

Masters of Scale: Rapid Response Transcript – Jerry Stackhouse

“Winning and losing, w/Vanderbilt University coach Jerry Stackhouse”

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Am I optimistic to think that we could do it in the intermediate? Yes. Am I hell-bent on trying to do it in the short-term? Yes. But I understand the reality of what we faced when we got here, of how I'm building the team, building our talent, building our infrastructure.

You have to learn to adjust to your personnel. Maybe there's something in your scheme and your vision of long-term that you got to try to tweak a little bit. Be flexible and not be so rigid in what you want to have happen and live in the moment, and hopefully you can still build that personnel up to be what you ultimately want.

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BOB SAFIAN: That's Jerry Stackhouse, coach of the Vanderbilt University men's basketball team and former NBA all-star.

With Covid-19, his team has faced cancellations, new health protocols, and a pandemic reality of isolation, and empty arenas. He's also faced both winning and losing amid that environment.

I'm Bob Safian, former editor of Fast Company, founder of The Flux Group, and host of Masters of Scale: Rapid Response.

I wanted to talk with Jerry because his challenges offer a compelling parable for the obstacles that every business leader faces these days. Leading a team has never been more complicated, balancing the high stakes of health, racial equity, and media scrutiny with the quest for performance.

Jerry is both patiently tracking a long-term plan and impatiently pressing for improvement. And he's grappling every day with how young generations are responding to unexpected times – and their intense desire for a return to normality.

[Intro Music]

SAFIAN: I'm Bob Safian. I'm here with Jerry Stackhouse, coach of the Vanderbilt University men's basketball team and former NBA All-Star. Coach Stackhouse is coming to us from his home in Nashville, Tennessee as I ask my questions from my home in Brooklyn, New York. Jerry, thanks for joining us.

STACKHOUSE: Thank you, Bob. Thanks for having me, man.

SAFIAN: So this is your second season in charge of Vanderbilt, and it's hard to imagine two seasons that would proceed with so much disruption. Right? Covid-19 cut short last year's NCAA basketball season, and since then, college basketball programs start and stop, a constant uncertainty. Leading an NCAA basketball program has never been easy, but these are new challenges. How has the job been what you expected it to be, and how has it been different?

STACKHOUSE: Yeah. I think really Covid has changed things, but I think for what we're able to control, the basketball part of it has been pretty good and pretty steady: Being able to get in the gym and practice, and obviously the day-to-day with our athletes, and them being full-time students. Obviously that's changed, with everything going virtual now. So that's had some implications, as you might imagine.

When freshmen come in, you pretty much try to put your arm around them, and make sure they get to class, and do all these types of things. And now, they're doing everything on their own. So it's about, "Am I going to make sure I get on this Zoom, or am I going to get on my phone and get on social media?"

So it's been a little bit of a challenge, but our guys have been really great, man. For the most part, man, we got a lot of work in. At the early part of the season, we had all of our guys, so we were able to practice. The summer was really different. We were the last game at the SEC tournament last year, and then they shut everything down after that. So, it was different.

It's not like we felt like we were in a bubble by ourselves. Everybody's affected by not being able to go and see recruits, not being able to get on the road, and not having the normal summer that you would have leading into a college season. But for the most part, I think we've made the best of it.

SAFIAN: Is your relationship with your guys different because of COVID, because of all the other things that are going on?

STACKHOUSE: Well, I think so, man. I think they really value that time together, because they're pretty much isolated. When they go back to their dorms, they're not allowed to visit with each other or to really come and sit with each other. So they really enjoy that time, and we enjoy that time with them. The film sessions. Even when we have a light day, they're still hanging around the gym. I was like, "We might as well

practice if y'all still going to hang around the gym." But they're just like, "No, we get a chance to talk to somebody."

So that's just the new world that we're living in with Covid, but I do think we all become closer because we spend that time together. You're teaching them, and they're learning. They're having successes, they're having some failures, and it's all new to us too.

SAFIAN: You had a recent win for the team, but not all the games have gone well. There's been some media swirling as well. There's Covid, there's social justice actions, wins and losses. What's the measure of success for a program in an environment like this?

STACKHOUSE: There's always going to be noise. I like to call it noise. It's just, kind of, distractions from what's important and what we know our ultimate goal is. You make short-term goals, you kind of have intermediate goals, and you have long-term goals. When I took this job, I knew to get us to where we wanted to go was going to be more of a long-term goal. Am I optimistic to think that we might do it in the intermediate? Yes. Am I hell-bent on trying to do it in the short-term? Yes. But I understand that the reality of what we faced when we got here, of how I'm building the team, building our talent, building our infrastructure. I think our infrastructure, it's to the point now to where we feel like we can really get out and have success. I think that was why I was brought here.

When I got hired at Vanderbilt, the talk was about trying to find the ceiling. I feel like we've had some good basketball teams, but can we find our ceiling of really putting it all together, really investing into our athletics as other teams in the SEC have? And we got that commitment. We got that commitment from our chancellor, got that commitment from our AD. So, we know where we are. The team that I inherited when I got here, didn't win a game in the SEC. You know what I'm saying? I have those same players minus a couple of draft picks. I lost my best player. I lost 24 points out of my starting lineup on the very first game of the SEC against Auburn, and we've still found a way to win us three games.

We feel like we're trending in the right direction with what we're doing and how we're going about it. I'm a firm believer that teams that play together, and really understand how to share the floor together, and understand the game of basketball can do some amazing things. So yeah, when you look at us on paper, it's probably realistic to say, "Okay, they're not going to be there right now. They're a year or so away." I think differently. I think that it can happen for us, and that we can beat anybody that we're playing.

I'm really excited about my kids, their potential to finish out this year. There's a lot of noise that comes with these high-visibility jobs, and it's fun when you can answer the bell. And I think our true fans, they understand it. That we're part of a build, and I think that they see the progress that we're making.

SAFIAN: A lot of the folks listening to this are entrepreneurs, or people who are trying to build their own teams. Right? Sometimes they can get everybody they want, sometimes they get who they have, and they're trying to go up against other teams that may be more resourced or more established in the marketplace. Are there key things that you anchor on about what brings the team together, what makes a team work?

STACKHOUSE: You can have a plan of, in your perfect world, when you have all of the personnel that you want, how things would pan out. But then you have to learn to adjust to your personnel. Maybe there's something in your scheme and your vision of long-term that you got to try to tweak a little bit in the midterm. So you adjust.

I just think being able to be flexible and not be so rigid in what you want to have happen and kind of live in the moment and hopefully you can still build that personnel up to be what you ultimately want instead of having to go out and outsourcing and thinking you got to get another piece or someone else. Just work with them, and eventually they may be able to accomplish the things that you want. But in the immediate, you have to just try to tweak your plan a little bit to help them.

SAFIAN: The women's basketball team at Vanderbilt had to end their season due to health and safety concerns and Covid. How did that impact your team? Do you players get worried about Covid? Are you worried about it?

STACKHOUSE: Yeah, I think we all are worried about it. It's like the happiest part of my day is when I get a text from my trainer that said, "All Covid tests are negative." That's the best part of my evening. We test three days a week, and then the next day, like I said, you would think about, okay, the game, right? The game, the game, the game's not the most important thing for us right now. Getting to the game is the most important thing and making sure that we have an opportunity for our kids to compete when they make all these sacrifices of trying to stay out of homes, wait, and still it could happen. It could happen at the pharmacy, it could happen at the grocery store. It's real, it's a reality of living and trying to play college basketball in a pandemic. And I try to be transparent and make sure I have full dialogue with my parents and our athletes because, at the end of the day, it's your decision.

We just want to go by the protocols, and there's nothing wrong with opting out. "I don't feel comfortable doing this." But our team, our parents, they want it. We take extra measures here. That's something that I'm truly proud of, that we make sure that none of our athletes, if they've had any dealings with Covid or anything, that they're not getting back on the floor until they have their MRI of their heart, and there's a ramp up. We're not just throwing them right back out there.

You got to respect the things that they dealt with. It wasn't just the Covid things. I think they were dealing with a ton of injuries so it was hard for them to really feel the team that they felt could compete and then obviously with the emotional side of it.

But, for us, shortly after that, I met with my team and, again, just kind of put it out there, "We will not hold it against you in any way if you don't feel comfortable to be out here, but once you got a foot in the sandbox, you don't have to stay in the sandbox." That's how we dealt with that, and we continued to forge forward.

SAFIAN: Sports and basketball have played a big part in the anti-racism movement over the last year, especially the NBA. How do you talk with your players when it comes to the social justice issues? What do you hear from them about it? And to what extent is that part of the dialogue within the team?

STACKHOUSE: I hear optimism from them. I think when we had the George Floyd tragedy, I think it just shocked everybody, and I really wanted to hear from my players, I wanted them to put something on paper. I made a project for them to write to me and kind of give me their thoughts and how they felt and there was a range. But I think the majority of our guys were truly optimistic. I think we got to learn so much from them, this is Generation Z. I think they just think differently.

It's the smartest generation that we've had. Do they have all the common sense every time? No. They're kids, we still got to keep them on track. But they got big ideas about how to solve this. I did spend a lot of time trying to talk to them about something that there obviously hadn't been the right answers to because we're still dealing with that right now and it's a big part of our society.

But the reality of it is let's try to educate ourselves, try to not let it be a elephant in the room, to be bold enough to speak on issues, to stand up for, and I think the NBA has done a great job with the Black Lives Matter movement, being able to allow guys to wear things on their jersey on the floor. They really took the lead on a lot of that, and obviously they got a lot of push back and a lot of negative feedback so it just shows you that it's there, it's real, and we got to try to fight it together. I kind of left it open to my kids if they wanted to kneel, if they wanted to stay in the locker room.

Some kids were like, "Maybe we could kind of adopt some program or bring some kids into the games and stuff." But now we can't have fans at games. Hopefully once we get out of this thing, we can do some things more geared to addressing some of those issues.

SAFIAN: It sounds like they feel this, I don't want to say burden or necessarily responsibility, but the fact that, as athletes, they are role models and they have a certain platform that they can use, and it sounds like, at this point, they're limited in the ways they can express that.

STACKHOUSE: Yeah. One kid that, he just doesn't understand it, he couldn't fathom seeing that. He went to a private school, so he never dealt with any type of police profiling, racial profiling or anything, he couldn't fathom it. This is a Black kid. And then I

got a kid that was like, "I don't feel comfortable walking on campus sometimes." You know what I'm saying?

This is something that's right around us, and that these kids feel, and we got to try to find a way to help them with it. And then there's kids that are like, "Man, it's been this long and hadn't anything changed, I'm just not optimistic that it's going to change." It's like I got all these different views in my starting line-up, and we're trying to get down to play together.

No, it's just a reality, how different people feel about different things, and I think we have to respect that but that's the most important thing that we're not going to always agree. But we got to learn to live with each other and learn different perspectives and different views, different cultures. And I think that's what makes America what it is, kind of a melting pot of people that can coexist together, but we want to see it live out on a bigger scale than it is right now.

SAFIAN: Do they turn to you for guidance about how they should express themselves, or what's appropriate on social media or isn't? As an NBA player, I don't know whether you thought of yourself as a role model and whether you had a responsibility to leverage your platform. People didn't really talk that way back when you were playing, right?

STACKHOUSE: I don't think you're just out taking a stance to take a stance on different things, and I don't feel like my guys expect me to go out and be someone who I'm not. I think we live in our world, the time that I have with them, right? My chief of staff, she meets with them and gives them different life lessons, and they talk about those things. But, again, it's not something that anybody really wants to talk about consistently. Again, it's the elephant in the room, let's just coexist, and it's unfortunate but that's kind of the reality.

SAFIAN: And do you feel like there's more that sport should be doing to have an impact then or-

STACKHOUSE: Why sports? I think the athletes are doing what they feel that they can do. I think the NBA partnering with the player's association to try to put major dollars toward fighting social injustice, I think that's a start, but where is everybody else?

Big business, Wall Street. I mean, everybody has a responsibility for this. I don't think athletes or the sports markets are responsible for the issues that are present. Could there be more Black general managers? Could there be more Black head coaches? Absolutely, but again, I think those are things that we just continue to push for and strive for. And hopefully we eventually get a little more of a level playing field.

SAFIAN: Has this been a stressful year for you?

STACKHOUSE: No. I mean, I don't really get too stressed about much but my team. I've dealt with some loss this year. I lost my father. So that that's been if you call that stress, I think that's the real stress. I mean, I love what I do. I mean, this is a blessing to be able to still be a part of a game that I've been playing since I was seven, eight years old or even younger. But I think then I had an opportunity to play it a long time, be a part of the game, and now still be able to give back and teach the game. So I feel fortunate from that standpoint, but yeah, my mom, she's 90, be 92 years old this year, and her and my dad obviously they've been together all of my life and longer, and for her to lose him, so yeah, it's tough to deal with those things, but those are life things.

I don't have time to be stressed. I have to try to just keep moving and make sure that I'm the answer to other people's problems and not try to dwell on my own, so to speak.

SAFIAN: When we talked before, it struck me that you have a certain confidence about yourself – that in whatever environment, you're going to find a way to make it through whatever's in front of you. Certainly the sense I got from you as a player, didn't matter what system you were in, you were going to find a way to have an impact.

STACKHOUSE: I just think it's being able to adjust and adapt even when people don't think that you can. I think it goes back to what I got traded to the Dallas Mavericks. And I was playing, Don Nelson was the coach at the time. So it was like, "Stackhouse, what's going to happen? Is he going to accept his role of coming off the bench?" I'm like, "Man, I ain't even got here. Hadn't even got to a practice yet, and it's already questions about what I'll accept." And Nelly, when we first talked, he was like, "Man, I got six starters."

That's how he started the conversation. I got six starters. I was a sixth man myself, but you're going to play starter minutes. You're going to be there at the end of games, it's just only five guys can start, but I got six starters. And the way he approached that, I mean, it kind of just brought it to me, and it calmed all my anxieties or any bad thoughts about it and to the point that where I embraced it, man. And next thing I know, I'm in that role, and people seeing me in that role feel like I accepted a role that man. When I took off my jersey to walk to check in the game, there were already standing ovations in the gym.

So I got pretty much more celebration from being a sixth man than I would if I was in the starting lineup. So I just think, man, that's it for me. Being able to adapt and adjust. I became a guy who was called selfish early on when I was averaging 37 points to a guy that I wanted to have in my locker room to mentor my young guys because I was able to teach them how to accept roles. And I had a real story to tell them and to share with them about how you can have success with less. And I think that's really the message that I give to our guys, man. I know everybody wants to play a ton of minutes, I get it. But again, you gotta earn it, and at the same time, be accepting of your role. Keep getting better every day in whatever role that's asked of you, and your role can expand.

And if you do that, I've never ever seen it in any season of basketball where some good things don't happen for you. And I've been in the game a long time so that's my message and my sell to them: to keep working, keep doing what you're doing. It's going to turn and I think they're starting to see it now.

SAFIAN: You mentioned that the last game you played with fans was almost a year ago. What's it like to compete in an empty arena?

STACKHOUSE: Man, it's really like I don't even notice it. I'm so locked into the 94 feet and the guys inside the line. Most of the time when we're in an arena with fans, I don't even really feel the fans. I'm so locked-in on what's going on, trying to see all 10 guys on the floor. I think that's where you really grow as a coach when you're able to see all 10 guys and kind of what's going on there.

SAFIAN: Do your players miss having fans out there, or is it some ways easier for you and for them with one less layer of distraction?

STACKHOUSE: I think that's been a message for them. Man, we got to create our own enthusiasm. We're better at it. We weren't good at the beginning of the year, but our guys have gotten better. They got some chants, they got some different things going on. So we go to other places, and we're the noisiest group you're out there, because the fans are still having to be spaced out somewhat. And we're still there in that little, little circle. So it's us against the world.

SAFIAN: If I asked you what's at stake in this moment for you, for your team, what do you feel like is at stake?

STACKHOUSE: I think you're always building your reputation as a coach. You're building your reputation as players. I think we all have aspirations of wanting to be successful. So, I mean, I think there's always something at stake. You got to be able to have a plan and understanding in your mind what your expectations are, what your goals are. You can't get sidetracked by anything, and I think that, that's the message to our guys.

So I think those are just little life lessons that we try to talk about, on a daily basis to stay grounded and to stay centered, to know that yeah, we all want to be successful, but we got to do the things that it requires to have that success.

SAFIAN: When you talk about being successful, there's a dialogue in some business about the value of failing and failing fast, and what you learn from failure. How do you talk to your team about loss, about losses, about when you're behind?

STACKHOUSE: I think you really have to take lessons from losses. We go back, and we watch the film, and we understand that we didn't do what we were supposed to do in this

situation, that's why they scored. When I grade the defense, sometimes I check "scored," right? We check, we did everything that we were supposed to do within our scheme, but we don't do that enough times. And I think that's how we hold guys accountable. A guy may have five mistakes, you got one blow-by, you didn't help the helper, you didn't contest the shot, so that's minus three. You got to steal, you got to deflection, or draw charge, that's plus two. And so that's how we hold them accountable. And young guys, they're going to have minus nine, minus seven, right? And it's a trend to see that a little older guys, they probably have minus three, minus four. And once everybody numbers start to dwindle, then the game's going to do what it's supposed to do, right?

Right now, we're in the top three offenses in the SEC. So it's about the defensive side of the ball, making sure that we're more accountable there. I don't even have to be the coach. They know what we're supposed to do. So now we got to go out there and execute it longer and harder.

We ain't worried about the losses, man. With records, that can turn so fast. Once you get on a roll, I mean, but once they do it, man, we might not, you know what I'm saying? We are good to run off 10 or 11 on these people. You know what I'm saying? That's the conversation that we're having.

When are we going to stop beating ourselves? That's the question. That's how I coach. I want you to take pride to stop seeing yourself on this film with me telling you this, time after time and again. And at some point you gotta be fed up and say, "Okay, enough is enough. I'm going to do my job." When enough of us do that, do our job consistently, we're going to have success, there's no doubt in my mind, that's what's going to happen.

SAFIAN: And when those principles take hold, you don't have to be holding them accountable because they're holding each other accountable.

STACKHOUSE: Absolutely, man, you said a mouthful right there. Like I said, it's cool for me to say it, cool for our coaches to say it, but when guys that you hang out with, and you talk about, "Come on, man, do your job." That's the relationship, and I'm getting that now.

We did it at a level that I haven't had a team that I've coached in the last four years, do it against Mississippi State. That was the best defensive grade that I've had since I've been coaching – 68% of our defensive possessions we got correct. I mean, normally you're just going to be somewhere in the forties or fifties, just half, and basketball is a game of mistakes. But if you're doing it in the sixties, man, you can put that win on the left-hand side every time.

SAFIAN: I notice these metrics are really important to you. When did you tune-in on that these numbers and metrics was the way to measure the teams?

STACKHOUSE: I got that from Dean Smith. Everything that I'm doing, I learned from him. We would come in and watch those games, and he's like, "Jerry, you had, you were flat. You guys made three mistakes and three good and you had good savvy. So you were flat. I want to see you plus though. I want to see you plus". That's my same spiel, man. Let's get plus, let's get positive.

And I believe the analytics. Yeah, I know analytics has a place. I mean, I think it's a great tool, but he was ahead of the game. You know what I'm saying? You call it analytics, you call whatever you want, but I call it what I learned in Chapel Hill for playing for Dean Smith.

SAFIAN: Well, thank you, Jerry. Thanks so much for doing this.

STACKHOUSE: Appreciate you buddy. Thank you man. Take care guys.