
Reflections from WT with Kendra Potts

- Randy Ray: You are listening to episode number 46 of Reflections from WT. I am Randy Ray. This is Dr. Walter Wendler, the 11th President of West Texas A & M University. And we have a special guest with us today, Kendra Potts.
- Kendra Potts: Hello.
- Randy Ray: Hello. First of all, how was Christmas break?
- Kendra Potts: It was much needed, and I got a lot of snuggles and playtime with the kids and just a lot of family time, so it was amazing.
- Randy Ray: Yeah.
- Kendra Potts: Yes.
- Randy Ray: Dr. Wendler, did you have a good one?
- President Wendler: I did. I did. We took a surprise trip. We went to the West Coast for a couple of days, which turned out to be very nice. We hadn't planned to do that. We saw all the family on Thanksgiving. They were up here. Dallas clan and the Beaumont clan, they all came up here. Then they went to the in-laws on Christmas. It was restful.
- Randy Ray: It's always nice to have a break. It's one of the nice things. We have a nice break in our job. I always say, it's really hard to leave, and then it's kind of hard to come back. But I'm glad to be back. I'm glad to be back in the groove. I'm excited about this semester, and I'm excited about having you here today.
- Kendra Potts: Well, thank you. I'm excited to be here today.
- Randy Ray: Yeah. You mentioned earlier you had three kids, Ella, Easton, and Elizabeth. How is that work with being a coach?
- Kendra Potts: Well, I got to give a huge shout-out to my husband. He is-
- Randy Ray: Jim?
- Kendra Potts: Yes. He is Dad of the year every year for our family. And he just supports everything we do here. We met here at WT, and so this place holds a special ... in our hearts. And so he wants to do whatever he can as a husband, but also as a father, to help our family and be able to do things while we're in season.

We were actually able to take Ella to Seattle. We knew the young ones, it probably would've been a little difficult for. And so Ella's 10. I think she's going to have a core memory of that trip. That was very special. She had a daddy-daughter vacation with Jim while we were in Seattle, but she got to see the whole thing from start to finish. It was amazing.

President Wendler: Charmed.

Kendra Potts: It was awesome.

President Wendler: You lead a charmed life. That's a wonderful thing.

Kendra Potts: It's wonderful.

Randy Ray: So you went to school at WT, you were a player here. How was that transition from being a player to being a coach?

Kendra Potts: I used to think being a player was just the most challenging thing, and the transition to the coaching world. Wow. As a player, you get those endorphins out, you get to release. And as a coach, you got to stay calm even when you're inside probably wanting to let some things out. And so that transition as the roles, that was pretty challenging.

But I have great mentors. Tony Greystone took me in, and so grateful for him. But being able to come back here and coach at a place that I played, that's just the icing. Because leaving, going to A&M Corpus Christi was amazing for us. We learned, we grew so much as coaches there. But when we left, man, that's when I realized, WT, the support, the community, the families that just take our players in, that's not everywhere. I kind of assumed that that's how it was because that's all I knew. That is all I knew as a player. And coming back here, those things don't change. You want to evolve and change, but the things that don't change around here are the love and support from the people at WT, but also the community around. And so that's just been super special.

Randy Ray: Yeah, I don't think a lot of people realize that. Dr. Wendler, have you experienced the same thing? You've worked at a lot of different schools. How is the athletic culture here different?

President Wendler: It's very strong. And I think it's what Kendra mentions, there's a lot of support, especially in the extended community, on campus too. Although I'm always wanting to see more students at games, although I'm not always the best example. I've got another job other than being a fan, and I am a fan, I'm a serious fan.

But I think this athletics is a well-oiled machine, the intercollegiate athletics at WT. A lot of that goes to Michael McBroom, who keeps the thing moving. He's

like all of us, some days are better than others. But the bottom line is he keeps this thing moving.

And I was at the NCAA meeting in San Antonio last week, and they went through the championships and everybody gave a rousing round of applause. This was amongst the presidents, just the presidents, it's a small group. But Jay, the commissioner for the LSC, went through all of the championships and so on from fall sports and WT was involved in everything, except football, but everything else. It's remarkable to see that. And if you look at the general quality of intercollegiate and the GPAs, what's the volleyball GPA?

Kendra Potts: Our team GPA was a 3.6. I think I was equally proud of that.

President Wendler: And you should be. And I always ask that. I like winning as much as anybody, I've got a competitive spirit. I played a little hockey in community college. I like to compete. I like to compete in the job that I'm in, compete with other universities and try and define who we are in a way that's a little different. Very easy if you pay attention to the panhandle.

But the bottom line is, intercollegiate athletics is the most well-oiled machine that I've ever seen. Doesn't necessarily have the most resources. We scrap for everything we've got. And there's a lot of competition for our strong coaches. We get people constantly being approached by other institutions. We do everything we can to keep the good ones. And by good ones, I mean they know that student athletes are students first and they're concerned about the team GPA, just what Kendra said. 3.6, that's much higher than the general student population. These girls work hard. And I'm proud of that.

And that's the lesson that they take with them. I don't know how many will eventually play professional volleyball. My guess is a very, very tiny number. But the ethics, the attitudes, the values, the sort of the nature of the Texas panhandle will never leave them and will always have great values. So I think that's what it does.

Randy Ray: Kendra, how do you do that, how do you encourage your athletes to excel in the classroom?

Kendra Potts: Well, if we're as coaches not expressing excitement about that side of things, I can't ask them to. I think it starts with us, how we set the tone for anything. If we're asking girls to be energetic in the gym, but we're not, it doesn't work. Same thing. So we put a lot of attention to academic meetings weekly.

It's really more time management and schedule. They're smart. But we want to make sure we're helping them with just being able to organize, make sure that they're being proactive with professors, face-to-face conversations and being able to say, hey, I'm missing not I missed. Just being proactive in all of that, showing that initiative.

I know they don't realize it right now, but it's going to carry over and help them so much in the real world, just being able to communicate that way. But we put a big strong emphasis on that as a staff. And I think it is, if we're excited about something, they're going to be excited about something. So we hold ourselves accountable on that.

But those academic meetings actually turn into just personal conversation, just kind of letting us know what they're doing. And so I actually really appreciate that part of our job. It turns into two things. We're checking on them as people, and we're also making sure they feel good about things in the classroom.

Randy Ray: I have friends that work at other universities and they roll their eyes and say, I have five or eight or ten athletes in my classroom, and they kind of dread it. But I always look forward to it because they always do well. It's all of our sports too.

President Wendler: Yeah, no, it is. No matter the win-loss record, I think that's something that Michael McBroom has helped tremendously with is this idea that these student athletes need to perform academically.

I think campus-wide, our student athletes have attained higher GPAs this year than ever before in the history and in almost every sport has reached. And if they're off their peak a little bit, it's just by a margin, it's not a lot. In other words, consistently performed.

And I'll tell you something else. One of the things I appreciate about our coaches, even the ones that aren't from here, they immediately gravitate to the panhandle culture kind of work ethic and all that. And I think when our coaches make sure, this is a personal thing for me, I'm not a coach and I don't pretend to be, but if they can get some local talent, that is very, very important. First of all, local talent brings local values into the equation. And the values here are different than other places. That's number one. Number two, I think the community appreciates it. I think the community likes it when a girl that they know from one of the high schools, and it could be from a big high school-

Randy Ray: Like Amarillo High?

President Wendler: Like Amarillo High. But it also could be from Pampa, which is not a tiny high school, but it could be from Darrrouzett. I mean, that's the point, it could be from Cotton Center, which is in the South Plains, not really the panhandle, but close enough for me. The tiny schools with a hundred students in them, pre-K through to 12, people like that. We're paying attention to who we are and what we have to offer. And it is remarkable. Period. What we have to offer in the panhandle is remarkable.

Randy Ray: Yeah, I agree. We're going to take a break and when we come back, Kendra, I want you to tell me all about the National Championship.

Kendra Potts: Absolutely.

Randy Ray: What that day was like.

Kendra Potts: Oh man, I can't wait to relive it.

Randy Ray: Look at her smiling.

Kendra Potts: Yeah, I can't wait.

Randy Ray: I can't help it myself. We'll be back in 60 seconds.

Speaker 4: West Texas A&M University is the Panhandle's University. With a commitment to serving the region and the world, WT is proud to put people, programs, and places first. We are a strong community, a herd of buffaloes proud to call West Texas home. Learn more at wtamu.edu.

Randy Ray: Welcome back to Reflections from WT. This is episode 46. We're talking with Kendra Potts, WT's volleyball coach. Kendra, you guys were the national champions, which is amazing to even say.

President Wendler: She's still smiling.

Kendra Potts: Yes. It's crazy.

Randy Ray: Tell me about that day.

Kendra Potts: Wow. What we did this year is we just didn't change anything from how we prepped from one day to another. So as far as the prep went, it was the same. But for some reason, the energy in our meeting room at the hotel, there was just not an ounce of doubt in any of our players when we were going through the scout. I mean, there were not a lot of weaknesses in Concordia St. Paul. Plus that team has won nine national championships. They've been there. We had been there but it had been 25 years. The prep just felt good, the energy was great.

Randy Ray: How do you prep? Is that mental or is it physical? What is that?

Kendra Potts: Before we get into the gym, it's more of the mental side of things. And our scout, our game plan, us coaches, we watch a lot of video. We put together a scouting report that's about four pages long, lots of information, but we want to hit the girls that are thinkers and then the girls that just need a couple notables, a couple of bullet points. So we try to hit on all those cylinders depending on how our players learn. And we watch video together, but we keep that pretty simple.

But the other side that we do, which I think is probably the most powerful, is we start our day every day with our gratitude. What we're thankful for. Doesn't have to be volleyball at all. It's just what are we grateful for? And then we talk about our intention. What's our intention for the day? And then we talk about our non-negotiable. And every single person goes around. We talk about it. Lots of tears sometimes or lots of laughter, whatever the case may be. But I think it's just super powerful that we can start the day with gratitude all the time.

It's allowed us to learn each other and just understand us as people over the player and the coach. Even my daughter was in there doing gratitude's and intentions with us that morning. It was just amazing. But that's how we've done it. We've done it like that all year long. So it was no different. But you could tell there was something there.

And then we also have a player, we call it a pod, it's a phrase of the day, or it can be a story, it can be a verse, it can be whatever the player's inclined to talk about. But Abby Nash, who is very good with words, she's an English major, super creative, she had a saying, because we knew what we were up against, it's from a movie, but she just said, we might play this team 10 times and we might lose nine, but today is our one. And we were just, I mean, just chills. And we just knew, we just left that meeting room, going to the bus, and then we were just loose and free.

Randy Ray: So you knew it. You knew.

Kendra Potts: Yeah. You can prep yourself and have the best day of your life and still might not come out with the win. That's the fact. But we put ourselves in the best situation to be our best. And then whatever the outcome was, we knew we were ready. The feels were good. But I think we were loose and free and not making the moment too big. But also grateful for the moment we were in.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Tell me what it was like when you got to the gym.

Kendra Potts: Again, we didn't really change anything. The vibe was the same. The girls were rocking their music in the locker room and just being silly, being loose and free. We use that all the time. That wasn't different. The pre-game dancing was no different. And that's why I felt really good because I just didn't feel like the girls were overthinking things that day. We didn't change a thing. We prepped the same that day as we did day one of season. And so that's why I felt like ...

Our thing was just win the day you're in. If it's a Wednesday and we're at practice, let's win that practice. Let's not think about ... We're prepping for things obviously, but we're going to win the day we're in. And so no different. We were just going to win the day we were in.

Randy Ray: So tell me what that felt like, that final second before the end of the game, and then the buzzer goes off, what did that feel like?

Kendra Potts: Gosh. I remember the point so clearly. And we climbed back, that fourth set, it didn't look like it was going to go our way, down 23-20. And our girls just were stubborn in all the right ways. They were just gritty.

Tori serving that ball. And we had a pretty good inclination they were going to the outside just because that was the strong point for them in that rotation. And we have two freshmen, Emma Becker and Tatum Stowe going up to get the final block, which is pretty cool.

And I remember I was like, take this moment in, take this moment in when we won. Seeing the girls dog pile. And us coaches, we just always came together and gave a good coaching staff hug. And Casey Shingler, my associate head coach, just said, hey, let's sit here for just a second. Let's sit right here just for a little bit longer. And we did, and we just took a lot of breaths. And I was just like, just be here, Kendra, observe, watch, smile, cry. And it still gets me. Obviously right now I've just got a big smile on my face because I want that, this is the joy that we work so hard for.

Randy Ray: Yeah, I think that's so important, take the moment in. I'm going to ask you both, same thing. How does being an athlete in college prepare you for the real world? Does it?

President Wendler: Well, I think it does. I think it gets you ready to face challenges. It has you assume personal responsibility. This is one of my mantras, this idea of rugged individualism. We are responsible for our own actions, the things we believe, the things we say, the things we do. And I feel like there's a lot of pressure in societies to find other people to put some of that responsibility on if things don't go your way.

But I think what Kendra does with that team is helps those girls sense personal responsibility for the outcome of the work. I'll call it the work, the game. And I just think that's fundamentally important. And it doesn't change. I don't care if you are running a company in the private sector or if you're running the government bureaucracy or if you're an elected official or if you have a little mom and pop operation, we're responsible every day for the outcomes that we ... Not the circumstances that come against us or laid before us, they may not be against us, some of them may be for us, not those circumstances, we can do very little about those, although there's some things we can do to avoid negative circumstances.

But the bottom line is I think we just have to be responsible for our response, the way we deal with what is in front of us. That's what I think.

Kendra Potts: I couldn't agree more. We talk a lot about controlling what we can control. And a lot of that is just how we respond and how we move forward. But also not forgetting to learn from circumstances and situations.

I can't say that a regular student that's just going to school doesn't have those challenges. They might be working a full-time job, having other people to care for, so I don't want to diminish what those regular students go through as well. I can just speak for our student athlete as far as just the mentality goes, I feel like we just kind of heighten that for them because it's the time management, it's direct communication, it's working with a group of people that have completely different personalities and trying to find a common ground. And appreciating the differences, not getting bitter about the differences. That's going to be no different in the workplace. I also say that's going to be no different in the marriage. You can correlate all these things regardless what path you go.

But I love the rugged individualism concept of just learning, growing, and moving forward. We kind of just identify the situation, the pro or con of it, learn from it, and then we move forward. That's what we take on the court. But also in turn, I think they take it wherever they are, off the court. Learn, grow, move forward.

And so we talk about those things. I think that's where student athletes, they get a chance to just have a platform to kind of talk through it and go with it. And I'm very happy they have that. I hope other students that don't get to play sports have those mentors or those groups that they can go to. But I really want our group to be a support system, direct conversation, even when those conversations might be hard.

I want to be a boss, if you will, that's, one, approachable, that they can come and ask maybe tough questions to and I'm receptive. But I also want them to learn how to take direct, honest feedback and run with it. Don't be a victim to it. And know that it's all for the greater good. And so there's so many variables and aspects from workplace to just general being able to adult in the beginning stages of adulting. And we all know it's not going to get easier. And so I just want to make sure they have tools when they're done here that they feel confident that they can conquer. But they also have a place to come back to and be able to talk to somebody about it.

Randy Ray: Well, Kendra, you're doing something right. I mean, your career record, 58 wins and 16 losses, that's pretty amazing. Not many people can say that. So we are, I know Dr. Wendler will back me up, we are fortunate to have you.

Kendra Potts: Thank you.

President Wendler: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Kendra Potts: Thank you.

President Wendler: And please, she's staying here and continuing to work with us and our people and represent the Texas Panhandle.

Kendra Potts: Thank you.

Randy Ray: We're glad you came back home.

Kendra Potts: Thank you.

Randy Ray: I always throw our guest a curve ball, and this one's an easy one I think. So we're going to take volleyball out of the loop, out of the equation. What's your favorite sport other than volleyball? Dr. Wendler, can you say, are you comfortable saying what your favorite sport is other than volleyball?

President Wendler: Yeah. It's real easy for me-

Randy Ray: Let me guess, let me guess, can I?

President Wendler: Yeah.

Randy Ray: I bet it's hockey.

President Wendler: Yes, it is. I like it.

Randy Ray: Because you're a former hockey player.

President Wendler: Because I played. Yeah. And I wasn't very good.

Randy Ray: And because we don't have a hockey team.

Kendra Potts: That's a safe answer.

President Wendler: Yeah, that's a real safe answer for me, it's not going to offend anybody. But I'll tell you one thing that I have, and I'm not just saying this because Kendra's here, and I do get out to some games, not nearly as many as I should.

But I have had a new appreciation for intercollegiate athletics for women. There is something special about the women's programs here. And the men's too. But the women's, I just never have seen it quite the way that it is here. Even at, for example, my most recent experience away from here was at Southern Illinois University. We had a tremendous men's basketball program. We filled up the, now it's Banterra Bank Center, we filled that thing up almost all the time for home games. Women, 500 people. So there was this sort of imbalance.

But here I've come onto a new appreciation generally for softball, women's basketball, volleyball, these team sports for women that, I don't know, there's just something about it that I never had thought much about before. I'm just being honest. Because the places I was, there wasn't that kind of support. It's real here, and it's vital. I think it's people like Kendra.

Randy Ray: I agree. What would you say, what would you say is your favorite sport other than volleyball?

President Wendler: She's going to say hockey. No.

Kendra Potts: Man. Yeah. The right answer is hockey. No. Strategic wise and just the toughness, I really got into the girls' softball run a couple years ago. And oh my gosh, I just picture myself being a pitcher on the mound, all eyes on me. It's a team sport, but there's a lot of individual responsibility that's significant to the team. So I really got into that. And I just appreciated just the toughness of those girls.

So I got into the actual sport. And I love watching the World Series whenever they're playing in the spring. But softball specifically. So I really love that. But I love all sports just because I like seeing groups come together.

But I do like football too, just because it's more of the environment that I think football brings and the excitement. And there can be a big football fan, or there can just be a person there just having fun and talking to people. I think it welcomes a lot of different minds together.

But man, softball, yes, that would be one of my favorite sports. But I'm kind of a sports geek because I like to see how coaches and players are managing each other. And I take things from all different types of sports. Being like, that's great, why have I never thought of that. So I'm just a sports nerd in general.

Randy Ray: Is your husband, is Jim?

Kendra Potts: Oh, yes. So I'm glad we share that. He loves Cubs baseball, so it was a rough go for a little bit until 2016 when they won the World Series. And we had our son that same year. So 2016 is Jim's year. I wish we could have another one of those. But yeah, so I've inherited that.

Randy Ray: Have you guys been to Wrigley Field?

Kendra Potts: Yes, we have. We went for our fourth anniversary. We love Chicago too. I mean, yes. So yes.

Randy Ray: Yeah, a couple of years ago we went, it was a lot of fun.

Kendra Potts: Yes, great.

Randy Ray: All right. Well, thank you. Thank you for joining us, Kendra

Kendra Potts: Yes. Thank y'all for having me. This was great. Yes.

Randy Ray:

Yeah. All right. And thank you for joining us here at Reflections from WT.
Looking forward to seeing you next time.