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START OF TRANSCRIPT**[00:00:01]**

The basketball culture and especially the inner city culture, it applies a lot of pressure on black men to become a professional athlete, and it's like that is the ideal route, especially if you already are in the sports lane.

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It's like, OK, if you don't play professionally or High Division One, then we're considering this society considered you, considers you a bust.

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Welcome to my call phone and a podcast created in partnership with Breakthrough. My name is Lauren Stockmann Brown and we're here today on July 11th, 2020, to answer two seemingly simple questions, depending on who you are and if you like answering questions. There's something that I've been thinking about lately and that I've so fascinated to ask Max Pierce is how do people find pride in today's societal climate with everything going on in terms of covid-19 the wide spread of the pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, black men, women, black trans people being shot on a weekly basis and it becoming a societal norm to view and read. Right. So how do people find pride in today's societal climate? And how is one's identity a form of creativity, expression and healing? So when we focus on identity today, we're going to be speaking a lot about Max as an athlete, though, how he was able to become so flexible with his identity and form of expressions, whether that be in his college life, focusing on economics or in his career, or he's now a Harlem Globetrotter, an athlete. So I had the pleasure of virtually interviewing Maxwell Pierce. He's known as one of the best dunkers on the planet and a dear friend of mine, someone who I would introduce to a stranger as my cousin. So it's so fascinating to hear and question what does it mean to be a black athlete in today's political climate? And how are sports a legitimate form of political activism today in the year?

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Twenty. Twenty.

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Ok, so, Max, welcome to Michael Vernetta podcast for our listeners.

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My name is Lawrence Brown and that's how we usually start the show is if you could say your full name, your pronouns, your gender, your race and your age if you're comfortable.

[00:02:54]

Ok, so my name is Maxwell Pierce, and my pronouns are he him, I am twenty four years old and I am a black man.

[00:03:04]

Awesome. So what I want to start off with, since I've known you, since you were like, I don't want to say like literally five years old, six.

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Five. Yeah. And I was like three then.

[00:03:18]

So, yeah, a very long time. 20 years, which is just like absurd.

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I'm going to have a lot of fun kind of intervening in your athletic side, your business side, and then you've always had a creative side, like I remember going to your house and you would just draw like Naruto like little cartoon, you

know, oh, now it's fun for you. So I feel like you've done a really brilliant job, just like tying in like basketball and then like family and the community and how that all ties together.

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So how would you say your interest in basketball and your love for basketball helps you feel more connected to your community or more connected to yourself?

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I think it's a two part function, I think for one, the game of basketball is very unique, especially to the other sports, because it has the ability to connect people anywhere.

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If there's a court or if there's a park, you're playing with strangers and you don't need like those people don't even have to speak the same language as you. And you all can be participating in the game. And I think basketball, although it is not the most popular sport in the world, I think it's on the way to being that and for those reasons, because it's really easy to bring people together.

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And so for me and a lot of other Hoopers, basketball is is a means of therapy. You know, it's it's a way to get away from whatever troubles you're having in your own personal life.

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It's a way to decompress as well as a form of exercise which is good for stress. So, you know, it's really it's really a nice escape.

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Hmm, perfect. That's great. And of course, I'm a former college athlete for my my strong two years, so I can relate to that. I can relate to that I have.

[00:05:16]

So my question for you is, within the recruiting process, there's a lot of stress. Right. So you're talking about how basketball is, as you know, mental health release. But one of the things that I've found as a former athlete is like as you get older, there's so much pressure on you to perform, but also do this and that and, you know, focus on your academics, like find a way to also have time for yourself. So it's an interesting dynamic of like this is therapeutic, but it's also it can also, like, lean into this is harmful for sure.

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So I think while basketball has always been therapeutic for me, I do definitely agree that there was some pressure that.

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Was getting to be overwhelming, especially my freshman year, I wasn't like I had such a deviation of what? The college basketball experience was supposed to feel like and I put a lot of pressure on myself to not make any mistakes as opposed to enjoy myself. So while, of course, it was therapeutic by nature, because it has always been the pressure was definitely. Getting to a point where I didn't feel like I was enjoying it to its fullest potential and and then, you know, during the second half of my freshman year, my class schedule didn't fit with my basketball schedule. And so I'm getting pressure from the academic faculty and staff to, of course, go to class, which is what I always prioritize.

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But at the same time, I'm getting pressure from my coaches as to why I'm not at every single practice and I can't make both happy if the schedule doesn't accommodate. Yes. And so, you know, I was I was kind of feeling on edge on both sides of the coin. And then that was I know that that came from the fact that basketball wasn't willing to to shift for that schedule.

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So, yeah, I'm just I'm smiling and, like, reminiscing on just like that, that that feeling of just being so in it to where you're like, OK, I'm in class like I'm wearing my like basketball, like my practice jersey underneath.

[00:07:46]

I'm out to practice.

[00:07:47]

And I went to NYU. It's like I got to hop on the subway. I have to make sure the subway time and I hope to God I can make this practice.

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So, like, you know, so it's it's really interesting. And I think being out of it, I was able to think of it in a in a different light.

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And I'm curious to know, like and then we're going to jump into more of, you know, your experience at Purchase and then, you know, your amazing accolades going forward. But I'm curious now, this pressure to perform athletically, academically and the hopes of them performing in a career to the highest degree was ever reflective of how, if you might have felt pressured as a black man to perform, to be here, you know, something that is, you know, what's the right word like die digestible in American society specifically?

[00:08:44]

Yeah. Yeah, I think I think that's a great point, because so the basketball culture and especially the inner city culture, it applies a lot of pressure on black men to become a professional athlete.

[00:09:03]

And it's like that is the ideal route, especially if you already are in the sports lane.

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It's like, OK, if you don't play professionally or High Division One, then we're considering this society considered you, considers you a bust. And so, you know, there's there's all different kinds of pressure that you that you feel from whether it's second hand remarks. For example, if I'm if I'm talking to someone back in high school, if I was having a conversation and I'm like, yeah, I play for this school, for this high school. And they're like, OK, do you have any looks? And I'm like, yeah. And they're like, OK, well, is that the one? That's always the question is if they wanted to do anything once and so subconsciously, that puts pressure on players especially who aren't of Division one caliber to try to achieve that. And for obviously everyone is not a division one caliber player. And so for the players that aren't. They start to think, OK, well, I have to play this one or else I'm not going to get the respect that I deserve. And I've also seen players select a Division One school, which is a reach, as opposed to a division to school where they would really thrive. And again, I think that's because of that pressure from society. And so. For me, you know, having to deal with that and then especially within the last three years of my life, it's like, OK, where are you going to go? Like, so many people are asking about the NBA and stuff.

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And I'm like, you know, I found my niche within the game of basketball.

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And it took me a really long time to figure out how to deflect the pressure that people were unconsciously applying. So I think for, you know, especially young black athletes, mental health, it's really important that you try to find early on how you can deflect pressure and use it to your advantage.

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Yeah, so even with so with your experience pacifically, you aren't being at least four when you at purchase.

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You weren't necessarily on an athletic scholarship, is that right? Because it was Division three. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, that's right.

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So there's this added pressure of a lot of your finances are coming from your career now in basketball, you talked about how there's already this pressure as a black male athlete to perform and then we already tighten your mental health. So there's like this financial aspect wasn't even a part of the discussion when we first started. So how is it now or now? I assume you're not doing much because covid-19, but like before covid-19, how was it with your mental health in this added financial pressure?

[00:11:59]

Yeah, so much on that, I mean, my time that purchased. Was. I definitely enjoyed it, but I do think that, you know, the experience that I had wasn't. Similar to a lot of people, luckily, I was in state, so that reduced the tuition a lot and then financial aid helped out.

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And so, you know, I didn't I didn't have to contribute that much. But I can't I can't say that that would be the same for a lot of other division three students, let alone athletes. And then, you know, so I guess my mental health then it was pretty stable because I didn't really feel pressure from the financial side to try to make ends meet, to play at and be at school.

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But now with covid, it's a whole different set of circumstances because you're home all the time. And for me, I got injured the day before quarantine started. So I was I was like bedridden for the first 40 days of quarantine. But I think, you know, for a lot of people, covid has provided an opportunity to really self reflect and re-evaluate, you know, how you operate and and what you're doing and what your plans are. But it's also. Limited your.

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Means of therapy, because you can only do so much, you know, like you can, I guess you can go outside for a jog

theoretically, but like you can't really spend time with spend time with your friends the way you want. You know, you can't you can't even go watch a sporting event right now. You can't really go to any major events, so.

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For me, covid has it's definitely been.

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Quite the awakening, and then I've been able to re-evaluate a lot of what I'm doing, but sometimes I definitely struggle with how I am. Keeping myself happy, because sometimes I just get so, so bored and I don't want to say depressing, depressing. Definitely not the right word, but so bored and it's like, OK, I don't even know what to do now.

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Yeah. So what are so if I can ask, what are some of these revaluations that you've explored about yourself?

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Well, and so it's more so it's more so about my blueprint, quote unquote, for things that I want to execute. So, I mean, we all have plans of what we want to get done and where we want to be. And so, you know, for my social media content, for instance, I have. Unconsciously created.

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Or reinforced the box that people have put me in, where they see me as only an athlete and I should only be posting athletic content and the second I step out of that box. People are mad and they're like, OK, you need to just stick to posting dunking stuff. And I've been met with a lot of that as of late because the only thing that I've been posting has been Black Lives Matter advocacy and fighting injustice. And so, you know, I don't I don't let those kinds of comments get to me because I know what I'm putting out there is right. But it's definitely been a strategy that I've had to work on is how do I get these people to break that lens that they're viewing me as where? Oh, he's only an athlete. So that has kind of been my priority. Is diversifying my image or my look?

[00:16:13]

Oh, that's really interesting there. So I have a lot of questions and I'm going to pivot to it one more time.

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Ok, so OK, first of all, really interesting because with this idea of imagery, you know, I feel like within the black community, there's, again, this extreme pressure to either reflect what it means to be a quote unquote, good black person or even more specific, a good black athlete or a good black student. Right. Right. And then you subconsciously step into an image that you truly created for yourself.

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And then, you know, then the response that you got was most receptive to the athletic side of you. Right. Right.

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So and that's just that's just really interesting. Right? Because if you want to relate, that is because of, you know, you're male. Is it because of your race? Is because of your background? I can imagine that being really confusing, but I think like a way to talk about that is through the lens of your corporation or business.

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I don't know what to exactly call it, but finance. Yes. Yes.

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Tell us a little bit about that. What what you aim to do. And, you know, I kind of feel like even when I was just talking you, it's kind of it hasn't died off because I know it's very much still a thing, but you've been a little more quiet about what you want to do. Yeah, definitely. And I think that that will speak to some of the things you're talking about, about, you know, your image and what you the difference in blueprint.

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You want to leave for sure. So the finance organization is is a company that my team and I started back during my senior year of college. And what we're basically aiming to do is prepare student athletes for the transition into the real world and out of their athletic career.

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That has been the plague of. Especially within the sports of basketball and football that is plaguing athletes, especially athletes of color, because, you know, you put all your eggs into this one basket of playing your sport professionally and the statistics, just the probability of of making it just doesn't allow everyone to get there. And in fact, it only allows around one percent of you to get there. So the other 99 percent of people are going, you're going to have to do something else. Mm hmm. Point blank period. And too often I'm seeing teammates. I'm seeing even other random players. They get to the end of their career, whether it's via injury or just that their talent

doesn't want them to play at the next level. And then they're scrambling to find something else to do. And because they're scrambling, they aren't selecting a career path that they enjoy that is sustainable and that that can even be monetized. And so I think I think that is really important that.

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Preparing for that transition doesn't happen six months before it's time to to make that move. Yes, it starts in your middle and high school years because you have to develop other passions or interests, at least enough so that you can be engaging in those things while you're keeping basketball a priority.

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And so my kind of wake up moment also came late. And that that's one of the reasons why I, too, wanted to create this for athletes, that it doesn't happen to them.

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But in my Junior, no, sorry, my sophomore year of college, I realized that, OK, some Division three players play professionally overseas. But I don't want to be left with only one option coming out of school because, you know, if you know anything about probability and just life in general. Sometimes things don't work out the way that you think they are. And so you always should have a Plan B..

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And so then I started thinking about, OK, well, what am I interested in? And it kind of led me to diving deeper into economics and finance.

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And then I joined the Econ Club at my school, and that's how I met my co-founder, actually. And then. So long story short, the the idea of diversifying yourself is so, so important because you don't want to be. Caught up, and there's so many ways that it can hurt you, but you don't want to be caught up in this one box that you can't break out of no matter what you do.

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And LeBron is one of my favorite athletes because although he he's predominantly known for his athletic legacy, if you look at his resume outside of basketball, it's it's amazing.

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And, you know, he's built the school, he's he's into film, he's he has ownership of soccer teams. It's just so many different things that he does. And, you know that that only strengthens him and his body of work as a human and it forces you to look at him through a different lens. And so I would like that same respect and that same impact.

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And I think that we would get a lot more done if everyone could function on more than one level or more than one playing. So that's why I say to diversify ourselves.

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Hmm. I love that. I love that a lot.

[00:22:02]

So there's two things I want to talk about as we begin to wind down like 15 more minutes of this conversation of black hair, which we always tie in.

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That's like the root of our creation.

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It is my main interest because it relates to everything else and how we think about racism in America, systemic oppression, interpersonal racism and so on and so forth.

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But I also want to talk about that hand in hand with I should know this recruit's name, McCombe, the McColm, the recruit who they must.

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In my saying, it's so, so wrong. They recruit. We chose to go to Howard instead of Kentucky.

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Oh, I'm a Kormákur.

[00:22:44]

Yes. Yes. Amaker Perfect. OK, wonderful.

[00:22:48]

So I want to get into that conversation. But first, I want to talk about this idea of hair and black hair specifically. And one of the things that I found is that the black community and black women in general have this very specific relationship to their hair, which has been rooted in systemic oppression as a whole. And I'm wondering what your thoughts are on that, on that issue and then how it relates or can tie into, you know, why recruits that are, you know, division want athletes would now steer towards a historically black college instead of, you know, a Kentucky or Kansas or something like that.

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And so the the earliest recollection of having. Some sort of tie with me as a black man with my hair is elementary school when and I'm sure you've experienced this when other white students are like, oh, can I touch your hair? And that is at first I didn't mind it. But as I got older and more educated, it became a trigger for me because I don't see the other white students asking other white students, Can I touch your hair? And it also it kind of indicates some sort of, I guess, surprise or astonishment for these people that are asking to feel your hair because they feel like it's such a foreign thing. And some reactions that I've gotten is is the literal words, wow, your hair is so ethnic. And so that's that's kind of around the time where it really became triggering and sometimes I've challenged that statement as well. What do you mean? It feels so ethnic and then they kind of get. Overwhelmed or embarrassed, because I'm challenging that statement because they don't realize that that in itself is a microaggression, without a doubt, and it adds on to all of the other micro aggressions that black people have to deal with on a daily basis. And so. You know, I think. Now, especially within the last 10 years, black people are becoming more and more open with. Wearing whatever kind of protective style that they want to, I think there was a point in time where we were trying to trying to conform to what society wanted to see a lot more. I think now I'm seeing a lot more, quote unquote, courage or confidence to wear it as we would like to wear it.

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And so I think as that relates to a lot of these athletes who are not going to Kentucky and instead going to a VCU and just it just speaks to how we need to, as a black community, pour back into ourselves and and sort of level out the.

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The economic prosperity, or I should say disparity between the white community and the black community, because, you know, we're so heavily reliant on what? What is provided via.

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I guess the white community or white business that we don't have as much power as we think we do, and that comes from empowering ourselves. So I think what MacCormick has done and just recently another top football recruit has committed to Howard, I believe. And so, you know, seeing that trend become more of a thing, I think it's great. And I think that he needs to keep going. If I could if I could do my college experience over. I might have done the same thing.

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So my last two questions, two episodes ago, we discussed the ways in which education is the modern civil rights movement of our time.

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And it was, you know, the guy asked to another black man off a Dean, Horace Mann School in the Bronx, and he's brilliant. And he said, you know, education is the modern movement of our time. And I think that would be a great question to ask you, not only because you're, you know, intellectual and very academic, but also I think it would be interesting to ask that question hand in hand with athletics.

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And if you think athletics can play a certain role or a similar role as education does and being this modern civil rights movement of our time, absolutely.

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Athletes, especially in society now, they have such such an amplified voice. And whether or not these athletes are educated, they have massive followings. And so even if you look at just in the last two weeks alone, and I don't know if you're aware of what Deshawn Jackson put out there, the tweet that he put out there quoting Hitler, it wasn't it was an ignorant tweet because, one, it wasn't factual Twitter. Hitler didn't say that. And two, it was it was definitely extremely inconsiderate on behalf of the Jewish community.

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But you see what kind of effect it's had on the sports world and just on society in general has become the topic of conversation, all because of one tweet from this one athlete. And so I think that if athletes can receive the same education as a lot of these activists are and make sure that it's factual and they can use it to their advantage, then and it's kind of about who who has the bigger megaphone. And so, you know, for someone like Killer Mike, who is you know, he has he has a really large voice. And for the most part, he knows what he's talking about. But for LeBron to say the same thing, it's going to reach more people. And so if you get the athletes involved, then you can attract a whole nother level of people who may not have been listening in the beginning.

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Hmm.

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Perfect tie in to this because you're talking about tweets and conversation, right? So something I always ask, are Jenners Thinker's, which are the people we interview are what are the importance or what is the importance of having conversations that Michael Nana works to embody, promote and facilitate?

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These conversations are extremely beneficial for the black community because it gives us a chance to share our experiences with one another and immediately empathize because to some degree we share the same experiences. It also gives. People who don't understand our experiences, an opportunity to understand and empathize, and I always think that inviting conversation to the point where that conversation becomes normalized, that's when we can start to see societal change. Because, I mean, this conversation is is definitely ramping up over the last month, over the last two months or these kinds of conversations, I should say. But we don't know how often they're happening. On. The most basic of levels, whether that's me talking to my friend on FaceTime or me at the park with my teammates talking about this as opposed to talking about some kind of music, because the more you hear it, the more you have to think about it. And the more you have to think about it, the more you may want to speak on it.

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And then so that and that way it kind of operates as word of mouth. And I think that, you know, these conversations are just they're essential. They really are.

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Amazing, amazing, and you're actually going to be our season three closer, so I'm like so glad we get to adding it with with this with this information.

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Thank you. What do you have? Do you have another. No problem. Do you have another podcast after this? No. Do you have another guest out of this? OK. All right. Hold on. Let me let me stop this real quick.

[00:32:01]

All right, so I just want to have this off the record, because it hasn't gone public yet.

[00:32:11]

So we actually can't include the next segment of this episode as a form of respect for Max Pierce. However, what came shortly after Max's request to, quote, go off record was his personal sharing and retelling of a banana being thrown at him on live TV by news broadcasters. Sounds insane, even repeating it. Banana being thrown at a black athlete on live TV by news broadcasters. This story received coverage from CNN News 12 and various other independent journalism networks. I'm left asking the question, as I'm sure you are, to why did this happen? How did Max respond? What's the importance of forgiveness, as corny as that might sound, but it just adds to this idea of America continuing to digest racist, bigoted behavior. What's next? And lastly, how is one's identity a form of creativity, expression and healing? Tune in to our next episode to find out more.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



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