiate in planning their estate plan. And our guest today is professional athlete adjacent, I would say. So I wanna welcome to the podcast today, Fox Sports NFL and College Football Rules Analyst, Dean Blandino. Welcome Dean.

Dean Blandino: Thanks for having me. This is awesome. Yeah, definitely professional athlete adjacent, I think is a great way to describe kind of what I do.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah, for sure. So for those of you who are not football fans, haven't heard of the tush push or chanted Dez caught it. Dean is the NFL's former VP of Officiating.

And you spent the bulk of your career at the NFL. You've had a couple of pivots and you've started a couple of your own podcasts.

So you're a professional podcast guest at this point. I love listening to Calm Down with Erin Andrews and Charissa Thompson. I know you make appearances there. And you were on Jay Glazer's Unbreakable, which I love the subject matter, talking about mental health. So thanks for being here.

Dean Blandino: Yeah, of course. And I love this the whole sandwich generation concept. I didn't even know like I didn't know the term. I didn't know until we started talking about it. And, but then I was like, wow, that's, yeah, I'm in it. Let's go.

Candace Dellacona: You are in it. You are in it.

Dean Blandino's Background and Career Journey

Candace Dellacona: And before we get to the bulk of the sandwich generation issues and maybe the wisdom that you can bestow on others, let's talk a little bit about your background, where you came from, how you got here. So you are a New York native, right?

Dean Blandino: Yeah, grew up in Long Island. Belmore born and raised, and I went to school in New York at Hofstra University yeah I had a communications degree. I grew up playing sports, love sports, anything and everything, whether it was football, baseball, basketball, hockey in the street, in the school yard, in leagues, in high school.

It was just, that was such a big part my earlier life and I wanted to stay involved in that in some way, shape, or form. And I didn't know what that looked like as a career, but when I got outta school, this was pre-internet, pre-social media, pre any of that and just sent my resume to the major sports leagues that all had offices in New York City.

And was lucky enough to get a job interview, an internship interview at the NFL in a couple of different departments, and I got the internship in officiating and I didn't know anything about it. I wasn't interested in officiating necessarily, but I loved the NFL, wanted to get my foot in the door and then learn officiating through that internship, was hired full-time and that became my career.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah, it's really pretty remarkable. I love one of the stories that you tell about the happenstance of it all that, you're submitting your resume. We can talk to a lot of the parents out there that are dealing with their kids and internships and submitting a resume.

And Hofstra is a great school, but it's probably not known necessarily for sports communication, or it wasn't back then. And I think the story was somebody saw your resume, who happened to be oh.

Dean Blandino: That's, and I tell my kids too, and I know your kids and as we think about college and stuff and it's such a great experience, right? But it doesn't mean, look, you can be successful a lot of different paths. But I think

one of the benefits of going to college is those connections and that network of people that you need and they become part of your network going forward. And this was just happened, someone that was working in human resources went to Hofstra, didn't know me, but saw my resume, saw the Hofstra on the resume and was like, oh, I'm gonna take this person and move 'em up to the top.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah,

Dean Blandino: And that was kind of cool. And a fun story and got to know her a little bit. And she told me that, and I was like, wow that's awesome. And,

Candace Dellacona: yeah.

Dean Blandino: yeah.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah it's always great to be able to give somebody maybe the inside scoop and they have to take it the rest of the way, and I think we were talking before, all of our kids are getting older and circling the wagons and figuring out who knows who and being perhaps a way to expose somebody to an area of something that they wanna work in or try out.

Challenges and Pivots in Dean's Career

Candace Dellacona: And so you started out as an intern, and tell us a little bit about your time, maybe at the NFL and your trajectory from intern to all the way up to VP and, being one of the spokespeople for the NFL and officiating.

Dean Blandino: Incredible journey and so blessed with that opportunity and I was surrounded by so many good people that took an interest in my development and back then this was prior to now we have YouTube and we have access to video online, and this was prior to that. And so we were editing officiating tapes, like pass interference calls or holding calls and we had to do it from tape to tape and pull this play from this game and record it onto a separate we were using beta cam and we were using VHS. And so I would sit there and put these tapes together and I would watch the video because it wasn't that you just had to let it run and record it on the other deck. I would watch the video and I would ask questions. And that's how I learned what pass interference is and what illegal hands to the face is. And I learned all those things. And then in 1999, the NFL brought back instant replay and I, having the technical background that I had from my education and working in television production and everything else, this, that kind of, that experience helped me be a part of that on the technical side, bringing back replay and some of the systems and processes to that and the software and the hardware. And then I became a replay official and learned those rules. And yeah. And then I got to what I felt was a fork in the road.

And this is like 2008 where I knew that I wanted to continue in officiating. I knew that I had gained so much experience and was this well-rounded background now, and I thought I could be in charge of the officiating department, but there was this glass ceiling at the time where, 'cause I never officiated, I didn't officiate on the field and that was seen as a roadblock for me.

I took the opportunity at that point to leave the NFL started my own company consulting company with different college conferences and continue to consult with the NFL and teaching and training replay officials and working with the system vendors. And a couple of years later, the NFL. Brought me back full time and I ultimately broke through that glass ceiling and I was named the head of officiating in 2013. So it was just a really cool experience.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah, and so there's a lot of information and all that you said and I think you're so humble in the way that you're talking about it, because I think what you just described is there was not that technology yet at the outset, so you were tasked with putting the tapes together in a way without any sort of technological help. And then when you had the technology and it caught up to you, you set the protocol or you were certainly one of the people that did it, which is really amazing and probably when you look back and realize how young you were to have that kind of impact.

Dean Blandino: It was yes and oh, I was in my twenties and there were points where I was like, why? There are very experienced, seasoned people in this officiating world that are giving, that must think highly of me. 'cause they were giving me these opportunities just said, I'm gonna, I'm really gonna throw myself into this and I wanna be. I'm gonna learn the rules inside and out. I know that I never officiated, so I know that will always be something that will be held against me, for lack of a better term. But I said, I'm gonna learn the rules inside and out. I'm gonna become an expert in all of these different areas and just try to make myself indispensable from that perspective and yeah, and being in my twenties and being a part of that process. And like you said, setting the protocol and now you look at instant

replay and what it has become and it's part of every sport. And it's really become an integral part of every game that we know.

So it was, yeah, when you think back , it's pretty cool. But , I try to like I don't really like to talk about myself from that perspective.

Candace Dellacona: Timing and the grind and the hustle and that combination, something we all try to impart to our kids, right? That, you can meet the right people, but you have to be ready to take on that responsibility. And to your point, you had never officiated on the actual field.

So you had this proverbial hurdle that you could never overcome because that wasn't in your future. So you had to figure out a way to get around that and earn the credibility, which clearly you did. And when you realized that it was time to leave the NFL and you pivoted, did people in your life tell you were crazy? How did that go down?

Dean Blandino: Yeah, I remember it was, it took a lot of people by surprise at the NFL because, and it was like you said, timing is so important. You can be in the right place at the right time, but what do you do with it? What do you do with that opportunity? That's up to you. And so there was an opportunity where the NFL was giving an enhanced severance package to people that had been there a certain amount of years. And so 10 or more years. And you could leave voluntarily and we'll give you this enhanced package.

And I looked at that as an opportunity. I said, okay, I can take this package continue to get, the benefits and compensation for, an extended period of time. And then build out, this company, this idea that I was thinking about. 'cause there was nothing in the space. and it was just, again, being in the right place at the right time, jumping at the opportunity, continued to work with the NFL on a consulting basis, so no longer full-time, but then I was able to branch out and do these other things. And work with these other organizations. And again, it just helped me. And yeah, when they heard I was taking that package, they were like what are you doing? And I knew it was a risk, but the way I looked at it, it was a calculated risk. I had planned it out. I had spoken to enough people I knew that I was gonna have these college conferences contract with me and and I was gonna continue to be able to work with the NFL. Sometimes you have to take those risks. I felt really good about it and it worked out in the end.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah, I think a lot of people in the middle of our career, we have young kids and you think about do you take the certain path or do you forge out on your own? And a lot of it is real bravery as calculated as the risk may have been, and you have maybe a bit of a cushion knowing that you have these contacts and you've done a really good job at keeping those contacts, it's still a huge risk.

So I think bravo to you for taking it in the middle of your career and what other people might've thought was the ideal position, and you walked away and it really worked out for you. And that'll probably be a good segment into our discussion about being in the middle, being in the sandwich.

Family Dynamics and the Sandwich Generation

Candace Dellacona: Your mom has made an appearance in media from time to time. We all love hearing, her thoughts about how smart and handsome you are. And she is a character. And so why don't you talk a little bit about maybe your family and like the sandwich generation with your mom and your family structure.

Dean Blandino: Well, yeah, family structure, I mean, grew up in a big Italian family. And my mom was born in Italy. They, my grandparents and on that side, my dad's family had been in America for a couple of generations. But it was that big Italian American family was so, so important. and Sunday meals and those gatherings and everything.

And my mom is such a big, like you said, she's such a character, she's such a big personality. She was like the neighborhood mom. Everybody would come to our house and you could just come in and there'd be food and there'd be all these things. She still to this day is that person. And it's incredible. I joke with her that she's gonna outlive all of us and she's just, and she's gonna keep going. She's incredible. And that was a big part of growing up, but then I left. I went and when I left the NFL, I also moved. Was married at the time was about to have our first child. And I moved from New York to Southern California. And that was a big, big jump and away from family, away from friends. And that long distance stuff that, that was hard. And my dad who passed away in 2012, he was still alive at that time and so missing them. Trying to maintain those relationships and also starting to build my own family, having this new business and all of this change.

It was kind of like a whirlwind. And you kind of look back and think, wow. How did we work through all of that? And then, like I said, it came back in 2012. To go back to the NFL, that's when my dad passed and I was thankful to be there, and be home for a little bit, when he, he got sick and but yeah, that's just a little bit of the background and, but

Candace Dellacona: Yeah

Dean Blandino: the, you know, and.

Candace Dellacona: You make a, an important distinction, right? Where there, there are expectations set for everybody. Everybody's family has like a different playbook, if you will. And an Italian American, Italian off the boat, Italy, Long Island, we know it well. And the expectations that proximity in terms of distance, right? And you know how hard it is to break out of that and not have it be a rejection of the family. Or like a statement about not wanting to be close, really trying to forge your own path and build your own life. And I think so many of our listeners think about that and now we're 10, 15 years further down the line. And our parents are older, some of them like your dad, my dad are no longer here. And so it brings up questions about what's next and how to advocate from a, long distance. I know you have siblings and your mom is doing amazing and she is definitely not the typical aging parent. We'll give her that, but, thinking about how you deal with being far away and the support that you need to provide. What is your best advice for those of our listeners who don't live close by, who can't pop over?

Dean Blandino: Sure. And then that, like you said, you hit the nail on the head with that, that expectation of proximity is so real

Candace Dellacona: Yeah.

Dean Blandino: felt it. And I know, and my parents were always very supportive, but they were absolutely crushed when we moved to California and so totally get it. But then like you said, you have to forge your own path.

And for me, yes, my mom does stay at my sister's and there's a lot going on and it keeps you busy and three grandkids and two dogs and everything else that goes on with everyday life. But, the biggest challenge again is just making time to communicate. It's picking up the phone and calling and having those conversations. Whether it's text message, making sure it's even things like you know, I don't post a lot of my personal stuff on Instagram or whatever it may be, but I know my mom's always like, oh, I wanna see pictures of the kids. I wanna see, what they're doing. I wanna see. So just even just that and sending them, trying to FaceTime those types of things to stay engaged. And then, whenever I can get to New York and whenever I can travel, try to do that with my boys. My two sons now are 15 and 10, try to make that at least twice a year and getting out and seeing family and spending time, especially with my mom.

She still comes out here once a year. And just making that time and effort and just communicating, and then just talk, helping my sister with, because it is, my mom isn't, knock on wood. She's aging, but she's doing great and she can move around and she still drives and she does all these things, but, just making sure, checking in whatever they need.

Can I help in any way? That's just that calm kind of communication and keeping those lines open.

Candace Dellacona: It's so important that you communicate and making sure that your siblings know too, that you're there, even though you're not there. And trying to figure out ways, as I guide clients or other people who have asked me, how do you advocate from long distance and there are so many different ways of doing that.

Thankfully we're in a place with technology where you can send pictures of the boys at their school concert that your mom may not have been able to be a part of. And so really making time to do those kinds of things and having those meaningful connections. 'cause there are different ways of being in the middle and being able to advocate. And so have you ever found yourself in a conversation with any of your siblings to say what is the plan? Have you ever had a conversation with your mom to ask about those plans, and if so, what did you say?

Dean Blandino: Yeah, that's a great question. And we do, try to check in because, especially with my sister, because my mom, she has her own separate kind of living area, but they're together a lot and just checking in with her. And I know that just like anything else when you live with people, there's gonna be ups and downs. And I think one of the things that we probably haven't talked because my mom really is just, you don't even think about it. She's just doing so well. We probably haven't had that conversation in depth yet. But it is just making sure, I just had a conversation with my mom the other day because her car lease is up and what do you wanna do, going forward and wanna help her and navigate that process.

She still drives, she still feels good about driving. So I certainly don't want, I'm not gonna push to take that away, if that's if she's good. And I'll talk to my sister and she said, yeah, she's she has no issues. But long term, I don't know, my dad passed suddenly.

He was fine and then was diagnosed with cancer and a couple of months later was gone. So I think that's probably scary for my mom to think about as well and just, oh, what, even to bring up that conversation I'm sure it'd be scary for her to have that. So

Candace Dellacona: Yeah.

Dean Blandino: we probably tiptoe around it a little

Candace Dellacona: Yeah.

Dean Blandino: you, I think as time goes on, those conversations are important. They, what is that long term if when mom's not doing as great and she can't move around as well, what does that look like? I think that's important.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah, no, for sure. And all of these news stories have been coming out recently. Bradley Cooper made a documentary about caregiving for his dad. I think John Turturro was talking about caring for his disabled brother. I think there's a preconceived notion that people who have access to resources, that have the ability to have a strong family unit and everybody working together that it's so much easier. And I think one of the things that I like to point out is that it's the common thread that goes through all of us. Nobody knows how to have these conversations. Not even Dean who negotiates, all of the coaches yelling at you about a call that you've made.

It's really hard to have those conversations and most people don't have the tools or the language. So thinking about it in advance and thinking just like what you said is really insightful about your dad and what she went through losing him. And so you're gonna have to think about the ways to have that conversation that's sensitive to that loss and to your sister who's there and absorbing a lot of it.

So it's great that you bring that up and I'm sure after this conversation you'll think about how you'll talk to your mom or maybe she'll call in and.

Dean Blandino: Oh yeah. Absolutely. And those are those conversations. I think once you can broach the subject, then I think it becomes easier. It's just figuring out, okay, how do we start this conversation? Mom, I don't think that this is, or this doesn't have to be done tomorrow, but at some point we do have to start to think about this.

And and when I think back to my dad, they, like a lot of older parents, I'm sure, they went and got funeral plots and you start to prepare for that, which it hate thinking about it, but though these are things that have to be done.

Because then if you don't plan for it. On top of the grief and all the things that come with it. Now it's okay, now I have all this other stuff I have to take care of. And am I really in a good place to be able to even handle that?

Candace Dellacona: Totally. And it can be a conversation of empowerment to say what do you want? How do you see it? All right, let's make that happen so that you're not in this position. Thankfully she, is in a place where she loves and she's with your sister, and they make it work together. So that is, that's incredible. And I think that that's unusual. So you're lucky in that regard.

Balancing Work, Family, and Self-Care

Candace Dellacona: The other sort of sandwich piece is the kids. So tell us how you stay present with the traveling and the TV appearances and all of the pressures of co-parenting and all of that.

Dean Blandino: Yeah, I think one of the things, and that was we talked about when I left the NFL, that was the first time and then I was in charge of officiating and that was such a, while I loved it. And I really feel like that, I feel like that job chose me. I didn't choose it, everything, my experience, everything that it prepared me for it. And I really did love it and I threw myself into it. But it's a and not just. During football season it's 24 7. It is, you have, like we talked about coaches, that, that, it's week to week and you're putting out fires every week and you're talking to coaches who are all over the country and they don't care that you're in New York and they're in San Francisco and they're three hours behind us and it's 1:00 AM they want to talk to you or they want to email. And I did take the approach and I

learned the hard way that I would get a, a text or an email work related. And I would approach it as if that person is waiting at their laptop or at their phone for me to respond.

Candace Dellacona: Oof.

Dean Blandino: that was how I looked at it,

Candace Dellacona: Yep.

Dean Blandino: Which is not great, and it's not healthy and it's not. I neglected a lot of other things and home life and those types of things. I realized that that wasn't sustainable for me and the life that I wanted to live and for my children and for, my partner. And an opportunity came up with Fox Sports and they had reached out and we just had some preliminary conversations about this rules analyst position. It sounded really interesting, and I love the NFL, but this just sounded like a better, a just a better way of life. And that was in 2017. Unfortunately, we, got divorced, but she's amazing and she's an incredible mother and she's an incredible co-parent, and we make that work.

And then it, yeah, it's just the boys and I feel like I am in such a better place while I'm busy. I have things to do, i'm not beck and call. I'm not looking at emails like, oh my God, I have to respond to this

Candace Dellacona: Yeah.

Yeah.

Dean Blandino: I've taken that step back and being able to enjoy more time with the boys and doing different things and going to practices and just spending time.

We've got the schedule down and I'm traveling during the weekends, but they're here with me Monday through Thursday. And my little one, I call him my little one, but he's 10. He's gonna walk in the door at 2:30 and I haven't seen him for a couple days, so he's gonna wanna kind of check in and I'm gonna want to hang out with him.

And we just do our thing. So just try to find that, that, we always talk about work life balance, right? It's such a, it's. really hard because, there's on the work side I gotta be successful. I wanna strive and I wanna do the best I can, but at what cost?

Candace Dellacona: Absolutely true. Yeah.

I think you're right. I think one of my favorite people, Kass Lazaro, who's been on the podcast, she's a really interesting businesswoman, talked about the work-life balance being a myth. And I think that's partly true. You have to figure out a way to integrate.

And boundaries is one of the things you just brought up, and that's one of the lessons that a lot of sandwich generation members have to think about and perfect and practice. Some of us are terrible at it, some are better, but you know, envisioning someone waiting for an email and response is not a great boundary at all.

And it sounds like you figured it out way in advance of the kids realizing it and you do such a good job. At being present and, the co-parenting thing is so tricky for so many people. And so you have this great partner that, together, you guys are figuring out the best way to meet the kids' needs.

So tell us a little bit about your schedule. You travel mostly on the weekends, so you're able to do the day-to-day stuff with the kids.

Dean Blandino: Yeah. Yeah. That was one of the good things football season is football season. I've been doing it since 1994. Weekends you're working and that's part of the deal. The way the schedule is now, we have a game on Sunday. I'm either leaving Friday or Saturday, depending on where that game is in relation to, I'm in Southern California. we do the game. I'm home Sunday night and then I have the week I work from home, I can get the boys ready for school and I can take them where they need to be and be here when they get home. And just continue to build that schedule out and make sure they have that consistency and communicating as a co-parent and making sure that we're being consistent.

And like I said, I'm just trying to, she carried the water for a very long time for, while I was working and doing other things. And I'm just trying to like, make up for that and continue to just be the best co-parent and best father I can be, which is, I know that's what we all, whatever, when we have kids, we want to, we wanna do that for them.

And, the schedule is so much easier now in terms of being able to have that time. You miss things like things on the weekends, whether it's flag football or wrestling or whatever else they're doing, you do miss those things, but you do have more time during the week to, to make those moments up.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah, for sure. I think you're right. I think we're all just doing the best we can and you have to be kind to yourself and think about things like boundaries and pitching in with whomever's, helping you with the kids. Be there for yourself.

Conclusion and Final Thoughts

Candace Dellacona: So my last sort of question is, how do you manage for yourself?

How do you practice self-care? What do you do to make sure that you're in a good space? You appeared on the the podcast talking about Unbreakable. Jake Glazer does a great job about the mental health aspect, so you share a little bit about that.

Dean Blandino: Yeah, absolutely. And I think a lot of people from, what am I'm Gen X, right? Gen X

Candace Dellacona: Yeah, I think you're Gen X, yeah.

Dean Blandino: Gen X. I think and especially like our parents, I think my father, they're incredible dad, right? Incredible. But there wasn't, a lot of, I love yous.

It wasn't a lot of, it was like, okay, come on, you fell. Come on, dust it off. Let's go. And so you have that. And then there was my mom who was like, too far the other way. It was like, oh my God, you stubbed your toe, let me take you to the hospital.

So you try to, I gravitated more towards my dad's style and so you keep things in and again, I learned the hard way that you can't do that and you have to take time for yourself to just make sure that you're in a good state. 'cause if you're not in a good state of mind, you're not gonna be good for anybody.

Candace Dellacona: Yeah.

Dean Blandino: You're certainly not gonna be good for the people that are closest to you. In my role as head of officiating, there's a lot of stress. It was a lot of negativity. I think we were talking about it earlier before we started recording, but, I did standup comedy back in the nineties.

Humor was always a big thing for me to diffuse situations and bring things to a better place. And then just, now it's really important. I'll wake up, get the kids to school, and then I'm gonna go work out. That's a big thing for me is just I, getting that, getting some exercise, doing something every morning, get my day started that way, feel good about that.

And then doing the rest of the day and always taking the approach of, I want every interaction that I have. I know some, it is probably not reasonable, but I want every interaction I have to be a positive one with other people. And the only time I fail at that is when I'm driving because too many people don't know how to drive. But other than that, I try to stick to that

Candace Dellacona: Is that a California thing, Dean, or is that

Dean Blandino: I think it's everywhere, but definitely in California. But try to maintain that positivity. 'cause I'm surrounded by a lot of negativity for a long time in that role. Just by nature, not

Candace Dellacona: Yeah.

Dean Blandino: because people are bad or whatever.

Candace Dellacona: Right, Yeah.

Dean Blandino: So just trying to stay positive, trying to have those positive connections. Surround yourself with people that negativity is just not something I want in my life. Don't want drama in my life, and sometimes it's impossible to avoid at all, but just surround myself with good people, keep my circle small to those people and yeah, and just do the best we can every day.

I mean, it sounds cliche, but that's kind of

Candace Dellacona: No, no. You said a couple of really important things. You said finding humor and I can attest that you're one of the funniest people in a group of people that I know, and I'm sure some of the guys will disagree, but strenuously objecting, but you are and really just allowing yourself to laugh.

And you were in a position certainly in officiating where half the people were gonna be mad at you. And knowing that and being able to move on from it, going for that workout, turning inward when you have to, and making sure that you have people that will be honest with you and also help you and be there for you.

So those are all good lessons to take away and boundaries, which was, you.

Dean Blandino: Yeah, and also don't read the comments on social media that do not even today, I don't even make the calls anymore. I'm just explaining them and I get blamed. So stay off the comments.

Candace Dellacona: I've seen notes, I've seen them seen, and most of them are, I would say that the people who adore you are right in there with you and really wanna reply. But we know better. And you're a good egg, Dean Blandino, and we're really happy that you were able to join us today and impart some wisdom for our listeners, for the fans.

So thanks so much for your time.

Dean Blandino: Thanks for having me. And yeah, anytime. I'd love to come back and just check in every once in a while.

Candace Dellacona: That sounds good. Thanks so much.

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