

A “Walk-On” Approach to Creativity

By Landis Wade

At my 40th College Reunion at Davidson College in 2019, someone paid me a back-handed compliment. It went something like this. "You were the last guy in our class who I thought would write a book and do something creative like start a podcast."

It's true. I didn't fit the mold. I was a college football player, who majored in history, turned that into a law degree, and worked as a trial lawyer for 35 years in Charlotte. It doesn't feel artistic, does it? Alas, I'm now a recovering trial lawyer.

My classmate's comment was really a question—the “how” question—how could a guy like me do something creative? This is the same question my inner critic likes to ask. Maybe you have an inner critic, too.

The answer to my “how” question is grounded in my “why” question. If, like me, the answer to your “why” is that your creative idea, whatever it may be, excites and challenges you to such an extent that you're willing to ignore your inner critic to learn and put in the work, the “how” will take care of itself. Sure, natural talent is nice to have, but hard work and perseverance go a long way, too.

What my classmate didn't understand is that the “walk-on” mentality that served me well as a college athlete came in handy years later when I decided to become a walk-on in the writing and podcasting worlds. College coaches talk to walk-ons like inner critics talk to creators. They tell them they lack talent and have little chance of making the team, as I was told as a 17-year-old who really wanted to play college football. Years later, as I took on creative ventures, I drew strength from the need, once again, to behave like a walk-on. My coaches were surprised when I became the starting kick returner as a freshman and the starting strong safety as a junior, but I surprised myself more when I wrote three books in three years and recorded and released 150 podcast episodes in two.

When your external and internal critics treat you like a “walk-on,” saying you're not good enough to write a book or launch a podcast, or do whatever creative thing you want to do, embrace the label, because here's the deal. A walk-on is a self-motivated person willing to work hard, a person who loves the activity so much that what the critics say doesn't matter. And that, my friends, is often more important than raw talent.

To channel Elizabeth Gilbert's “Big Magic,” the universe is going to offer you a good idea and when it does, you have a choice to make. Are you going to walk-off or walk-on?