NFL Superstar Bobby Wagner on Creating a Vision Off the Field

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Bobby Wagner, linebacker for the Seattle Seahawks, has launched a successful career off the field as co-founder of Fuse Venture Partners VC. Wagner's newest endeavor digs deep into the startup and tech metropolis of Seattle to give a new generation of visionaries their day in the sun.

This new adventure started back in 2012 when, a year after successfully going pro, Wagner began working with a wealth manager who brought him to Silicon Valley and introduced him to different startups and those involved. Here, he was able to see not only endless opportunity, but also where his own strengths within this new landscape would be invaluable.

"When I started to go out there and listen to different startups or different CEOs talk about how you build this company from a two-person team to a team of 500, I really just stepped back and was like, 'Well, it's not necessarily a business, but football has a lot of similarities to that,'" Wagner says. "[The Seahawks] have to put together a team pretty much every year, and everybody has to be on the same page."

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Beyond team-building, Wagner also found that companies that

cultivated a healthy culture throughout the various tiers of employees and leadership are the ones with whom he felt the most impactful connections. “The most important thing, I think, is the culture,” he elaborates. “I think you have to have an environment where people want to come and work, feel they’re appreciated and are aligned on the same path or same goal. And then they have got to believe in the leader.”

You can have a great product or service, but the team has to be in sync with each other and feel supported and empowered, just like, say, on a football field. “It has to be a vision that everyone can make their own,” Wagner asserts.

Later, he was introduced to John Connors, who was involved with the Seattle VC firm Ignition. After spending some time there during one offseason, Connors suggested Wagner come on as an intern to deepen his education in the industry. Wagner accepted the offer, and it was at Ignition where he connected with the people that he’d go on to launch Fuse with.

His eagerness to learn, combined with his natural sense of curiosity, served him well as he learned more about what it actually takes to be a successful investor and how to harness the instincts to do it with precision. It was through that process he was able to see how the right investment could open doors for companies that otherwise may not have a chance.

Wagner’s growing knowledge inspired him to share with his teammates on the field the concept of wealth versus riches. “I feel like if I can help somebody look at money differently or manage their finances differently or spend a little differently, then I feel like I’m doing my job,” states Wagner. “So I’ll try to help them see the bigger picture and think longevity versus the temporary spending that we’re kind of accustomed to.”

Many successful professional athletes face complicated and overwhelming circumstances once they begin accumulating

financial wealth. With more money than they've ever had before, it can be hard to know how to be smart and strategic with it. They can be bombarded with investment ideas and business plans, oftentimes from family and friends, people they care for and that have been invaluable support systems. Navigating these conversations with respect and honesty and knowing what questions are most important is key. When it comes time to review potential opportunities or asks from family and friends, Wagner advises athletes take their time.

The same goes for working with other professionals like agents and managers. "A lot of athletes go from not making any money at all to make any large pot of money," explains Wagner. "Then they get approached by an agent who takes a percentage. Then they get approached by your financial advisor who starts investing your money without you even understanding what he's doing."

Wagner's ultimate advice is stay focused on your game. "The main thing is you have to be good at your craft," he says. "The last thing I want people to do is make it to the league and start thinking about something else without establishing [themselves] in whatever career [they] have. Once you establish yourself and start to think about the different things that you want to do, the first step is exposure. Put yourself in whatever environment you want to be in. If it's video, if it's art, if it's business, if it's music – whatever you want to do – start surrounding yourself with that. Once you have that exposure, the next step is just humility."

Wagner hopes Fuse will help move some of the startup-culture focus out of Silicon Valley and into Seattle. "It's a new fund, a spinoff of Ignition," Wagner explains. "A lot of people, a lot of investors, a lot of founders, feel like they have to go to San Francisco to get the funding for their companies. And so we're trying to change the idea that you have to leave to go to Silicon Valley."

Right now, Fuse is focusing on the enterprise-software market in Seattle. As far as criteria the fund is looking for before it invests, Wagner says they’re open to both early and late-stage companies. Most important for Wagner and his investors is establishing belief in the CEO or founder. Wagner makes it clear that all the pieces are important for any company looking for investment. And with the years of humble, on-field learning and experience he’s gained, combined with ironclad intuition, one can only wonder not if, but when, Fuse will begin transforming Seattle-spun dreams into money-making realities.

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Learning something completely new and putting yourself out there in a way that makes you feel vulnerable or uncomfortable is no small feat. And for many, it’s not worth the uncertainty. But as well all know, and as Wagner exemplifies, big things never happen in the arms of comfort. They happen in the space where bold and humble natures are braided together.

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