

Daniel Decker: [00:02](#) Welcome to Jon Gordon's Positive University Podcast. My name is Daniel Decker, I'm the co-host of Positive U, and on today's episode Jon talks with Nick Nurse, the head coach of the NBA Champions, the Toronto Raptors. This is a power-packed episode with great takeaways, as Nick gives us an inside look at what made the Toronto Raptors a championship team.

Daniel Decker: [00:22](#) He shares the keys to getting the team to believe in, and buy in, the importance of trying new things. The benefits of collaborative leadership. Why, as a leader, you must feed your team with positivity. And so much more.

Daniel Decker: [00:36](#) This episode is also a lesson in your past preparing you for your future. While many see Nick as an overnight success, he actually spent years working on his craft of becoming a coach. So you could say he's an overnight success, 27 years in the making. And Nick is a great example of being like The Coffee Bean. He's someone who creates positive change, overcomes challenges, and transforms the environment around him.

Daniel Decker: [01:00](#) If you want to learn how to create positive change, I encourage you to pick up The Coffee Bean. It's a new book by Jon Gordon and Damon West. It's a short read, with a profound message. Just go to CoffeeBeanBook.com, that's CoffeeBeanBook.com, to learn more.

Daniel Decker: [01:16](#) All right, let's join Jon and Nick.

Jon Gordon: [01:19](#) Hey, I'm Jon Gordon with Positive U. And today my guest is Nick Nurse. Nick is the head coach of the NBA Champions, Toronto Raptors. Nick, how you doing?

Nick Nurse: [01:29](#) I'm doing great. Great to be on, John, I'm a big fan, so thank you. It's an honor.

Jon Gordon: [01:33](#) I'm a fan of yours, Nick. When you won, how did it feel? And then, how do you feel now?

Nick Nurse: [01:40](#) Well it was great, I think you get right in the middle of the whole thing, Jon, and you're not really aware of a lot of your surroundings. You mean, when the ball goes up, the focus is on the court. During the weeks, and the prep leading up in the finals, did as good a job as I could to almost insulate myself, just so I could focus. I knew that I needed to spend my energy preparing the team, getting my rest and recuperating, and just try to stay pretty much insulated, as much as I could, so I could focus on it.

- Nick Nurse: [02:16](#) So, when the buzzer went off, obviously it was a joyous moment. So happy for the players. Man, they were so awesome, it was a great, tough-minded, focused group. And just happy that all the work and belief that they had came to fruition for them.
- Jon Gordon: [02:37](#) And then how do you feel right now? Is there a different feeling right now?
- Nick Nurse: [02:41](#) I feel good. I think I've tried to, tried to go back and let some of it sink in, like even when you get back and you have that parade, I don't know if you saw that, that was something. That five-hour parade might have been harder work than the playoff, it was something else. It was so much energy, and all that. But I recorded that and watched it. And I watched a couple things this week, just some shows that were going through the playoff run, and it kind of hits you a little more now that it's done, and you can look back and see some things that you couldn't even see when you're in the middle of it.
- Nick Nurse: [03:18](#) And obviously, again, very happy. Our organization's awesome, our city and country, you saw how happy they were. So I'm excited that everybody's getting to share in our joy.
- Jon Gordon: [03:30](#) I noticed that after you won, you weren't in front of the cameras. Did you do that on purpose? Because it almost seemed like you tried to stay away from the cameras and let your players have the limelight.
- Nick Nurse: [03:41](#) Yeah, a little bit, Jon. I think that it is the players' moment. More than anyone, I think they're the ones that are out there on the floor doing the work, and put in all the long hours and stuff. And I really want them to maximize that.
- Nick Nurse: [03:57](#) I won a title back in '96 in England with the Birmingham Bullets in my first year over there. I just remember it was their time to celebrate, and I kind of always try to do that when there's a celebration.
- Jon Gordon: [04:14](#) I love that. Take us back to the beginning, where you first realized you loved basketball. I heard you were a very good shooter growing up.
- Nick Nurse: [04:23](#) Well, I'll tell you what. I love basketball. I played a lot of sports, really, really lucky. I tell people this all the time. They say, you're so competitive, how come you want to win? Well. I'm the youngest of nine, and I got five older brothers, and I always tell

everybody it was a competitive battle, even before you got out of bed. If you wanted to eat in the morning, you better be the first one up. Things like that, fight for a spoon and a bowl and some cereal, so that pretty much went on all day. So that competitiveness was instilled in me in my environment, and as a younger, played a bunch of sports in high school. Our high school team, little small Catholic school in Carroll, Iowa won the state championship, and so basketball kind of became the sport I decided to play.

Nick Nurse: [05:15](#) But I think really, Jon, I realized that I was going to coach and my love for the game was my senior year at Northern Iowa, I was actually getting a degree in accounting and was going to go out and get a job, and saw my career right in front of me ending. I wasn't going to be good enough to play in the NBA, and that's when I was like, holy smokes, I've invested a lot of time in this and I really love, there's just no way I can walk away from this right now, so that's when I went in and knocked on Eldon Miller's door, my head coach at the time and said, I don't think I want to be an accountant, I think I want to coach. He said, why don't you join me as an assistant next year and see how it goes?

Nick Nurse: [05:55](#) And since leaving Northern Iowa, I haven't accounted for anything, but I've been able to stay employed as a coach ever since, and that was a long time ago.

Jon Gordon: [06:03](#) Yeah, let's talk about the journey. So you coached at Northern Iowa as an assistant, then what happened after that?

Nick Nurse: [06:08](#) Well, I got a job as a player coach, so I was able to continue to play a year, it was in a small little team in England, but they were playing in the first division over there, it was in Derby, England, they were called the Derby Rams. I knew I wanted to coach and it was a chance to get out there and run around and play a little bit more as well, and I went over there and took that job initially.

Jon Gordon: [06:33](#) And then what happened after that?

Nick Nurse: [06:34](#) Well, then I came back to Iowa in the summer and I was planning on going back to Derby, and I got offered a head coaching job at a college called Grand View University, which is in Des Moines, Iowa, not far from where I grew up, and was like 23 years old and going to be a head coach in college, and it was a pretty good little school and pretty good little situation, so my playing days ended and I grabbed the job as a head coach.

Nick Nurse: [07:00](#) I mostly just wanted to see if I could do it, Jon, to be honest. I knew I wanted to coach and here was a couple of head coaching opportunities at a young age, and I started in there, and then from there I went to the University of South Dakota for a couple years, and then I went back to England. The league looked like it was going to expand, they did a pretty good TV deal with Sky Sports over there, they built about five or six new big arenas in some of the major cities, and I ended up taking a job in Birmingham, England, coaching for the Birmingham Bullets in the newly built national indoor arena right in downtown Birmingham, England.

Jon Gordon: [07:36](#) And how old were you when you won a championship there?

Nick Nurse: [07:38](#) I think I was 26, 27, something like that. Yeah, and it was really similar to this, to be honest. I went over there and the team I think finished 8th out of 13 teams in the league the year before, and there were 500, and there was a team called the London Towers that had won it, I don't know, maybe 9 of the last 10 years or something like that, and I went over there with Birmingham and just kind of started plugging away and had a couple nice players. We made an addition or two to the roster. We started out 8 and 8, and I think we ended up 26 and 10 that year, and then we got on a hot playoff run and ended up being the London Towers in the championship that first year.

Jon Gordon: [08:20](#) Sounds very similar.

Nick Nurse: [08:21](#) Yeah, it is. It is. It was great, it was a lot of fun, at Wembley Arena. It was a little bit like the Final Four is in the States, it was a game Saturday night in a semifinal and a final game on Sunday, but the ride back on the bus was a little bit smaller than the parade we had in Toronto, but it was a lot of similarities either way.

Jon Gordon: [08:43](#) At that time, did you have any dreams of coaching in the NBA?

Nick Nurse: [08:48](#) Yeah, maybe in the back of my mind, but not for sure yet. I think I was just making a transition. I had just left college coaching and kind of realized I liked coaching professional players and that environment a little better, so I was going to go on that track, so naturally, the top of the heap there is the NBA. I probably wasn't quite dreaming about it that much yet, but just wanted to get better and keep on plugging.

Nick Nurse: [09:18](#) I think that's one thing I always tried to keep in mind, and one thing I did when I went over there. I was only going to be over

there a year, because I just wanted some more head coaching experience, did about 65 games over there and went over and really went to work as a student of the game. I was going to clinics as much as I could, I was reading books, I was watching.

Nick Nurse: [09:41](#) And one of the things I did over there was I found a company that would send me, this was back in the VHS tape days, that would send me VHS tapes of NBA games. And every Friday they would come and I would get four or five games in the mail. You could pick your team, I ordered the Bulls. That was back in the Bulls' heyday, and would watch those over and over. I learned a lot. I didn't know Phil Jackson at the time, but he was kind of my mentor. He didn't know it either, but I was watching him coach and trying to learn everything I can.

Nick Nurse: [10:14](#) Our team was running the triangle offense that he was famous for running, him and Tex Winter, and my players loved it. We'd watch the videos together, especially the American players, and we'd put some of the new stuff in and just tried to do the best we could learning, and having fun with it.

Jon Gordon: [10:31](#) What did you do then that you're also doing now? Like, what was part of your coaching philosophy that's still with you?

Nick Nurse: [10:38](#) Well, one of the thing I believe in, again and I would like to mention, there was a couple books that I leaned on heavily that year, specifically one was Phil Jackson's Sacred Hoops, but another one was called Freedom in the Huddle, which was written by a guy, his nickname was Dr. Victory, good nickname, Darrell Mudra is his name, and he was the head football coach at the University of Northern Iowa where I went to school.

Nick Nurse: [11:05](#) And Freedom in the Huddle is basically empowering your players to help you make some decisions and kind of guiding them along the way, and stepping back and letting them do their thing. And that's something I was trying to incorporate way back then, and I think it's very, very applicable to what I did with the Raptors this year.

Jon Gordon: [11:26](#) Yeah, you don't seem like a yeller. You seem like someone who just lets things play out, and then.

Nick Nurse: [11:31](#) Yeah.

Jon Gordon: [11:32](#) you seem like someone who stays calm.

- Nick Nurse: [11:34](#) Well, first of all I think I've matured a little bit. There's some players and coaches along the way that might argue with you on that, but I think one thing I knew this team needed this year was a sense of calm, a sense of steadiness, and really from day one, we had a really long pre-meeting before training camp started, pre-training camp meeting, and that was really a big focus, that we just weren't going to overreact to anything, Jon. We weren't going to overreact to a bad pre-season game, or a great win, a win at Golden State in the regular season, or winning at OKC or whatever. We were just going to go in there and play the best we could and then the next day, get the tape out, get back on the floor and get in the film room, and try to figure out what was good, what was bad, and make our steps forward.
- Nick Nurse: [12:34](#) And I think we had a long-term vision in place and you may have heard this or not, but one of our slogans for the year was AMJ, which was short for April, May, and June. And we were really trying to focus all of our building process and all that stuff all the way to be playing our best basketball in April, May, and June.
- Jon Gordon: [12:57](#) I love that. Talk about, how did your journey of becoming a head coach and then getting into the NBA prepare you for this season and for the success you're having now?
- Nick Nurse: [13:07](#) Well, I think first of all that head coaching experience is invaluable, and I had about 20 years under my belt, maybe a thousand official games, but probably another thousand unofficial games. Any time I could get in a summer camp and grab a group of guys and play four or five games or work an all-star camp or a top prospect camp around the world, I was volunteering my name to do it. I went to Long Beach Summer League and I hung out there for two summers passing out water and handing out stats until they finally gave me a team to coach the third summer.
- Nick Nurse: [13:45](#) I just was trying to really experiment, is the right word I guess, with trying to build chemistry and lead guys to play harder and play together and all that stuff, so all those little places along the way, official or unofficial, were just testing grounds for me to try out all these ideas I was reading about, or watching coaches and trying to figure out what they were doing, and try to take it into what I could incorporate on the floor.
- Jon Gordon: [14:16](#) You were always working on your craft and it seems like the best coaches are always doing that. Can you talk about that?

- Nick Nurse: [14:21](#) Yeah, I think it's really important. I think that, first of all, I got bit by the bug, I talked about that towards the end of my college career. And I just think it's important to try to pick things up, but then somewhere you got to put them into action, and I think it's hard to sit around and think about things all the time, and that's why I always stress to my staff and any young coaches that ask me, is grab a group of guys anywhere. Go get in a camp or volunteer somewhere, or grab any little AAU team you can and start getting up in front of them and being able to project some of your ideas, and then you know what you do? You throw out the ones that don't feel right and you keep the ones that do, and you start building up your tool kit a little bit.
- Jon Gordon: [15:14](#) So it's important to develop your own style as a coach, and not necessarily do everything another coach does.
- Nick Nurse: [15:20](#) 100%. I think the things I'm trying out were more tactically on the floor, and I always say that that's only about 15% of the job, the X's and O's. But, I always put a big 'but' in there, but it seems to be that little 15% that the players early on latch onto quickly. They come out there and what they want is for you to help them succeed, and that's really what your job is on the court, right? And if you're prepared and ready to give them an on-floor game plan that A) can help the team, and B) can benefit them personally, then they're going to be on board with you quickly.
- Nick Nurse: [16:05](#) I still say it's only about 15% of it, but it's really important 15% to get some buy-in quickly.
- Jon Gordon: [16:12](#) Yeah, having worked with a lot of professional athletes, I know that if you can't help them get better, then they're not interested in talking to you, but if you can help them, they will spend all the time in the world with you if you can help them be great.
- Nick Nurse: [16:23](#) Yeah, that's it. It's one of the things I used to tell my teams a lot. I worked in a lot of smaller market things, professionally, and almost every league I was in was a league where guys were trying to play well and then move up to something else, like the D League, or it's now called the G League, was the best example, right? These guys were playing in the minors and they wanted to get a call up.
- Nick Nurse: [16:45](#) Even in England, guys were trying to get to bigger leagues in Europe, and we used to talk about it, and this may sound pretty simple and straightforward, but we used to say we have two

goals. One is to win, and two was to increase your value in the marketplace, help you get a better job, help you make a better living. That's what these guys are doing, they've got families and kids that they're trying to support, and we thought if we helped them focus on number two, they'd help us focus on number one. It was a small little circle that would keep paying off benefits to each one.

Jon Gordon: [17:18](#) You won a championship in the D League, now called the G League. Talk about that and that experience.

Nick Nurse: [17:24](#) That was really special, Jon, and the reason was is we went back to my home state of Iowa, back to Des Moines again, and they'd just built a brand new shiny arena in Des Moines, Iowa, and I was like, well what are they doing here? Who's playing here? And they had a minor league hockey team playing, so I literally called them up and asked them if they'd be interested in putting a D League team in there, and they were, and then I called the D League offices and they said they'd love to have a team in Des Moines, and then I kind of scratched my head and said, what do I do next?

Nick Nurse: [17:55](#) But I end up calling a couple of guys, namely Jerry Crawford, he's an attorney in Des Moines, but kind of a big community provider, deal-maker type of guy, and we end up starting a team in Des Moines. Took us four years, we built it up and all that kind of stuff, but at the end of the fourth year we won the D League title and man, was that something. That was really a special thing because there was me and one other guy from Iowa, Nate Bjorkgren who's now my assistant here in Toronto, we spent about 20 hours a day together for about four years trying to figure out how to win that thing, and it was really fun.

Jon Gordon: [18:36](#) I often say, how do you become an overnight success, and it's 10 years later, but it seems like your journey...

Nick Nurse: [18:44](#) Mine was only 27 years later. There you go, right?

Jon Gordon: [18:49](#) I was thinking that about you, right? 27 years later, an overnight success. When you were named the head coach of the Toronto Raptors, how'd you feel and then what was your next thought? Like okay, what do I need to do next?

Nick Nurse: [19:03](#) Yeah, I think I was in position, Jon, I had been in the League five years, I had 20 years of head coaching experience under my belt, I was on a lot of people's radar. I thought I was going to become a head coach in the NBA at some point, there was four

or five jobs open, I was talking to most of the teams. The last place I thought it was going to be was Toronto, it never really entered my mind that I would be here. But then I got it, and I figured I was going to have head coaching job for this season, and like I always say, there's a thousand people that used to tell me all the time, you're going to be a head coach in the NBA someday, and after I got it, those same thousand people seemed surprised. They were texting me a lot of congratulations and stuff like that, so it was a little bit surprising of the reaction, getting back.

- Nick Nurse: [19:56](#) And what did I do next? I got on a plane to go visit our key and core players and just look them in the eye and say let's go man. I'm ready, and let's get ready to start dreaming big and let's make our first steps forward right now.
- Jon Gordon: [20:13](#) Our mutual friend Dabo Swinney often talks about the power of belief, right? You got to get those players to believe. How important was that for you and this team, and the mindset and the belief that, you know what, we could win this thing?
- Nick Nurse: [20:27](#) Yeah, I think we had a good team, right? We had a 59-win team that was seeded number one in the East the year earlier. So we had a core there, we had some success. But again, we had to start thinking a little bit bigger. And I started off my pre-season talk with an expect to win motto, right? That we have to expect to win. How are we going to win if we step on the floor and we're not expecting to win? But that's one thing, I think quickly following that is you better give them a plan and some ideas and a process of how you're going to get there.
- Nick Nurse: [21:08](#) So I think you're going to tell them hey, we're expecting to win the whole thing, but here's, boom boom boom boom boom, some of the ideas and thoughts and processes we have to get us there, and that's again I think where the buy-in starts happening, and the belief starts to take a little bit more shape.
- Jon Gordon: [21:26](#) What are some key practical ways to get buy-in?
- Nick Nurse: [21:29](#) Well I think it's a sharing of the idea of where you want to go, with the plan that follows it up, Jon. I think that obviously you can tell them how big you want to dream and that you're going to go for the whole ball of wax, but there needs to be some concrete plan and vision there that they can see, and that you can share and discuss with them and they can see where their role is and what their role is and kind of share back with you on,

yeah, this is doable. I think I can do that, and I'm willing to do that, and communicating those things is really key.

Jon Gordon: [22:08](#) Did you really implement a no complaining rule during training camp?

Nick Nurse: [22:13](#) I didn't implement the no complaining rule, but we did talk about things that were really close to that. We wanted to stop finding people to blame or situations to blame people on. We wanted to be proactive and create a solution, do something about a problem or whatever. You probably heard about my elephant in the room thing, say hi to the elephant if you just want him to come in and talk about anything. We just didn't want our issues to linger, and we wanted to confront them and I wanted our guys to make sure that they knew, whenever there's a problem they need to speak up. If I had a problem, I was going to speak up, and we could take care of those things in a positive manner. I think that we never really wanted to get too high or too low, especially too low. When we'd have a bad game, we'd try to flush it away as quick as possible and get ready to play the next one.

Nick Nurse: [23:14](#) That's probably the thing I'm most proud of with this team, is they did that with tremendous amount of courage this year. We went down and we got blown out at San Antonio in the Kawhi Leonard return game, I mean just got our doors blown off, and we had to get on a plane that night and go to Milwaukee, who had the best record in the League, and we turned right around and beat them on their home floor the next night. And we did that several times, maybe not quite in that big a fashion, but that really helped us in the playoffs, because we had a couple bad losses we had to bounce back from in the playoffs, but we had already been there and kind of practiced that in the regular season.

Jon Gordon: [23:48](#) How important is it to have a guy like Kawhi Leonard on a team like this?

Nick Nurse: [23:53](#) Well, it's huge, as you know, on any of these championship teams is, it's about the players, and he's certainly one of the world's greats, right up there at the top, and he'd already won before, he was a finals MVP, and man, did he play like one in our series. And not only that though, Jon, his play was one thing, which was off the charts incredible. His demeanor, just unflappable, like the guy is just the most steadiest, unemotional, just doesn't show any emotion good or bad until it's over. When he hit that shot that bounced on the rim four

times to get it, he let out a scream and celebrated that for about a day, and then he got back to work. And when we won it all, that's what his goal was.

Nick Nurse: [24:43](#) He's always talked about, all I want to do is be healthy and play a long time, and all I care about is winning, and man, that is a message that our guys took from him and followed in his footsteps with.

Jon Gordon: [24:57](#) So his presence, his attitude, was contagious to the guys around him.

Nick Nurse: [25:02](#) No doubt about it. I think that's always the case with your best leaders on the field or on the court, or anywhere probably, Jon. I always say, everything rises and falls with leadership, and we rose with his leadership.

Jon Gordon: [25:17](#) I love that. Chuck Daly was asked if he was a great coach. He said, I'm a pretty good coach, but I have great players.

Nick Nurse: [25:24](#) Yeah.

Jon Gordon: [25:25](#) Would you agree with that?

Nick Nurse: [25:27](#) Yeah, I think for sure, and especially at this level, and most levels, Jon, it's you gotta have the talent, and we certainly did. Kawhi and Kyle, and adding Marc Gasol and Serge and Fred VanVleet, Norman Powell, Pascal Siakam, OG, all those guys that contributed, man, it was quite a group. I think they came together as we went, I think they grew a lot, but a lot of talent there and a lot of toughness.

Jon Gordon: [25:59](#) When did you realize this team was special?

Nick Nurse: [26:06](#) I don't know, probably that one I already talked about, when we bounced back against Milwaukee, that showed me a lot. That was one time. There was some times during the year, Kawhi sat out 22 games for the now-famous term load management, he hadn't played in year, and we were just not trying to overdo it with him again, thinking towards our goals of April, May, and June. And our players at first were kind of scratching their head, wondering about this, but then they got I think, and bought into it, accepted it and understood what we were doing. And they played great, I think they went 17 and 5 in the 22 games that he didn't play, and there was no locker room issue with it or any of that, and I thought that was a pretty telltale sign of our team coming together.

Jon Gordon: [27:01](#) You guys were so mentally strong this year, it was just incredible to watch, especially in the playoffs, but I also know, Nick, that doesn't happen by accident. Leadership is a transfer of belief, so I'm just curious, and I know you're very humble but what did you do to continuously share your belief with them and to get them to believe and think, to keep them connected, right? You have to be a connected team to be a committed team, so how did you get them to stay connected throughout the year and then have that higher level of commitment?

Nick Nurse: [27:33](#) I think again, a lot of that has to go to the players, Jon, there were some strong leaders there in Kawhi and Kyle and Marc and Serge, and even Freddy although he's a third-year player, he's kind of got a leadership swag to him, you know? Freddy VanVleet.

Jon Gordon: [27:50](#) Yep.

Nick Nurse: [27:51](#) But again, I think it was, I tried to give them a vision with a plan, I tried to not overreact to anything, but when they needed maybe a kick in the pants a little bit, I was going to give it to them. There was times when they didn't perform like they were capable of, they were out of character at times, and when they did that we tried to show them that, and get them back in character, and I remember we had one film session right before we went out on the floor, we were down 2-1, we were playing at Philly, and that's exactly what we did. We showed them out-of-character plays from the series, followed up by in-character plays from the series, and said if we want to go where we want to go, we better get in character pretty quick, and eliminate the out-of-character mistakes that we were doing, and they did that pretty quickly.

Jon Gordon: [28:55](#) You often talk about love and accountability, so it seems like you were really holding them accountable to the standards that you expected, and that they expected of themselves.

Nick Nurse: [29:06](#) Yeah, it's a must, Jon, I think, and with a lot of things, you say yeah we're going to hold them accountable, and it sounds pretty cool, right, but you got to kind of get down to the nitty gritty of what does that mean, what do they understand it to mean, and how does it directly relate to what we're going? I don't know, I could give you a couple examples of how we hold them accountable.

Nick Nurse: [29:31](#) We have this thing on defense where we like to show our length and that's simply getting down in a stance and spreading your

wings. And we just count it. Every time you run down the floor and you get on defense, do you get down and show your length and, if you had 25 opportunities in the game and you did it 20 times then you get a score of 80%, and we show them that on a per-game basis, and that's a very specific, important, are you buying in thing that we're tracking and giving them daily feedback on after games, anyway.

Jon Gordon: [30:08](#) But you also are very creative, we ran a box in one. Talk about the creativity and the coaching that you brought to it, and was it a lot of fun putting that in? Were the guys like, really, we're going to try this? What was the mindset?

Nick Nurse: [30:26](#) I think first of all, just to quickly go back on that, I think there is a little bit of a story to that. When I put it in, we were in trouble. It was in game 2 and we just couldn't get the game to our rhythm. Golden State's rhythm was just off the charts, and we just were trying to break their rhythm. So we needed to do something out of necessity to do that. And then it was a time out, and I kind of drew it out on the board, where everybody would be in the box, and who the one guy that was going to be chasing Steph Curry was going to be, and showed it to Kyle Lowry and he goes, I love it.

Nick Nurse: [31:06](#) And that just sold it to the rest of the team right there, and they went out on the court and I think we were down about 13 at the time and we end up cutting it all the way back to one possession in that game, but it just gave just another tool in the tool box. We did use it later on in the series, in fact we used it in game 6, the game we won it, pretty effectively too.

Nick Nurse: [31:28](#) So I guess it just shows that we probably will try anything. We tried a lot of the things during the season, and I told them that before training camp, that we were going to try some things, and some of them might be uncomfortable, and some of them might be wacky, and if they don't work we'll get rid of them, but maybe we'll find something. Maybe we'll find a combination of guys we didn't think could play together that will, maybe we'll find a defense that we can use just a few times a night that might help us in the future and change a game, and they just were really good about being open-minded and buying into that. But I think we kind of set the table that we were going to be like that from day one.

Jon Gordon: [32:11](#) So you were really preaching growth mindset and it sounded like they really had one.

- Nick Nurse: [32:16](#) 100%. That probably more than anything throughout the playoffs, that 15% of the X and O coaching I was talking about. The communication back and forth, the ideas that they were coming with and we were coming with and my staff was coming with, the transferring of those back and forth, the acceptance to do them, was all part of a special mindset this team had.
- Jon Gordon: [32:45](#) Did you see this team really gel, come together even more during the '76ers series? It seemed like that's when this team became a strong, powerful team.
- Nick Nurse: [32:54](#) Yeah, the playoff run was long, you know, a couple months, and very up and down, and looking back on it, the Orlando series that started and we lost the opening game, and we just needed to play harder, first and foremost. And we went out in game 2 and played the best defense times five that we played all year. I mean, we really got out there and guarded them, but our offense was a little bit out of rhythm, we were winning a lot of those Orlando games shooting 36, 38% from the field, which wasn't going to get it done in the next rounds. And I thought we'd start playing better on offense, Jon, I thought the rhythm would get there, I thought guys would become accustomed to the three levels up of intensity that goes on when you hit the playoffs, I mean it's unbelievable the way guys are flying around in the NBA in the playoffs, and takes a little getting used to.
- Nick Nurse: [33:49](#) And again, the defense kind of carried us through, the offense started to come in the Philly series as you mentioned, and then it kind of stayed with us, and we just kept getting a little better in each series as we went.
- Jon Gordon: [34:03](#) And does that carry over to the following year as a team?
- Nick Nurse: [34:06](#) Well I sure hope so. I guess we're going to have to wait and find out, but we noticed too, and Dabo and those guys will probably tell you that extra two months you get to play while everybody else was done, and that's two months of games, intense games, 25 games, film sessions, practices, et cetera, that certainly should help your team going into next season.
- Jon Gordon: [34:29](#) Let's talk about the real bay thing, let's talk about the hat you were wearing, the Nick Nurse hat.
- Nick Nurse: [34:36](#) All right.
- Jon Gordon: [34:36](#) The double N. I loved it, people were talking about it, how did that come about?

- Nick Nurse: [34:40](#) Well it was a strange thing, I was wearing a Travis Mathews and their logo is a T kind of on top of an M that kind of looks like an NN, and my brother Steve's the head equipment manager at the University of Northern Iowa, where I went to school, and they're a Nike school, as the NBA is, and the Nike rep kept asking him, why are you wearing that Travis Mathews hat all the time, and I kept saying well, it's black on black and I wear a lot of black, and I just tug it on my head because it usually goes with what I'm wearing pretty easily, and he said, I'm going to make him some NN ones that look like the TM if that's what he wants to wear. And my brother brought me four of them up, so that's the big story of the NN hat.
- Jon Gordon: [35:21](#) Yeah, Scott Van Pelt was talking about it a lot. He loved talking about that hat, and at one point he was even giving you a little bit of a hard time saying, hey, this guy thinks he has his own logo now, and yet when I heard him interview Kyle Lowry, Kyle was great because he said, no no, it's just a hat with initials on it, it wasn't a big deal, and he had your back and when I saw that I thought, okay, this coach has a great relationship with his players and his players have really bought in and believe in their coach. It was a little subtle thing, but I look at those subtle things and I thought it was a big thing.
- Nick Nurse: [35:55](#) Well, first of all I appreciate that, that you noticed and Kyle said that, and I think Kyle's echoing how I felt about it, it's like the story I just told you, it certainly wasn't a Nick Nurse brand that we were out there trying to [crosstalk 00:36:10] anything like that, and for Kyle to understand that that's the way I would probably portray it is meaningful, there's no doubt about it. But Kyle's a special player, Jon, and I say this about him all the time. I've never seen anybody play harder, in any league I've been in, and that to me is the ultimate compliment I can give him. And he deserves it, I'm not blowing smoke. The dude will take charges and block out seven-footers and race after the ball and push his team and play as hard as you could possibly play, and he's six foot tall. Man, I think he's a great example
- Jon Gordon: [36:49](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative)-
- Nick Nurse: [36:49](#) for a lot of guys to go out there and use the abilities God gave them to the best of their ability.
- Jon Gordon: [36:56](#) So true, that attitude he has is everything, and you lost at home actually in game 5, and as a team you really could have gotten discouraged, but you told me after that loss, we're excited about the opportunity to play again. I'm excited about coaching

again, even after that loss. It was a totally different attitude than I expected, I just loved it. I said wow, they are going to go in and they're going to win the next one at Golden State just from your attitude. How important is it to stay positive through challenges and to stay encouraged when you could get discouraged?

Nick Nurse: [37:35](#) Yeah, I think at that moment, Jon, it was crucial. Right, because we were six points up with three minutes to go in game 5 at home, and the whole city, the arena, everybody was wanting us to close it out, and we were right at the front door and do it in our home building and all that kind of stuff. I just didn't want a hangover, any lingering emotional thing. We had to play, we didn't win it and we were still up 3-2. I mean, if you can't look on the bright side of being able to play in the finals, coach in the finals and being up 3-2, then you're never going to look on the bright side, and we needed to.

Nick Nurse: [38:11](#) I grabbed my staff quickly right after the game and brought them in a board room and said, hey everybody, the message is we're up 3-2 and let's be positive, no self-pity, no nothing, let's get ready to get excited to get on that plane and go to Golden State and go get this done.

Jon Gordon: [38:29](#) And did the players feel the same way?

Nick Nurse: [38:31](#) Well I'll tell you what, I thought when I came in the locker room and delivered that message, I thought they were okay. Right, I didn't feel they were too far down, I thought they were okay. But the next day when we got on the plane I knew they were great. You just see the way they were walking and talking and moving, body language, interactions with each other, coaching staff, support staff, everybody that was on that plane understood the message and it showed, and it wasn't phony at all, it was genuine and I felt pretty good about it.

Jon Gordon: [39:08](#) To young coaches and young leaders out there, Nick, what would you tell them about your journey and what you could tell them about leadership and grinding it out and growth, what are some of your favorite tips to share with young leaders?

Nick Nurse: [39:22](#) Well I think the first thing, Jon, I would say is that you've got to feed your mind or pump in as much positive stuff as you can. Like now I listen to you and read your stuff, but there was Tony Robbins. It was Zig Ziglar when I was younger. And I really think that's important, to get up, not every day but most days and start working on your positive mental state, your enthusiasm, et

cetera, because that will carry you into being able to have enough energy to do the work you're going to need to do. And the work you're going to need to do is, study people and work at things and read about different ways to do things, and grab little bits and pieces that make sense to you that you think you could incorporate into your own personality, and then I would just say you got to work at it.

Nick Nurse: [40:24](#) I already said as a young guy at 22 and 23, I was taking head coaching jobs and I was trying to grab any team I could just to get in front of people and try to lead them, work at my craft and just build on it from there, and I always encourage young coaches to still go do the young kids camps, and grab a team and work with them. Take an AAU and work, even though yeah, everybody wants to be in the NBA, but when you get there you want to have a solid foundation built of philosophy, work, direction, plan, motivation, psychology, all the things it takes to lead at this level.

Jon Gordon: [41:06](#) Yeah, earlier I said you weren't a yeller, but Dabo Swinney will yell at his players, and I know you at times will get excited and get emotional. Sean McVay, same thing, positive coach, but he will get on his players and yell at times as well. So it obviously is important to sometimes get on them a little bit, even though you're also giving a lot of positivity and belief. So talk about the blend of the two, and how do you know the right combination? What is the right combination for you and does that vary based on situation and circumstance?

Nick Nurse: [41:39](#) Yeah, I think people have talked about, even some ratios or almost formulas, like four positive to one negative. When we show film, we try to show a lot of positive clips, but you also got to show the teaching clips, right? We call them the teaching clips instead of maybe the negative clips, but you can't use the get on them speech too much, Jon, I think,

Jon Gordon: [42:05](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Nick Nurse: [42:06](#) And I think people have talked about it like, you've got about six bullets to fire a year, and you better not fire too many of those or they'll start falling on deaf ears, and I maybe think it's even a little less. I think that a lot of times, you got to be able to talk to them pretty plain language and pretty level emotions. That's what most of your meetings are, even when they're after a tough loss or something, but every now and then, you got to turn up the volume, turn up the intensity and really get after

them. But I think you got to pick those moments, and they're pretty few and far between.

Jon Gordon: [42:46](#) Yeah, as a student and teacher of leadership, collaborative leadership is the way to lead now, and it sounds like you lead in a very collaborative style. Would you agree with that?

Nick Nurse: [42:57](#) Yeah, I sure hope so, Jon, I think that would certainly be my goal, or if I could talk about a philosophy, I certainly think being able to empower people, share the vision, certainly not be afraid to take the heat when the heat's there, and take it off people when it's there. That's part of your job as the head coach or a leader, but to be able to let people use their talents, that's my thing is, here's a structure, but now go crazy with your talents and show me what you can do, and I think that applies all the way up and down the staff, from the travel guy to the equipment guy to the chefs upstairs. Let's tell them, hey, this is what we need and would like, but man, surprise us every now and then and do something cool that we know you can do.

Jon Gordon: [43:54](#) Nick, you're such an amazing coach. You're an incredible leader, and just watching you, I've been blown away this year, just studying you and watching how you led this team, watched a lot of your games and just our conversations, and it just seems to me that you're always striving to get better. Even now, you just won a championship and you're planning to go coach the National Team, the Canadian National Team, talk about that.

Nick Nurse: [44:20](#) Yeah, I'll tell you the single biggest reason I'm doing it, Jon, is I was fortunate enough in 2012 to be part of the staff of the Great Britain Olympic team, so we spent about four or five years in the buildup to the 2012 Olympics getting that team basically started from scratch, and to perform in the Olympics, and I just didn't have a better learning experience, and I thought the international game and the World Cup's an amazing tournament, obviously the Olympics is. It just puts you in an incredible learning environment. That's the biggest reason I took it. Two, they got a lot of talent. [crosstalk 00:45:01] young players and I think they have a chance to move forward. Again, it'll be the same, I'm try to get this group of guys together to dream about going someplace, maybe they haven't dreamt about or even think they can go yet, and we'll see what we can do with it.

Nick Nurse: [45:18](#) Really talented young group, but mostly I'm going to learn and get a great staff put together and try to get these guys playing tough, playing hard, playing together and dreaming big.

- Jon Gordon: [45:30](#) When does that start? And were you tired after all this? Didn't you need a little bit of a break?
- Nick Nurse: [45:35](#) Well I tell you what, I wasn't that tired until this week, Jon, to be honest. The week afterward's been more tiring than the whole season put together. Especially that parade, that was harder than any series we played, but just so many people, and the intensity of it was amazing. Never, ever probably experience that again and never forget it, that's for sure. But no, you know Jon, you know when you put a good staff together and you can kind of lay the ground work out there together, and let them again go do their thing. They can really help and prepare, and I always just try to keep focused on coaching the team. And when you have a good staff, they can prepare you to do that.
- Nick Nurse: [46:20](#) And then I spent a lot of time recouping, revitalizing and restoring my energy and stuff so I know I'll be ready to go.
- Jon Gordon: [46:29](#) So just like a player, as a coach you're recovering and you're making sure that you stay energized and continue to feed yourself throughout the year, to fuel yourself and have that energy going forward.
- Nick Nurse: [46:41](#) Yeah, no doubt about it. I spend a lot of time just relaxing, I'm working at playing a couple musical instruments. I play a little bit of piano and guitar, and I find that to be a great break from watching film for 10 or 15 minutes and I also find it, I don't know if this is 100% true or not, but I believe it to be true. I think learning those instruments stoke some creativity in me and keep some new ideas flowing. So I would recommend that too, to go and learn a language or whatever you can do to keep your mind stimulated and keep rolling, and it also for me gets me out of the basketball grind and relaxes me and I have fun with it.
- Jon Gordon: [47:25](#) So how has your life changed since winning the championship? Just talk about even the small little things like the little stores you go into now.
- Nick Nurse: [47:32](#) Yeah, I mean for sure, I live right downtown Toronto here, not far from either the arena or a practice facility and I would say that a year ago, certainly, I could walk unnoticed down there, pretty unnoticed, but not anymore, so that's the first thing that's changed. And I'd just say it seemed like there was a lot of Raptors fans, a lot of new Raptors fans, and certainly it was great to share this with people I went to college with, people from the state of Iowa, my hometown, a lot of people reaching

out and saying hey, way to go man, and that was fun to share that with everybody.

Jon Gordon: [48:12](#) Nick, few more questions, personal questions. Growing up in Iowa, what was that like? How did that make you who you are? I find people from Iowa are just amazing people. Everyone I meet from Iowa, my friend Gary Woodland just won the U.S. Open, he's from Kansas, right. There's something about the Midwest, can you just talk about that and the kind of person you are growing up there?

Nick Nurse: [48:33](#) Yeah. I think first of all, everybody's a little partial to where they grew up, right, and I certainly am. I think, you know, Iowa nice is a real thing, I think they're first of all really nice people sharing hardworking people, there's no doubt, it's a farming community, a state, you know, farming state, and a lot of that hard work and working together and all that stuff I think certainly embodies the state, and I was fortunate enough to be a part of that. Just really good people, Jon, you know.

Jon Gordon: [49:06](#) Yeah, great people. My first book tour went to 28 cities. The biggest crowd we had was Des Moines, Iowa, and they thought Jeff Gordon was coming though, that's why they showed up.

Nick Nurse: [49:18](#) Surprising though, they always back events, I mean we had 14,000 people at a D League championship, and they came out to support us and they are, they're great sports fans in Iowa too.

Jon Gordon: [49:33](#) Yeah, amazing people. Who's your hero, Nick?

Nick Nurse: [49:37](#) Who's my hero?

Jon Gordon: [49:38](#) Yeah, who's your hero?

Nick Nurse: [49:40](#) I don't know, hero's such a big word, right? I think there's certainly some people I look up to and I'm very thankful that I was given the opportunity to either learn from or eventually meet one day, but I look at my coaching, I got to look at my high school coach Wayne Chanley, unbelievable teacher of the game. My college coach Eldon Miller, the same, just personified the word class and how to do it with working very hard and being super competitive but doing it with class. And on, I mentioned Phil Jackson, and I'm not trying to drop a name, but I was watching for six years their games over and over and over, and was super fortunate to get to meet him this past summer and

spend some time with him. And he gave me some really valuable lessons to take forward.

Jon Gordon: [50:41](#) Love that. You have so much fight in you, and you got your guys to fight every third quarter. I mean, that's the key to beating the Warriors, you have to make sure that you match their intensity in the third. Did you put extra focus on that, making sure that, all right guys, we have to win this third. Was that something you intentionally talked about?

Nick Nurse: [51:00](#) Well, I didn't going in, Jon, I thought that I was going to see how it played out, and game 1 we kind of dominated the third, so I didn't need to say anything, but in game 2, then they came out and so we had to make an adjustment in game 3, and we ended up just changing the starting lineup in the second half, and we put in Freddy VanVleet, another point guard. We just thought it'd give us a chance to keep our pace higher coming out of the half, and then we ended up staying with that the rest of the way.

Jon Gordon: [51:35](#) What a great idea. So going forward Nick, you just won a championship, I've been with a lot of great coaches who have won championships and it's an incredible feeling, but what are you thinking about next and what are you excited about next?

Nick Nurse: [51:49](#) Well, I'm going to hopefully lean on some people. That's my first plan, Jon, I'm going to go talk to Dabo and Enda, Belichick, whoever I can get, guys that have won it, and are trying to do it again. Because I want to hear what their experiences were like and see if I can pull anything out of there that'll help us. That will be my main focus this summer.

Jon Gordon: [52:11](#) What a great idea. Working with Clemson after we won the championship in 2015, actually 2016, lost in 2015, won in 2016, the following year I came back and lost in the semis to Alabama, and you could just tell that Alabama wanted it more than Clemson did. So the following year, the message was Eye of the Tiger. So funny, I got up there and I knew I was going to talk about Eye of the Tiger. I get there and Dabo gives me a shirt that said "Eye of the Tiger". We hadn't even talked about Eye of the Tiger to each other, but he was getting them back on that hungry mindset. So it sounds like I can't wait for you guys to talk and for him to share some ideas on keeping the team hungry for next year.

Nick Nurse: [52:55](#) Yeah, I look forward to it to. He gave me some good help in leading into this, I don't know if you know or not, but he came

up to a game. He always travels around the NBA and he came up to a game and I got to spend some time with him first time I met him, and we stayed in touch since then, and he gave me some great thoughts during the playoffs.

Jon Gordon: [53:12](#) I love it, love it. Nick Nurse, thank you so much for joining us. Congratulations on your championship, you deserve it, but I know this is just the beginning, right, the best is yet to come.

Jon Gordon: [53:24](#) Looking forward to hearing some of your music as well in the future.

Nick Nurse: [53:29](#) I don't know about that, but hey, I want to say it's truly, truly and honor, man, I was a huge fan, as you know, and it's almost surreal to be doing this for you and just want to tell you how honored I am.

Jon Gordon: [53:43](#) Well thanks, Nick, I really appreciate it. Best is yet to come.

Nick Nurse: [53:46](#) Okay. Thanks Jon.

Daniel Decker: [53:47](#) Thanks again for joining us for this episode of the Positive University podcast. If you found value from it, please share it with a friend. You can post on social, be sure to tag [@jongordon11](#). Make sure you also subscribe so you get notified each week as a new episode releases. You can subscribe, rate, and review in iTunes or wherever you listen. We'd be extremely grateful for that, as your reviews help encourage others to listen in.

Daniel Decker: [54:10](#) So until next time, stay positive and remember, the best is yet to come.