

THE COMBUSTION CHRONICLES

**EPISODE THIRTY-SIX
GRIT, GUT, AND RELATIONSHIPS**

**HOST: SHAWN NASON
GUEST: CHRIS CABOTT**

MAY 12, 2021

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Shawn: Welcome to *The Combustion Chronicles* podcast. Where bold leaders combine with big ideas to create game-changing disruption.

I'm Shawn Nason, your host for *The Combustion Chronicles* podcast. Throughout this series, we're bringing together the most unique and influential minds we could find to have honest conversations about not being okay with the status quo, blowing shit up, and working together to influence our shared future.

We believe that when bold leaders ignite consumer-centric ideas with passion and grit, the result is an explosion that creates a better world for all of us.

On this episode, Chris Cabott is the CEO of Steinberg Sports & Entertainment, and oversees all aspects of the company's finances and internal operations. Originally from Philadelphia, Chris is an attorney, certified NFL player agent, and has extensive experience in the entertainment industry. Throughout his career, Chris has negotiated over \$1 billion in client contracts. In 2016, Chris was honored as the first professional to ever in one calendar year sign a first-round NFL draft pick, land a major record label deal for a recording artist, and negotiate a life rights option with a major film studio. Chris has over 92 Gold and Platinum records to his name and has worked on a number of feature films, and is an adjunct instructor at Temple University's Fox School of Business where he teaches sports law. Chris, welcome to *The Combustion Chronicles*.

Chris: Hey, buddy, good to be on here. Thanks for having me.

Shawn: Absolutely, man. Chris, what a career, what a bio, and so many great things. So, just, kind of, wanna level set with our audience. Chris, you're an attorney by trade, a certified NFL player agent, and, of course, the CEO of Steinberg Sports & Entertainment. Was a career in the professional sports industry always a goal that you had in your life?

Chris: It's interesting because I grew up in a little town called Coatesville, Pennsylvania, and my mother was a hairstylist, is a hairstylist, has a small country, salon attached to the home. And my dad is an artist; drawing, and painting, and photography. And my dad, as a young guy with two kids, put his family ahead of his passion and essentially traded his time in art to trade time in a steel mill and traded hours for dollars, and I always respected that about my dad. So, I think, for me, I grew up very much appreciative of talent, of God-given talent because of my mom's creative talent as a stylist and my dad's creative talent an artist. And I always struggled to understand why my dad, who was so talented, essentially had to take a job outside of the arts to make ends meet. And I think I was always sympathetic to that. And then, as a result of

growing up in the steel industry, you have a lot of strikes, labor disputes, things like that. So we were always scared we were gonna lose our home. And when I was 14, we almost did. We were on strike for 90 days and I was staring out the window, and I heard this, kind of, resounding instructions that said, "Help people make a difference." And I accepted as the voice of God in my 20s. And when I was helping people and trying to make a difference in their lives, things always worked. And I found a pureness in that. And, you know, I thought, "Well, how can I do that? How can I help you out and make a difference?" And if I could do it, most folks with God-given talent, people like my dad, people like my mom. I always liked sports. We couldn't really afford to play them. But God gave me a right foot and a left foot, and I put one in front of the other, and I ran cross-country and track because they didn't cost anything. And the harder I work, the better I got. And I found a pureness in that too.

So, one of the cool things, though, I always say we were... I'll never say we were poor because we were rich in love and great in values. We were definitely financially stricken. But one of the cool things about not having affordability to go to sporting events and things like that is I was never a fan of sports in a way that was fanatic. I was a fan of sports in a way that I admired the talents of the people I was watching on ABC, NBC, CBS. We couldn't afford cable. And that was almost like admiring my mom and dad. And that was essentially admiring God and the talents that God had given my mom and dad, the talents he'd given these athletes on TV, I would watch. So, I think, indirectly, I always... You know, I certainly aspired to have a career to work with folks with God-given talent. And obviously, God-given talent is so prevalent in sports, so it indirectly took me into that. But, you know, just a brief antidote to that, I was very lucky, I found a mentor named Lloyd Remick, who was an NFL agent in the '80s and '90s. He had gotten out of it, he was more into entertainment. And Lloyd, who I consider my professional father, he gave me an opportunity to intern and work with him for free while I was in law school, and I learned a lot. And then I was doing a lot of legal work for some athletes who are more involved in the entertainment industry, as far as starting their own record labels, things like that. And what I noticed was that their agents were never involved. And that blew my mind. I always thought of your agent as your right-hand person.

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And I felt like that was God speaking to me again, encouraging me to start a sports agency. So I did start a sports agency from scratch and things built, things grew. So it's interesting, long-winded answer, kind of a long-winded road to sports representation, started back in Coatesville, started with, you know, kind of God's instructions, started with the talent of my mom and dad. And, you know, luckily, I was able to work with folks with God-given talents

through Lloyd, and then started working with some athletes and, kind of, all came to be. So, it's been a blessing.

Shawn: I love that Chris, and I love what you... I wrote it down that you were rich in love. I love that. So, most of our listeners, Chris, you know, they probably don't even have a clue what the inner workings of your industry looks like. Can you just give us a little bit of a peek behind this curtain, what it is to be like an agent in your world and what that competitive landscape looks like?

Chris: Sure. At the end of the day, the agent industry is the service industry. We are in the career of managing the careers of elite talent in sports and helping them grow their opportunities. This is an amazing time in the world of athlete representation because the landscape, the horizon continues to get broader, and broader, and broader. There are more and more opportunities. So, I've always enjoyed planning. I've always enjoyed details. Frankly, I've always enjoyed believing in people and seeing the best in them, and providing them with opportunities, and helping them to grow and expand it to achieve more. So, today, obviously, you have your on the field contracts, you have your off the field endorsements. You have tons of media opportunities to tell a story, to share a narrative, podcasts, obviously, vlogs, things like that, where athletes can, you know, really have their own voice and have their own opinions and business. There's so many opportunities for athletes and business these days that are tremendous. And I feel blessed to be in a career where, on a daily basis, I can help facilitate and bring those opportunities and help execute them. And it's a special thing. And obviously charity and philanthropy and give back is a beautiful thing. And when you look around the landscape of sports these days, we have some really great leaders in the sports industry. I mean, there are some real heroes in the world of sports that are really carrying the torch, and I feel very lucky to be able to work in this industry at this time. As far as competition goes, there's a lot. There's a ton of competition. And I think that the beauty of that is, at the end of the day, if you really pride yourself on building relationships and not just doing transactions or not just signing people or not just collecting people, you find people whose values match yours.

You find people whose personality matches yours. And the nice thing is with the folks we work with, we have an amazing Rockstar VP of PR media named Julia Ferran, and she says the game is what brings us together, but the relationship is what keeps us together, and I think that's critical. So, the cool thing of it is that athletes in selecting a representation have a lot of opportunities, have a lot of options, and are usually picking the folks that make the most sense for them. And what we offer is more service and more resources than any other firm, but on a very intimate basis. And if that's something you like, and if you view yourself as more than an

athlete, and you view yourself as someone that has the opportunity to really lead, and grow, and build generational platforms, we're the right firm for you.

Shawn: So, Chris, I really wanna dig into that because we call this *The Combustion Chronicles* and our ecosystem focuses a lot on disruption and the principles of disruption, and actually navigating people through disruption. So, your industry, again, so competitive and you've managed to grab arguably the face of the NFL, in my opinion, as a client, in Kansas City Chiefs quarterback, Patrick Mahomes, as well as some other remarkable NFL talents. So my question to you is this, when it comes to disruption, when you look at the rest of the industry and then you look at what Steinberg Sports & Entertainment is doing, what are you doing that sets you apart from the rest of the industry and the way it operates, and how are you disrupting the industry in this manner?

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Chris: I think the best way to answer that question is to focus on what we do best. And I think what we do best is we identify talent early. We identify... We watch a lot of film, and, frankly, we trust our gut. Patrick Mahomes was not a first-round touted guy coming out of college. Obviously, by the end of it, he went 10th overall. But if you would have set the clocks back about four years, you would hear folks saying second round picks, third-round picks, and folks who are fourth-round pick, etc., Talked about all of the things about him that were unorthodox. You know, as far as wasn't typical was setting his feet, and throwing the ball, and things like that. And what we saw was sniper eyes in a really great vision down the field, a really strong arm, a very athletic arm, a play-maker, play-making ability. And I could go on about so many guys we represent. Khalil Herbert in the 2021 draft is a running back that I think about three years from now, people will look back on this draft class and say, "Wow, how come no one was talking about him?" You know, a few years ago, the way maybe they talked about some other folks. But this guy, he's an NFL starter at a minimum, but incredible vision, incredible burst, incredible balance. He catches the ball well, runs the ball well, has special teams value. So, that's just some of the things that when we pick out, we have the ability to really spot great talent. But on top of that, it's getting to know the person. So usually what happens is we watch film, we see talent, we reach out. We get to build with people. We get to know them, see where their value starts, see where their values align, and then we look to build and grow with them. And at the end of the day, we look to give them a plan of what their future could look like if we work together. And then we look to build trust, which takes time. That's why we'd like to start building relationships early, then God willing, there's a good synergy, where it feels like family and it feels friendly.

And you know that someone really cares about you as a human, not just as an athlete. So, I think from that perspective is how we're able to really find the right people to service, and then the career of an athlete, and obviously most is from an NFL perspective, it's really four stages. There's get drafted as high as possible into the right fit, the right team, the right staff, etc., start to make money off the field, endorsements, marketing, transition to a great veteran contract, that's where most players make most of their money in the NFL in their second contract, and then have a plan for life after football. And a lot of that comes with a great Leigh Steinberg philosophy and great Leigh Steinberg architecture of retracing routes to the high school level, the college level, obviously the pro community, looking to integrate with the business leaders in those communities, putting them on an executive committee of the foundation, starting a foundation, giving back. That's where you can do a lot of good in the world. That's where sometimes you have second career business equity opportunities or off the field business equity opportunities that come naturally while players are still playing. And from day one when we do a presentation, we have a plan for all four stages there. And one of the things I like about having a plan is it gives us something to follow. It gives folks something to hold us to. And, you know, you can always modify a plan, but if you don't have a plan, you, kind of, spin in circles. And it's nice when you can have something planned out, a lot of detail and execute. So, I think that's where we found success. I think that is, kind of, a unique model in the agent stratosphere, usually at one of the spectrum, we have small agency, maybe one agent, solo agent, a couple of agents, limited resources at the other end, conglomerate firms that are looking to go public. They have a lot of different divisions. They're signing a lot of players essentially to have a lot of contracts on a balance sheet, things like that. And we've built something organically that is in the middle. We built a hybrid. That is something that's very attention to detail driven. It's very familial. And we provide more services, and more resources, and more reach than any other firm to very select few people. And that feels good to me. It feels refreshing to me. That feels meaningful. That feels honest to me.

Shawn: Chris, I love that. And there's two things that I wrote down that you shared there. First is, that a lot of it is gut for you. I loved also when you start thinking about business, and disruption, and how people function. You know, you talked about you built this family atmosphere, but you've also said you have a plan at the beginning, but you're willing to adjust that plan as you go. And that is really powerful to me. And I think that's a great takeaway for people when they think about disruption and what goes forward, is, it's great to have a plan, but you have to be ready to trust your gut and change that plan if you need to. So, love those insights and love the stories and hearing the heart of you as a person and how you are guiding and directing that North Star in your organization. On the flip side of that, Chris, let's talk a little

bit about what failure feels like. Because we all have it. Where would you identify a failure along your journey and how did you recover from that failure?

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Chris: There have been many. I mean, there have been many failures along the way. I mean, and it comes in so many different forms. You know, early in my career, it would be, you know, recruiting a client and, kind of, getting to the final meeting round, because I started as a lone wolf, and it was Chris, you know, really have a strong relationship with you, like you a lot, believe you, but this group just is more established, has more clients etc., etc., etc. And that stuff like that always felt like a failure, felt like a huge letdown and, you know, sometimes, too, you spend a lot of money doing that. You're traveling, you're going to games, you're creating relationships, creating these presentations. You could spend thousands and thousands of dollars and get nos, and nos, and nos. And that's a tough one. Failures, every so often, we haven't had it much, but you'll have a client that, you know, you work with, and you work hard. And for whatever reason, they tell you that they wanna take their business somewhere else. And, you know, that always stings because I think that, you know, we really put our heart and soul into what we do. And we really believe in the people and we treat this very much as family. And when that happens, like I said, that's things that hurts. However, what I will say to you is something that along the path of life I've learned is that rejection sometimes is God's protection. So you always have to stay in faith. And, you know, there's another phrase I like that, "People don't leave your life, God moves them." And that requires some faith and that requires some real confidence and loyalty to the Lord. But here's something else. In this particular industry, where it's very high paced, where it's very competitive, you are essentially at all times are building systems. And sometimes when you don't get a client or a client takes their business elsewhere, that doesn't mean your system has necessarily failed.

What it means is that you have the opportunity to continue to refine a system, grow a system, get better with the system. And I think that if you look at the last eight years of Steinberg Sports, that's really what has happened. We started with a goal. And that goal was to represent elite talent in the world of sports, provide more services and resources for them than any other group, than any other firm, simultaneously provide intimate attention. And that goal never changed. What happened every single year is we put more into that system. We put more legs around that goal. And at the end of the day, we're continuing to refine that process. We continue to bolster that system. And what I'm happy about is that we can really manage the career of a superstar, from everything on the field, to the off the field, the endorsements, the sponsorships, the marketing, the fulfillment, the media, the PR, to helping them find, their charitable pulse, to helping them execute there, to help them give back to communities, to help

them provide their stories, to, obviously now with our new partnership with Yucaipa and the Yucaipa sister companies, to having the ability to get into scripted and unscripted opportunities on TV, and content, and digital, to modeling, to entrepreneurial mentorship, and it's special. And we'll continue to refine and we'll continue to build. And, you know, one thing right now that there was a fellow I've been speaking to for a while that, you know, who's a colleague. And he's very deeply entrenched in the video game space, in the gaming space. And we have some clients that, frankly, they're NFL athletes, but they're also eSport athletes. I mean, these are some of the top Madden players and Call of Duty players in the country. And we need to provide more opportunities for them. So, you know, with all that being said, like, when I get the word no, that doesn't mean N-O to me, that means K-N-O-W. It's knowledge.

And with that knowledge and that feedback, we can continue to grow and enhance a system, that, at the end of the day, serves a goal. And that goal is to serve God-given talent and manage their careers. And you can never let something knock you down. You know, and I've said this to people, I've had said it myself, that you may be down but you're not out. And someone said something to me yesterday that made a lot of success, probably that made a lot of sense. They don't measure success by results. They measure success by effort. Because, at the end of the day, if you continue to apply enhanced effort, you will get the results. That's today's sermon.

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Shawn: Let me tell you, you just made me fill up a whole notepad there with that sermon, Chris. You know, people don't leave your life, God moves them. Holy cow.

Chris: That's right.

Shawn: And no, N-O, to know, K-N-O-W. And you don't measure success by results but by effort. Holy cow. What great nuggets for everyone listening, and I so appreciate you for sharing those. got two things left to do with you, first is, a final lesson, our call to action to our listeners. And Chris, what is that one thing you would want our listeners to take away from your story and what you have shared with us today as they leave, and what they've learned from this podcast? What would that one thing be?

Chris: What two things I want people to take away?

Shawn: Yes.

Chris: Believe in God. Trust in the Lord. That is... Some people have that, some people don't. The longer I live, the more I live, the deeper my faith is. Trust in humanity, believe in people, which is essentially believing in God. I grew up in a very small family, and I grew up with very different dreams, and goals, and aspirations. And I think I appreciate humanity a lot different than some people and I appreciate relationships a lot different than some people because so many of the people that believed in me, and backed me, and cared about me were strangers. They weren't family. They weren't friends. They were people I met along the way. And at the end of the day, I knew that God put them in my life for a reason because they wouldn't have just been there. So, definitely trust in the Lord. And then, I think the second thing is just don't stop. You know, like, don't give up. You know, if you have a dream, if you have a goal, if you have an aspiration, if you have a passion, go after it. Don't stop. You know, when people tell you no, don't listen to them. Don't believe them. Just because maybe something didn't work for someone else, you know, it doesn't mean it can't work for you. And at the same time, take that advice, heed that advice because you can learn something from everyone. And maybe where someone else made a mistake, you know, it can become something for you. And then I know this is three, but experience really is life's greatest teacher. I'm a strong believer in education and academia. I mean, I'm the biggest believer in experience. One of the greatest things that worked for me was I worked three jobs. Through undergrad, I worked three jobs. Through the year I took off to an undergrad law school, I worked three jobs to law school. And my time interning with Lloyd Remick, I spent more time at the law firm than I spent it in law school, which probably is not a recipe for success for many. But the reality of it was, I was being taught a trade, I was being taught a skill in school, but I really got to hone it when I got experience and worked on it. And that was, you know, in all the experience that Lloyd gave me as a mentor. You know, he gave me a great gift that way that I will forever have a debt of gratitude for.

And I guess the last piece here is truly appreciate people. Treat everyone with respect. Don't look up your nose at anyone. Don't look down your nose at anyone. Treat everyone as you'd like to be treated. Obviously, Golden Rule, basic stuff. But it goes far. I've been really lucky in life. I've had a lot of doors open for me by a lot of relationships. And that's... You know, I like to think some of that's because I've treated people well and they've, you know, reciprocated. And, you know, just build relationships. Don't ever do a transaction, build relationships because when things are going well, it's the strength of the relationship that serves it. When you hit adversity, it's the strength in relationship that will back you up. So, a lot of God, a lot of humanity, a lot of hard work there in my tips.

Shawn: You're speaking my language, Chris. So, we've come to the very last part of the podcast, and we thank you for sharing all of that. But we do the segment called the "Combustion Questions". Those are...

Chris: Let's do it. Let's combust!

Shawn: ...three randomly selected questions, and just gotta go with your gut, which is not obviously a problem as we've talked about that today. So, combustion question number one, Chris. If you could only eat one meal for the rest of your life, what would it be?

Chris: Spaghetti bolognese.

Shawn: Spaghetti bolognese. Nice. It's almost lunchtime for me. I'm ready to go grab some lunch.

Chris: Right, do it.

Shawn: Awesome. All right. Number two, what do you think about giraffes?

Chris: I think they're tall.

Shawn: They are tall. And question number three, what's the greatest day of your life?

Chris: Every day I wake up.

Shawn: That's like a mic drop moment there, every day that you wake up. Well, Chris, thank you so much for doing this with us today and sharing those amazing insights. And best of luck to you. And I'm so excited to see how you're gonna disrupt the industry even more. So, thank you for today, and stay safe and be well.

Shawn: Thank you so much for listening to this episode of *The Combustion Chronicles*.

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And be sure to check out my new book, *Kiss Your Dragons: Radical Relationships, Bold Heartsets, and Changing the World*, available now at Amazon. Yeah, most people think you

ought to slay dragons, but to really soar you have to make friends with them--and even kiss them.

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Stay safe and be well.