

Episode 15:
Not Just For Kicks:
NFL Placekicker Returns for a Diploma 33 Years Later
 (7/4/2018)

Segment	Who	Copy
Intro	Kevin Butler	I've been in some big offices with some very powerful people and I've had guys sit on the other side of the desk and look at me, and the only thing they wanna know about is what it feels like to play football. And behind them somewhere is a framed diploma. And that's the one thing I never had.
		INTRO MUSIC
Podcast Overview	Andy Levine	<p>Welcome to Second Act Stories, a podcast that looks at people who have made major career changes and are pursuing more rewarding lives in a second act.</p> <p>So since I began this podcast back in March, I've always wanted to interview a professional athlete about life after their sports career. And so I was delighted to connect with Kevin Butler, an NFL veteran of 13 seasons from 1985 to 1998. In his rookie season, he was part of Chicago Bears that won Super Bowl XX.</p> <p>So what was life after he left the field? And what was behind his desire to return to the University of Georgia to finally get a degree that had eluded him for 33 years?</p> <p>I traveled to Atlanta and met with Kevin in his study surrounded by awards, photos and football memorabilia. And I sat on a couch with his dog Vinny and had an fascinating 90 minute conversation with the man.</p> <p>Let's get this started with Kevin Butler's dazzling football career at the University of Georgia.</p>

	Andy	Tell me about, I don't know , the greatest moment of your college career. If you had to pick one game, one moment, what sticks out to you?
	Kevin	Well, it is my senior year. We were playing at home. We were playing Clemson who was their biggest rival. We're getting beat bad at halftime 20-3, I think it was, at halftime and then we turned around the second half and came back. And then I kicked a 60-yard field goal at the, you know, last few seconds of the game to beat them.
	Andy	It took a little digging. But here's the call of that play from the Georgia Bulldogs long-time announcer Larry Munson. The score is 23-23. Georgia is out of time-outs. It's 4 th down. And there are 17 seconds left on the clock.
	Larry Munson	<i>So we'll try and kick one 100,000 miles. We're holding in on our own 49 and a half. We're gonna try and kick it 60 yards plus a foot and a half. Butler kicked a long one...</i> <i>Oh my god...Oh my god. The stadium is worse than bonkers. 11 seconds. I can't believe what he did..."</i>
	Andy	So college football with the Bulldogs was a pretty amazing experience for Kevin. But he never actually got his degree from the University of Georgia. He was taken in the 2 nd round of the NFL draft by Coach Mike Ditka and the Chicago Bears in 1985. And he headed to the Bears mini-camp in Wisconsin rather than graduation. The first day started with a team meeting.
	Kevin	So I got in the meeting and they shut the door and, Coach Ditka was, you know, like, "We welcome all of you here. We get the draft picks, we get the free agents, all the veterans in there. We're gonna do our minicamp." And, you know, he's given the opening talk, and then Mike Singletary, you know, now Hall of Famer, stood up and said, "Coach, we need coaches leave the room." Coaches all left the room and Singletary got up, and Hampton got up, Payton got up, Richard Dent got up. And these were all Hall of Famers. And they were still babbling from the loss they had and the embarrassment they had in the championship game. And they made it very clear that if you did not believe in winning the Super Bowl, that you were not gonna be on the team. If you didn't do everything possible, that you would not be on the team because this team had one goal and one goal only, that was to win the Super Bowl. And that kinda lit my fuse.

	Andy	So right after the team meeting Kevin called his fiance Cathy and told her that they were going to have to reschedule their wedding which had been set for January 25th.
	Kevin	I got out of that meeting and I called my fiance, and this is true story. I called Cathy and I said, "Hey, honey." And I said, "We need to change our wedding." I said, "We're supposed to be married 25th." And I said, "26th is the Super Bowl." I said, "Bears is going in the Super Bowl." And she's like "You haven't even made the team." I go, "I will make the team." And I said we're going to Super Bowl, and it takes two to get married. And I'm not gonna be there, I'm gonna be in New Orleans.
	Andy	So Kevin made the team. The Bears did go to the Super Bowl and beat the New England Patriots 46 to 10. Kevin kicked three field goals and four extra points. And two weeks later, Kevin and Cathy got married.
	Andy	Now, just to get this right, you are how old in your first year?
	Kevin	I am 23.
	Andy	23 years old and you're...
	Kevin	No. I'm, yeah, 24.
	Andy	Twenty-four years old. You're 24 years old and you go to the Super Bowl, and you win the Super Bowl.
	Kevin	Yeah.
	Andy	Kevin continued to play for Coach Mike Ditka for the next 8 seasons and had a very successful career as one of the league's top place kickers. But in 1993 a new coach came in with new plans. And in 1996, he was cut by the Bears.
	Andy	You work for 11 seasons with the Bears and then you get cut. Was that kind of a bitter pill when that happened?
	Kevin	Oh, it is. It's always a bitter pill. I don't know if you'll ever find an athlete that says, "Yeah. I get cut just like I wanted to." You know, there's no...it's not the corporate world of, you know, I got cut without cause and then you can collect everything. You know, in the NFL when you're cut, you're cut.

	Andy	You were two seasons with Arizona. Good experience there?
	Kevin	It was good from a standpoint of redemption. I didn't... I never wanted to leave Chicago.-I got spoiled being in Chicago, you know. I consider myself Chicago Bear even though I didn't get to retire with them.
	Andy	So, I came across one quote that sort of stuck out to me about place kicking that said, "Placekicking in the NFL has been called the football's loneliest position." Is that a fair description of the job, you think?
	Kevin	Well, I think it can be. I mean, you certainly have the outcome to be lonely and it's lonely when you're not performing. There's no doubt about it. I, you know, I've been in the business world for 20-something years also and, you know, you go and you lose a big deal you've been working on for a long time. I guess you're a lonely salesman at that point. You're a lonely executive at that point. So, I think there's a lot of common denominator with being successful and then having challenges. But kicking is certainly, you're isolated, you know. You were out there by yourself and they don't understand if the snap was a little bad or the hold was bad or alignment came through and blocked it, it's your fault.
	Andy	And that's a good transition to life after the NFL. Kevin has done a range of different jobs – some entrepreneurial and some more on the corporate side of things.
	Kevin	Me and Walter Payton, when Walter retired two years after that, me and Walter Payton started a business called the Great Iron Golf. And we had the licenses for the NFL golf accessories. So, anything that you'd see from towels to balls to tees, the clubs, head covers, anything, we had the license for those. So, me and Walter would do that in the off season. I really formed a great relationship with him. I learned a lot from it.
	Andy	Kevin and his family eventually moved back to the Atlanta area when Cathy's mom got sick. And she ended up managing the family business, a bridal shop called "Formally Yours."

	Kevin	<p>My wife needed to come back and not only to take care of her mom, but take care of the business. So, we started kinda switching and said, "Okay. We're heading back to Atlanta."</p> <p>Cathy owns and runs the business now. And my daughter, who's a fashion merchandise major from Georgia, also runs the business with her. So, they have that going. So, it was crazy how it took us back here, but it was family that really brought us back here. And we couldn't have been more happier to get back here.</p>
	Andy	<p>So, you come back to Atlanta in 1999. Tell me what you did career-wise at that point.</p>
	Kevin	<p>Yeah. I came back, a buddy of mine who'd been in the hotel industry called me randomly He goes, "What are you up to? I said to him, "Moving back to Atlanta." I said, "Let me come interview with you."</p> <p>And I did and it was a company called PGI, Production Group International. And it was a full communication agency. We did everything from Coca-Cola to Ford Motor Company, to your AT&T, BellSouth, whatever it might be. Just large-scale sales meetings, movement, incentive programs, we did it all.</p> <p>So, I came back and I took that job.</p>
	Andy	<p>Kevin worked with PGI for about ten years. And then he joined a company a technology company in 2011 that he recently left.</p>
	Andy	<p>Is it hard for a professional athlete and someone, you know, like yourself who's been, you know, on a Super Bowl team to transition away from sports and to make that move?</p>
	Kevin	<p>I think it's very hard for anybody to transition from something they've been doing to something different, change, you know, people, and I'm one of them. You know, change is always probably held with a little bit of hand in front of them at first. But I think, you know, if you learn to look at change as an opportunity, it becomes a little easier.</p> <p>The thing you miss most when you leave sports is the camaraderie. I mean, probably it's a cliché, but it really is. I mean, to go into, you know, when you get out of football, you go, "God, am I ever gonna be around a group of people again that, you know, I enjoy getting up, going to work with, that I'll go to bat for?" And that's the mentality of sports teams. And you have to be lucky, and you have to search a little bit to find that in the, I'll call it real world when you're out getting a job.</p>

	Andy	So in the past decade, there has been a tremendous amount of concern about NFL players and the long term impact of concussions and brain trauma. Place kickers are obviously in a different role but it doesn't mean that they don't face medical challenges once they leave the game.
	Andy	I know you have had both hips replaced as well as spinal fusion surgery. Is that related to your career in football?
	Kevin	Yeah. It is. You know, the spinal fusion, probably not as much. I think the information came from what I've done throughout my career on my back. But I had what was called Spinal Discitis. So, it's like getting tooth decay on your disc in your spine to where one day, all my disc were gone and my spine collapsed. So, I was down for two months without movement, you know.
	Andy	How many years ago was this?
	Kevin	2005.
	Andy	Okay, Okay.
	Kevin	You know, two times in eight weeks, the ambulance took me back and forth to the hospital. I probably lost 35, 40 pounds. At the worse, I couldn't move. As it was. So, I took about a year to get under control before they did the operation and they did the operation, they fused me up. Instantly, I felt better. Speed up 10 years, the left hip was always troublesome, you know, planting [SP], twisting. It was just bone on bone. So...
	Andy	So that's just the repetitive movement?
	Kevin	Repetitive movement. It became arthritic and then once the arthritis set in there, the bone was basically, you want a smooth bone that's just really smooth in your joint, and my bone probably looked like that to where it catch...and I had no labrum anymore. So, I had no cartilage either. It's just bone on bone, it hurt.
	Andy	Okay. How long ago did you have the surgery?
	Kevin	It will be two years this July, which is great, and this one I had done on March 23rd. So, that was six weeks. I went for the 6th-week checkup this morning.
	Andy	Let me switch gears on you here. Talk about the decision to go back to school and finish your degree. So, how did that come about?

	Kevin	<p>It came about just, you know, my kids have always been on me about it, you know. That, you know, they're all luckily, God bless them all, all finished school, all have their degrees, my wife has a degree from Terry Business School.</p> <p>So, it was left to me, I was, you know, not gonna be the one guy in the family and they always kept saying...I said, "When you all are done, when you all are done." So, lo and behold, they're done. And so, they just, you know, really pushed me and I got a meeting one day with Diana Beckett up at the University of Georgia. She's, you know, in the admissions and the basically the counselor, my counselor. So, I went to her. She pulled up all my records, we got it out there, and we figured out it was six classes. She goes six, you know, that's doable. You can get that done."</p>
	Andy	<p>So thirty years-plus years after leaving the campus, Kevin Butler returned to finish his degree at the University of Georgia. But there was the twist that brought him back to the Bulldogs football field.</p>
	Kevin	<p>I was taking two classes and two days a week. And I got a call from the university, Mike Gavin, who was a coach for me when I played at Georgia and who's in the administration now, he's like, "You know, if you take...if you're a full-time student and you take 12 hours, you can be an undergrad assistant. You can coach the kickers."</p> <p>So, I did that and I jumped into coaching. And that's really what intrigued me. And I had a great time with it.</p>
	Andy	<p>So, you're coaching the punters and the kickers?</p>
	Kevin	<p>Yeah. And the snappers, and I'm helping out with specialty teams. Basically, I was a coach, coaching and I was responsible for the kickers and the punters, and their workouts, and come game time I was responsible for whether they win in or what they were gonna do. So, Kirby gave me a lot more authority than I thought I was gonna have when I first enrolled.</p>
	Andy	<p>So, you just graduated last Saturday like three days ago.</p>
	Kevin	<p>Yeah. Last Friday night.</p>
	Andy	<p>So, how did it feel walking across the stage?</p>
	Kevin	<p>It's unbelievable. Yeah. It was unbelievable. I had...</p>
	Andy	<p>So 30 years in the making or whatever.</p>

	Kevin	Absolutely. I had the best time, you know. It was at the Terry Business School which is a tremendous business college in the university system. One of the tops in the nation and my wife is a graduate from there and now, you know, our whole family is all graduates. And it's something that made my parents very proud they share the moment with us. Yeah. It was awesome.
	Andy	Across the top of his graduation cap, his family wrote "The Butler Did It." And his entire family attended the graduation ceremony.
	Kevin	I mean, it's a moment that as I watched my son and my daughters, and everybody graduate from Georgia, you know, I'd gone into many business meetings, I've been in some big offices with some very powerful people and I've had guys sit on the other side of the desk and look at me, and the only thing they wanna know about is what it feels like to play football. And behind them somewhere is a framed diploma. And that's the one thing I never had. And, you know, the field is finally level, you know, I can go and do anything I want now. And I think that degree does give you some of that mental ability to go out there and compete.
	Andy	I had the chance to speak by phone with Kevin's son Drew Butler. He is a 29-year-old punter in the NFL who has played for both the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Arizona Cardinals. And he had this to say about his father and his new degree.
	Drew Butler	I think it was just personal pride. He took it seriously. He worked his ass off. He really really did. It's hard to go back. I mean I can't even imagine going back just being a few years out of college and he did being 35 years out of college. I've got nothing but respect for him. And I know a lot of his classmates and peers did as well.
	Andy	Let's go back to Kevin for the final word on today's podcast.
	Andy	So, if football is act one, act two is some of the entrepreneurial things you did with Walter Payton, with this technology company, with PGI, that's act two. What do you think act three looks like for you?
	Kevin	Well, I'll tell you what I'm hoping it looks like. I wanna be involved in football. I think that's... As my wife says that's what I was put on earth to do and I think the way I handled myself the last two years with Georgia and Coach Smart giving me that opportunity, I think I bring value. I'm gonna bring value to whoever picks me up or whoever would give me that opportunity. Would I like it to be at Georgia? Absolutely. I think that's where I bring the most value.

		OUTGOING MUSIC
Thank-You and Show Credits	Andy	<p>Of course, we want to thank Kevin Butler for opening up and telling us his unique story. And we really do wish him the best as he returns to football with the Georgia Bulldogs or another team that's smart enough to hire him.</p> <p>We thank his son Drew Butler as well and hope to see him on another NFL team in the year ahead.</p> <p>If you are considering your own second act, we hope Kevin's story will provide some inspiration. You have to admire anyone who returns to college after 30 years and finally gets that diploma.</p> <p>We hope you'll keep listening. A new "Second Act Story" is just around the corner.</p>