

**OPINION**

## Opinion: Sam Wyche became my coach – for a painfully 'brief' time

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Former Cincinnati Bengals head coach Sam Wyche acknowledges the fans at halftime during the Week 12 NFL game between the Cleveland Browns and the Cincinnati Bengals, Sunday, Nov. 26, 2017, at Paul Brown Stadium in Cincinnati. (Photo: Kareem Elgazzar)

I thought I knew a lot about interviewing. Then I met Sam Wyche.

The news of his recent passing hurled me back into his locker room where I had my one and only observation of him doing what he did best, which was coach.

For those of us who interview a lot, it's a given that if you have a thorny question or topic you want to get into, you don't open the interview with it. You want to ease into it and not make the object of your scrutiny defensive right away. Or, as I was accused of one time by a religious leader I was interviewing, you want to warm the water before you drown the cat.

Timing is everything – until it's not. That's what Wyche taught me.

I was leading a high school sports journalism conference in Florida during Major League Baseball's spring training. We ran a competition throughout the country and selected one student from each state. The criteria were strict and we had a committee peruse each application. We wanted the best high school student sportswriter each state had to offer. These kids were bright and motivated.

Since the Orlando area had many professional sports, we visited with not only the Los Angeles Dodgers where they used to train at Dodgertown in Vero Beach, but also the Orlando Magic, the Tampa Bay Lightning, the University of Florida, and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Wyche was head coach of the Buccaneers at the time, and he had gotten into some trouble with the NFL because he didn't allow female reporters into the locker room. Male reporters were okay, but not women. Female reporters felt that being excluded from the locker room gave the male reporters an advantage for getting insights and quotes immediately after a game, and the NFL eventually agreed with them. But Wyche wouldn't budge. Every game he didn't allow women in the locker room, the NFL fined him. This did not seem to bother Wyche one bit.



**Jan 22, 1989; Miami, FL, USA; Cincinnati Bengals head coach Sam Wyche on the sideline against the San Francisco 49ers during Super Bowl XXIII at Joe Robbie Stadium. The 49ers won the game 20-16. Mandatory Credit: Richard Mackson-USA TODAY Sports (Photo: Richard Mackson-USA TODAY Sports, USA TODAY Sports)**

About half of our young journalists were female, so it seemed to me that this would be an obvious question to raise during our time with him. Speaking to the students over the loudspeaker on the bus headed toward the stadium, I cautioned them not to start with that question. I explained the wisdom of easing into the tough questions.

When we arrived at the stadium we were ushered into the Buccaneers locker room, where Wyche and some of the players had gathered after a workout for a mock press conference with our students. A former NFL player, he was a big guy.

We set the ground rules for the meeting. It was all on the record; if a student had a question he or she should raise a hand and, when called on, should stand, say his or her name and home state, and ask the question.

But before one question was even asked, Wyche made an opening comment about his stand on not having women in the locker room.

"I know that some bozo journalism teacher probably told you that you never start with the tough questions, but that's bull---," he said. "I know that issue is on everyone's mind, so let's get started talking about it. Who wants to ask the first question?"

This was so abrupt that it startled the students. And I think they were intimidated by Wyche's size and gruff manner. Or maybe that was just me? Either way, these superstar students were struck mute.

"Come on!" he said. "You'll never get anywhere in journalism just sitting there looking dumb. Who wants to ask about women in the locker room?"

He seemed like he was getting agitated. We were wasting his time.

"Seriously? Somebody ask me about this!"

Now he was yelling.

Finally, the boy from Ohio stood up, introduced himself, and asked his question.

"So why are you opposed to women interviewing players in the locker room after a game?"

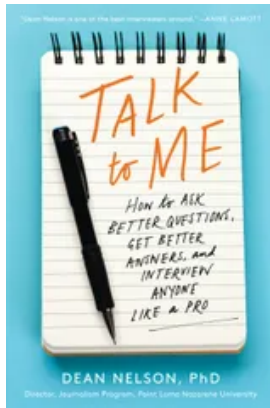
Wyche strode right up to the boy and towered over him.

"Drop your pants, son," Wyche said.

The boy looked perplexed, and slightly terrified.

"What?"

"I said drop your pants. Come on – I'll do it with you," Wyche said, as he began to unbuckle the belt of his own trousers.



I looked at the Buccaneer players. Most of them were smiling. I looked at the other students. Most of them looked horrified. Then Wyche ramped up the intensity.

"Son." His voice was much louder now, and he was getting red in the face. "I said drop your g----- pants!" He had now completely unfastened his own pants.

The boy was frozen.

"Kid! Drop your f----- pants RIGHT NOW!"

I wondered what the headline might be in the next issue of the newspaper. "Wyche to Underage Boy in Locker Room: 'Drop Your F----- Pants!'"

**The story of author Dean Nelson's interview with former Bengals and Tampa Bay Buccaneers coach Sam Wyche is adapted from his book, "Talk to Me." (Photo: Provided)**

The boy looked like he was about to cry, but he collected his wits enough to finally croak out, "Not in front of all of these strangers."

Wyche looked ecstatic.

"That's exactly my point!" he exclaimed. Then he strode back to the front of the locker room, fastened his pants, and said, "Now – who else has a question?"

Eventually, everyone had questions for him and the players, and he was delightful, forthcoming, honest, and funny.

And even though I felt like I knew a lot about interviewing before that encounter in the Buccaneers locker room, I saw that there is always another approach that I hadn't considered. I still don't lead with the tough question – I still tend to warm the water – but I'm open to the Wyche method if the situation demands it. And by "the Wyche method" I mean sometimes mixing up the order of things. I don't mean the part about pants.

For that brief time, I feel like I can say that Sam Wyche was my coach, too.

*Dean Nelson is the founder and director of the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego. This article is an excerpt adapted from his book, "Talk To Me: How to Ask Better Questions, Get Better Answers, and Interview Anyone Like a Pro," published by HarperCollins in 2019.*



**Dean Nelson** (Photo: Marcus Emerson)

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