

Focusing on Life After Football

Law alumnus guides players through trappings of fame.

By Angela Lutz

During his 15-year career working with NFL players, **Les Pico, '92**, has gotten good at busting stereotypes. One misconception he encounters quite often: Not every football player is a millionaire. Still, that doesn't stop family and friends from hitting them up for cash, which can be stressful for a new professional athlete. That's where Pico comes in: Part of his job is helping these young men manage their money and set limits in their personal relationships so they can be more effective on the field.

"If a player was raised in a single-parent home and his mother worked three jobs to help him get through school, it's hard to say no when people ask him for money," said Pico, who has been director of player development and legal for the Minnesota Vikings since 2005. "But we help them create safe and respectful boundaries so they can say no."

"I absolutely loved my experience at Washburn. There were faculty members that touched my life – they were so willing to go above and beyond and help me grow professionally. In every aspect of my life, I grew – and I had some growing to do. I was trying to be a good father, a good husband, and a good student, and I had great people around to help me." - Les Pico

Guiding players through the trappings of fame and finances is just part of what Pico does. In his position, he also assists players with other challenges they face off the field, including taking care of their mental and emotional health, avoiding toxic relationships and substance abuse, and transitioning in and out of the game. In his quest to get to know the league's Sunday afternoon superstars, Pico regularly confronts young men who believe talking about their feelings is a sign of weakness. This is another damaging cultural norm he seeks to dispel.

"I think men are raised in an environment where we are taught to handle our business, and men view other men as being weak when they do talk about their problems," Pico said. "I tell our players that I want to know the guy behind the numbers. I'm not a fan – this is what I do for a living. The fans are the 70,000 people who watch them play on Sunday afternoon. If they have challenges in their life, we address them."

Pico got his start working with athletes while he was a student at Washburn University School of Law, where he coached football in addition to juggling his studies with the demands of being a young husband and father of four.

"I look back on that and it was a great time, but it was also a tough time," he said.

After graduation, he worked for the NCAA and the Kansas City Chiefs before moving on to the Vikings, where, along with his other duties, he has implemented a number of educational programs and internships to help players prepare for life after football. Since the average length of an NFL career is just shy of four years, cultivating secondary marketable skills is a very real concern for most athletes.

"I always tell the guys you have to begin with the end in mind," Pico said. "I want them thinking from the day they hit the door about life after football. I'm on them – I say that if football defines who they are as a man, there are going to be a lot of disappointments in their life outside of football. But we're trying to bring guys in that are good character guys both on and off the field."

In addition to their skills on offense or defense, when Pico interviews potential players, the question of character is paramount. He looks closely at a player's experience in college: Was he timely getting to class? Was he accountable? Was he active in the community? Did he have off-the-field issues or positive drug tests? Did he work well with teammates? Was he respectful to coaches? In general, Pico said he finds



Les Pico, '92. Photo provided by the Minnesota Vikings

himself working with a lot of “awesome” young men – which is the opposite of what most people see in the media, he added, where professional athletes’ personal conduct regularly makes headlines.

“They are great young guys,” Pico said. “I think the media tends to focus on the negative, but I can’t say enough about the quality and character of the young men that we bring in.”

Though Pico now serves as a role model to many young football players, some of his early mentors included his professors at Washburn University School of Law, including Nancy Maxwell, Ron Griffin, Dennis Carroll, and **Ray Spring, BA '57, JD '59**. Pico’s law degree serves him well in his current position, allowing

him to help players find quality legal representation and navigate tricky contractual or business situations. He credits his time at Washburn with helping him grow as a person, and he is now able to pass that same wisdom and guidance on to young players in the NFL.

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