

SEEKING THE EXTRAORDINARY

Ep 13 - Etan Thomas: The Activist Athlete

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Michael Nathanson: Welcome fellow seekers of the extraordinary, welcome to our shared quest. A quest, not for a thing, but for an ideal. A quest, not for a place, but into the inner unexplored regions of ourselves. A quest to understand how we can achieve our fullest potential by learning from others who have done or doing exactly that. May we always have the courage and wisdom to learn from those who have something to teach.

Join me now in Seeking the Extraordinary. I'm Michael [00:01:00] Nathanson, your chief seeker of the extraordinary. Friends. I've had the privilege of interviewing several professional athletes on this show. But every one of them was extraordinary for reasons that exceeded their athleticism. Today's guest is most certainly of the same caliber. He attended Syracuse University where he played basketball and graduated with a degree in Business Management. In 2000, the year in which he was selected to the first team, All Big East, he was drafted number 12 in the NBA draft and went on to play as a center and power forward for the Washington Wizards, Oklahoma City Thunder and Atlanta Hawks. But this man is far more than a member of the elite group of men that were good enough to play in the NBA. He's a study in resilience and inspiration. Want an [00:02:00] example? During the Wizard's training camp for the 2007 to 2008 season, a routine physical examination revealed that he had a leaking aortic valve requiring open-heart surgery.

The surgery was a success. And a year later, he returned to play again for the Wizards. Oh, and in this first game back, he had 10 points and eight rebounds. Yet our guest has passions and genius well beyond athletics. He's a prolific writer, thinker, advocate, and activist. He wrote a book of poetry called *More Than an Athlete*, in which he addresses big issues, such as the death penalty, racism and abortion.

He coauthored his autobiography *Fatherhood: Rising to the Ultimate Challenge*, in which he discusses his own childhood without a father. In another book of poetry and essays, *Voices of The Future*, he collaborates with today's youth to tackle topics such as police [00:03:00] brutality, wars, HIV, and even religion. And his most recent anthology, *We Matter*, relies in part on interviews of other athletes, activists, and scholars to educate, question, and inspire.

He's also written for the Huffington Post, Washington Post, CNN and ESPN, and he still likes basketball too. As he is a writer and podcaster for basketballnews.com. He's the recipient of the 2010 National Basketball Players Association Community Contribution Award as well as the 2009 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr Foundation, Inc. Legacy Award. Please welcome the extraordinary Etan Thomas. Welcome Etan.

Etan Thomas: Wow. That was an incredible introduction. I appreciate that.

Michael Nathanson: Well, well, we aim to please. I, it was actually hard for me to prepare it because, there's just so much

going on in your life, which I want to get to, and I'm [00:04:00] sure our audience will be delighted to hear from you. And I thought I'd ask, just with a nickname that I saw that had been given to you, you've been called the activist athlete. I'm guessing that you're not a big fan of labels for people just having read some of your work. But is that a fair way to, to summarize at least some of your contributions to the world?

Etan Thomas: I know, I, you know, I, I definitely accept that. You know, it was now in current times, athletes are speaking out on a lot of different issues and it's kind of the norm. When I was playing and I'm not that old, but when I was playing it really wasn't the norm that wasn't the thing that you would hear a lot of athletes do. So it was kind of an anomaly for me to speak out and I was in DC, which is rich with political culture and everybody's always protesting something and every, you know, and I was just drawn to that. And so I began doing a lot of poetry and spoken word and speeches and different places around DC. And so that's what I kind of got known as my [00:05:00] time here with the Wizards, but yeah, no, I, I take it as a compliment.

Michael Nathanson: Yeah. I mean, I think it's meant in a positive way. Um, I saw an argument online. There's a lot written about you and by you online, there's a lot of good material out there. And I saw an argument online that there, as you just said were many, it used to be that there were many activist athletes, especially in the sixties and seventies. And, you know, part of that was around Vietnam, but it was also about civil rights. And maybe even leaking into the early eighties and, you know, references to Muhammad Ali and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, the great Bill Russell, I'm speaking to you from Boston. Billy Jean King, Jim Brown, Arthur Ash and the argument goes that what happened was as big money got introduced into the games or into professional athletics, what happened was that might've created some fear of rocking the boat, some fear of loss, perhaps the kind of thing we [00:06:00] just saw with Colin Kaepernick. Is that how you see it?

Etan Thomas: Yeah, I think that's pretty accurate. I think that the thought was around when, you know, David Stern was the commissioner and Michael Jordan was at the height, you know, the face of basketball, the whole thought was marketing and expanding and not offending anybody, but marketing to everyone and expanding, you know, internationally. And one thing about David Stern, you know, he really took basketball to the NBA worldwide. And so his point of emphasis was that we don't want to offend anybody. So that was his messages to MJ, and MJ bought into it, and that's kind of the whole notion around why the atmosphere around the NBA was so quiet at the time.

Now, fast forward to LeBron, and he's the face of the NBA. Then you have Adam Silver with two completely different philosophies. And their philosophy is, you know, we're going to nurture and create a safe environment, a safe space for athletes to be able to use their platforms. And, you know, I interviewed Adam Silver for my book 'We Matter,' and that's one of the things that we talked about [00:07:00] and, you know, in a LeBron taking the head is being the face of the league. And using his voice in this platform. So I think that is why that the correlation of why you have so many athletes right now willing to speak out and then why during that time period around MJ and David Stern why it was so quiet.

Michael Nathanson: Interesting. You played with Jordan, correct?

Etan Thomas: Yes, I did.

Michael Nathanson: You did? Yeah. Are you still in touch with them? Do you know him?

Etan Thomas: Well, I mean, I don't know, people ask me that, you know, it's so funny my daughter just asked me that like a little while ago. Like, do you have to have MJ's phone number in your cell phone? I'm like, no, no, I don't have his phone number in there, but we are, but we are definitely, you know, once your teammates you always have a level of respect and for each other, one of the things that I always point out is my two years here with him in DC, when he was with the Wizards, when he came out of retirement, I saw him do so many things around the community.

And so many things that people don't know about, he didn't want anybody to know about. Because the thought was that MJ didn't care about the community at all. And [00:08:00] didn't care about anything outside of that. And that just isn't true. Like I was there, I saw it with my own eyes. I saw after when 9/11 happened and he was sitting there in the locker room when he was watching the news. And he was seeing like somebody was talking, it was all on the family members. And I saw him literally call his guy over and say, he wants to donate his entire salary to those people. Those people who, you know, the family members who lost their loved ones and 9/11. They said, okay, we're going to go through a foundation and he was like, no, no, no, no, no foundations, no anything, directly to those people. I heard that with. And you don't do that if you don't care. So I always, I always tell those kinds of stories and he just didn't want to ever broadcast it. And that was just his choice. But the notion that he doesn't care just isn't accurate at all.

Michael Nathanson: Yeah. Well, I certainly didn't mean to suggest that I just had to ask.

Etan Thomas: No I'm not saying you did. I just always, you know, I always want to tell that because people have a certain perception,

Michael Nathanson: You know unlike you, I I'm not, I don't have any fame [00:09:00] around me, but I did go to Law School with Barack Obama.

Etan Thomas: Well that's big!

Michael Nathanson: See you're doing the same thing, see what I talk to people they're much more interested in did you know Barack Obama? That's, that's what people are interested in. I guess this goes along with having had you know, had an intersection with people who have done pretty amazing things in their lives.

Etan Thomas: Right. Right.

Michael Nathanson: So just starting, maybe with a little bit about your childhood. I read on one of your biographies. There actually a few biographies out there that said, born in Harlem, New York and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Thomas' childhood was surrounded by books on the civil rights movement politics, and the 1960s. He was greatly influenced by his mother, Deborah Thomas, a school teacher who instilled in her two sons to think critically and use their platform to make a difference. So was basketball your platform? Is that the way you see it?

Etan Thomas: Definitely it's something where my mother [00:10:00] saw that I had a love for the sport, saw that it was tall. You know what I mean? So those are the athletes that she, gave me, but it was so, so when your mother is a teacher, sometimes. You just have extra work to do. That's just the way that it is, you know, you have, you're taught in school and then you're also taught by your mother and that's the way it was with me. So I had to have book reports, and do things on different athletes when I was young from Muhammad Ali to Bill Russell, to Kareem and, you know, and that's just, that was the norm for me. But then as I really started getting into, in depth with them and I got drawn to them I was like, wow, this is amazing. So, you know, they were using their platforms and they were standing up for things at different causes and you know, things like that. I just thought that was just so wonderful, you know, but that's really what my mother instilled and pushed me in that direction. So then when I got into High School I got into speech and debate and I started writing my own speeches and doing different things around Tulsa, Oklahoma, and using my platform just because I played basketball. And a lot of people listen. So that's when I made the connection that, oh, okay. I can, I can do [00:11:00] this too. I can do this with all the different people who I've read about. So that's where it all started.

Michael Nathanson: Yeah. Did you love your years in the NBA? It's 10 or 11 years, right? 10 or 11 years?

Etan Thomas: Yeah. No, it was great. I mean it's a blessing. I mean, going back and looking at the people who I've played against and sometimes, you know, with kids, like kids like Google me and Google pictures and stuff. So just now we have the NBA Hall of Fame. So they're Googling pictures of me playing against Kobe. Or, you know what I mean? And then it was announced that Ben Wallace and there's pictures of me playing against Ben Wallace and so when you look back on it, you're like, oh yeah, I was, I was playing against them, you know? And it's just, when you're in it, you don't think about it. Like, I mean, I was teammates with the greatest player ever MJ for two years. You know what I mean? I mean, so it's, it's definitely. Definitely a blessing when you look back on it.

Michael Nathanson: Yeah. Sometimes when I speak with professional athletes, I like to ask them questions. Like, who's the greatest player you ever played with, but I already know the answer, I guess.

Etan Thomas: When it's MJ that's, you know, that's the top of the list.

[00:12:00] **Michael Nathanson:** Have your fellow players been supportive of your activism?

Etan Thomas: Definitely. Yeah, definitely. I mean, we, you know, it's interesting cause I always tell people these stories that we've had some of the most in-depth conversation in the Wizards locker room.

That, that people would just be blown away by. And they were like, well, who's having these in depth conversations. And I'm like, well, Gilbert Arenas. They're like, wait, you stop, Gilbert Arenas is having conversations about politics? And I was like, literally all the time. Yeah. The same thing, the same main topics, and guys in the locker room, that's why it was always so interesting when I heard, like with Kaepernick that, okay, you're going to divide the locker room. If you have different opinions. And I was like, that's really all we do. Every practice is argue about something, whether it's music, whether it's politics, whether it's current events or something like that, that's what we always do. And those conversations, you know, they're really, they're really great, but they also brought us together.

Michael Nathanson: Yeah. So you, you did not view those kinds of arguments or debates as divisive, but rather it's just a way to [00:13:00] share ideas.

Etan Thomas: Yes. And we did it literally every single day. Every day before practice, every day after practice, that's what was going on in the locker room.

Michael Nathanson: So I could talk about your basketball career, but I do think that what's just extraordinary about you is your it's as much about your basketball career, what you've done after your basketball career. And I know that you are not one to stay quiet or avoid controversy. I did take a look at your Twitter account and saw your tweets and you say it exactly how you want to say it. And I love that. I respect that. I'd like to give you an opportunity to tell our audience, if you had to think about what the core areas of your advocacy or areas that you're looking to help provide education to others on, what would those core areas be?

Etan Thomas: I think the first one would be human rights and I think that expands to a lot of different areas. But human rights is definitely one of the main ones it's one [00:14:00] of the things that as cell phones and footage has been coming out more and everybody can record everything. We've actually seen all the instances of police brutality.

They really hurt like I remember when I was younger my first time actually seeing police brutality was the Rodney King beating and, but I didn't actually see them on a continuous reel after that, you know, I saw it and, you know, we had discussions about it and stuff like that, everything, but now with the invention of cell phones, you see it all the time. I mean, every time you, you look and you, you you've scrolled through Twitter, there's some terrible story that happened. And that's been really tough.

And I would say that the main issue the main point that I really that human rights issue it's because people are being treated as being less than human.

Michael Nathanson: Yes.

Etan Thomas: And I think that is one of the reasons why you're seeing a lot more activism happening right now because more people, not just athletes, but everybody is like, okay, wait a minute. [00:15:00] Now this is, this is not acceptable. Like we can, after George Floyd happened, you know, the whole world was like, oh my God, wait a minute. This is like something out of a horror movie. This cannot be the way that we police in this country. So you know, I think that's really something that has really opened up a lot of people's eyes.

Michael Nathanson: Yeah, on the conviction of Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd, you asked, and this is a quote, why did it take a video from a civilian and worldwide outrage to get here?

Etan Thomas: Right. Right. And you know it was actually because she was a teenager at the time. I think she was like 16, 17 years old. She picked up her cell phone and recorded it. But if she wouldn't have done that, we would've never known about George Floyd. We would've never heard his name. Never heard of Derek Chauvin, nobody would have been held accountable. Nothing else would have happened. And so just to think that it takes that in order for somebody to be held accountable, how many more George Floyds have there been that we just haven't heard about? And the answer is a lot and that's a problem like that is a [00:16:00] serious problem.

And in not just a problem on a scale of, you know, something that's wrong in this country, but you're looking at it, when those kinds of things happen, especially in the black community, we start looking at our children. You know, my son is 15 years old. I mean, he's excited about turning 16 and being able to drive and be able to go different places by himself and have freedom to be able to do this and this.

And for me, you know, I'm like, ahhhh, I kind of want to keep you close. And you know what I mean? It's that type of fear that happens every single time one of these cases come out. So it's not just because it's a topic, but it's really hits close to home, especially when you have children.

Michael Nathanson: Sure. So human rights is at the top of your list. Other issues that, that you consider your core issues.

Etan Thomas: I mean, well, I go, I'm somebody who's interested in politics and I, you know, follow as far as the debates are happening in different topics and things like that. And I don't like to put myself in a box of, I am [00:17:00] this. Because for me, there are some things I agree with over here and there's some things I agree with over here, you know, and it's interesting because people are always surprised if you have an opinion of something that doesn't fit into the box that they put you in. Yeah. So it was like, well, I didn't say, I didn't ask you to put me in that box, but you put me in that box.

You know what I mean? And, and so it's, it's interesting, but those are the parts where, you know, before COVID I was traveling a lot to a lot of different Universities and having those kinds of discussions, especially with young people. Oh, when I say young, you know, college students, I'm old now, so college students or young people and having those discussions on different topics and learning how you go back to the art of debate and discussion without personal attacks you know, and I think it's important for us just as a society to be able to do that, to be able to disagree with someone and that'd be okay and you listen to them, they listen to you and [00:18:00] you understand how they got to that point.

Doesn't mean you have to necessarily agree with them, but you just at least hear them. And that's something that I've always been a real proponent of.

Michael Nathanson: Yeah. We're just getting back to the topic of human rights and also just education about history. One thing I noted that you're that you have Tulsa in your background that you were raised there and I saw that you tweeted just the other day about the upcoming 100th anniversary of the Tulsa race massacre. And you said if there were three black survivors from the Tulsa race massacre, and I looked that up and they're in their hundreds. I mean, it's, it's, you know, which I guess if you do the math, of course they are. How many white people are left, who participated and never served a day in prison for their crimes? How many white people know that their parents and grandparents are the ones who murdered and burned black wall street to the ground? And you went on to note, which I thought was really interesting. I'm a bit sad [00:19:00] that you actually went to high school, not far from what we now refer to as black wall street.

And you said that, that you didn't even learn about, the Tulsa race massacre in high school that you had to learn about it from other places.

Etan Thomas: Yeah. I mean, they didn't teach in high school. They didn't teach them my middle school. My middle school actually, Carver middle school was literally seven minutes from where black wall street was. Booker T Washington high school was maybe, 12 minutes, 15 minutes away. All right there in the same area and we're that close in proximity. And it was not taught in school. It was not taught in any of the classes. It wasn't taught any in anything, but I learned about it, you know, in the community and church and different, you know, things, the community taught us about everything, but if it was just left up to the schools, it would never have been mentioned. So now going back to seeing you know, Governor Stitt, you know, who's the governor of Oklahoma and he wants to pass the bill that said that, kind of hampers the type of [00:20:00] teaching that is going on in school because he wants, he doesn't want to create any tension. And he looks at it as you know, wants to bring us together instead of dividing us. Those are like the words that he used and it's like, well, you can't take that part out of history, just because, you're worried that it will divide people.

I mean, those are important parts of history that it need to be known. I mean, when I even go back to the way that I was taught about the trail of tears, now I'm in Oklahoma know what I mean, where Americans were all, and the way we were taught about the trail of tears, it was so surface level, no depth into it, of what actually happened. I mean, even going to like the way, the reason why they're called the Oklahoma Sooners and how the land runner came and they took the people. So none of that was really taught in depth in schools. And I think it's something that is important. Like, are we going to teach history. We have to teach history. Can't teach a form, a watered down version of history. You have to teach what actually happened.

Michael Nathanson: Yeah. It's interesting that you mentioned the, the trail of tears, my own [00:21:00] experiences I did learn about that in high school. I did not learn about Tulsa in high school. It wasn't until college that I actually learned about Tulsa. And, you know, Dave and I were just talking our producer, we're just talking before you joined us. And we were talking about how I think a lot of people know about Tulsa because of the Watchmen series that came out.

Etan Thomas: So I'll tell you this I went to Syracuse University. I remember being an economics class and the professor, in a big lecture hall was talking about, he made a reference to the Tulsa race massacre, and then he paused and they said, does anybody here know about the Tulsa race massacre and what happened?

And literally out of the hundreds of people in a lecture hall, three people raised their hand. I was one of them. The other two were one was from Texas. And the other one's from Oklahoma. Nobody else had ever heard of it or knew and we were looking around like shocked, like, wait, y'all don't know what happened? Y'all never, you know, and they were like, we have no idea. What is that? And that's, it's just a tragedy.

Michael Nathanson: Well, it's good to see you out there educating people and advocating, [00:22:00] and I think it's appropriate certainly. So tell us about your writing.

So you are a prolific writer a lot of stuff out there. You've written, is it four books so far?

Etan Thomas: Yes, I actually just finished my fifth book. Haven't even turned into a whole manuscript yet.

Michael Nathanson: Are you at liberty to tell us what it's about?

Etan Thomas: Yeah, it's about looking, going in depth with police brutality and white supremacy and where they both intertwined. And so it's a pretty deep book, but, yeah, no, with everything that was going on from George Floyd to the history, going back to, I mean, it covers a lot material, but also it, it ties in things together. So we talked about the Tulsa race massacre and how the same system that didn't hold any other people accountable, you know, doesn't hold people accountable in the police department in Tulsa, when they murder innocent people and unarmed people right now, I mean, the police conviction rate is so low and I specifically looked at Tulsa cause it's like [00:23:00] 0.014, you know, like nobody gets convicted ever of, of anything as far as a police officer in Oklahoma. So it's really tying in a lot, but it was an exhausting project, but it was one that you know, I'm glad that I took that journey.

Michael Nathanson: Do you want to say a few words about each of your books?

Etan Thomas: Sure. So 'We Matter: Athletes and Activism.' That was you know, I wanted to have a collection. First I wanted to be able to put together something, to keep inspiring the younger generation of athletes to continue using their voices and their platforms.

So I went back and I interviewed a lot of the people who I grew up in miring and reading about them. My mother taught me about. So John Carlos, you know, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bill Russell, Craig Hodges, all of those, I interviewed all of them. And then I interviewed people in the present, athletes in the present, who had been using their voices and their platforms like Eric Reed, who was kneeling with Kaepernick the entire time and Dwayne Wade and Russell Westbrook and [00:24:00] Carmelo, and you know, all these different guys now and talk about why they have chosen to use their voice. You know, and interviewed a lot of WNBA players and they have been just phenomenal in the way that they've been banding together and doing everything collectively. So I wanted to do all that, with 'We Matter.' And 'Fatherhood,' it was an interesting time period. You mentioned when I had open heart surgery.

So that time, that year I had a year of down period where I really couldn't do anything. So I used that time to write and that kind of kept me sane. And my son Malcolm was really young at that age. And my daughter had just been born maybe two months after I had open-heart surgery and I couldn't hold her. I couldn't do anything after my surgery, you know, you're going through your chest and I couldn't hold anything like heavier than a fork. So, you know what I mean? So I was just really literally just laying now for the longest, it is a whole big process. So I took that time to really write introspectively. Growing up at a single parent [00:25:00] household, I did have a relationship with my father. My parents were divorced but my father wasn't in the home, you know, like I would see him once a month maybe, or visitation type thing, you know, a lot goes on in between those visitations. So, you know, talking from that standpoint and being, having a motivational story for young people who are growing up in that situation to know that they can still make it in life. And hearing all of the other people who have had worse situations and how they were able to overcome. So I utilize the voices of, you know, athletes, celebrities, and entertainers as well, but you know, going back further, you know, 'Voice Of The Future,' I want it to really put on display a lot of young people's writings and, intertwine that with my own and really elevate their voices. That's really what it was really my aim with that. And 'More Than an Athlete', you know, I was young and just writing poetry. In DC, writing about everything, like you said, from racism to all these different political topics and writing about basketball, writing about everything. So I [00:26:00] just put it all together in a collection of poetry.

Michael Nathanson: I'm a writer myself. I do a lot of writing but I've never experimented with poetry. And I actually did look up some of your poems.

And I thought I'd read one and see if you could respond to it. Alone. She completed his soul and she believed him. Hung on his every word until the test came back positive. She never knew he could run so fast. The biggest mistake of her life was falling in love with a coward. Where does that come from?

Etan Thomas: Oh, you went back and that was for 'More Than an Athlete.' So I was, you know, when, when you're into poetry and you're going to poetry events, I don't know if you've ever been to like a poetry spot. A venue where people are telling you different stories and you're listening to them and everything like that.

And then afterwards there's a scene where, you know, after the poetry event is over, a lot of the poets just kind of relax or go someplace and they [00:27:00] build, and build means you start asking people questions about their different poems and where they came from and everything like that. And those conversations go for hours. You know what I mean? And, you know, that's where you started meeting different poets and listening to their stories and things of that nature. And you just get moved by sometimes what people say and different things that they write about different things that, that affect them. And that in particular was a young lady who expressed that's what pretty much happened with her and being able to understand somebody else's perspective and their situation, you know, I did, I started doing that a little bit as well. So you'll see that reflected in some of my poetry in 'More Than an Athlete' as well, because I'm listening to other people tell their perspectives, and then I just kind of write about it. So that's what that was from.

Michael Nathanson: In 'Fatherhood'

Etan Thomas: That was, you dug for that one.

Michael Nathanson: I actually loved it. It really, for some reason it, it struck me, it connected with me. And you had a lot of [00:28:00] great stuff, but I, I knew I could only choose one. And that was the one that just really, I just really liked it. In Fatherhood, you write quote, I would define a leader as the person who puts the welfare of the group above himself. It's the same thing with fathers. Is that the way you think of yourself as a father?

Etan Thomas: Oh, definitely. You know, when you're a father you're learning, it's just a whole learning process. And it's funny when I wrote that book, the first line that I put in the book was I am not a fatherhood expert. That was the first line. And I wanted to make sure I said that from the beginning, because it's hard to even be an expert on something that continuously changes. I mean, anybody that has children that was like, you have one child. And, you know, you think you got it. Okay. I got this plan, this worked when and do this happens and you have a second child. And none of the things that happened that you did with the first child is effective, you have to go all the way back to the drawing board and do everything over again. Because even the way you discipline is totally [00:29:00] different, the way you communicate, the way you compliment, what they respond to is like night and day. And so that's why it's, it's an incredible journey. But it's something where you're always learning. So as, as a parent, you're learning from your kids just as much as they're learning from you, because you're learning what is the best way and effective way to reach them.

So it's a wonderful process, but it's definitely, a journey.

Michael Nathanson: You have a son named Malcolm, right?

Etan Thomas: Yes I do.,

Michael Nathanson: And you've said, I think in public that you named him after Malcolm X.

Etan Thomas: Yes. So when I was in middle school in seventh grade, I read the autobiography of Malcolm X and that kind of changed everything for me.

Like the lights was on, like, I went from being a little kid that was worried about little kids stuff, like, you know, insecure about my clothes, wanting to make sure I fit in here, you know, stuff like that, to just switching and being concerned with other things completely. It was like, and it's funny talking to people who, you know, [00:30:00] because on Facebook you can connect with all your old people and stuff like that. And hearing them talk about that switch when they saw it in real time, it was really a huge switch for me. You start questioning things and you want to learn more about your history and your culture and everything like that.

You walk different, you talk different it's just a major switch. So that to me was so pivotal in my life in shaping who I was. I knew in middle school, I was going to name my first son, Malcolm.

Michael Nathanson: One thing I have not seen you talk about or write about is your open heart surgery and you just talked a little bit about it. I happened to know, unfortunately too much about it because I have a son who has congenital heart disease and who himself has already had four open-heart surgeries and actually related to his aortic valve primarily. His aortic root. Are you okay now? Or are you, you totally clear?

Etan Thomas: Yeah, I'm good. Now I've never really written about it. It's interesting. I really didn't know how to write about it. [00:31:00] Like there was, so I've talked about it and I've interviewed, I remember I interviewed Jeff Green, he's an NBA player. He plays for Brooklyn now, but I, knew him when he was really young playing with the Oklahoma City Thunder and he had open heart surgery.

So I interviewed him on my podcast and we were talking, it was like, we were talking about basketball for a while. And then we started talking about open heart surgery and it was almost like we forgot everything else. We would just talk, going back and forth about open-heart surgery for like 25, 30 minutes and talking about, you know, sharing stories.

And he was like, yeah, I remember when you, you reached out to me and you called me and you checked on me, you told me if I need anything to tell you. And I was like, yeah, but that's because that's the way some guys did with me, like Ronny Turiaf, they called me and the same way and you know, especially when you're an athlete and you come back from that, you want to act like, you want everybody to treat you the same.

You know what I mean? Don't think of me as somebody who had open heart surgery, think of me, as just a player that was just out for a little while with the injury and I came back. But [00:32:00] it's not that way. You know what I mean? You just want everybody, so there's a lot with it in how you look at life and your appreciation for life to that and everything like that. So, Yeah, but it's not something I've really written a lot about, but I spoken about it more.

Michael Nathanson: Will you end up needing another surgery at some point in your life or are you good for the rest of your life?

Etan Thomas: Well, at some point I am, but the thing about it is surgeries have progressed to the point where, when I do need another surgery and I, and what I had was leaking valve.

So they had to replace a valve. So the medical field has progressed now that the way that they do the surgery now, they didn't do what I needed. So they don't have to go in through my chest and have that long recovery period where I can't move hardly. And I can't, they don't do it that way anymore.

Michael Nathanson: When I did your introduction I did neglect one thing. And, you know, I have to say that, neglect, probably not the right word. I wanted to save it in until the end of this portion of our interview. You actually have a charitable foundation, the Etan Thomas Foundation. [00:33:00] Can you tell us about that?

Etan Thomas: So, what I do with the foundation is I do a lot. It's really geared towards youth and empowering youth and motivating youth. And one of the things that I, I did a lot of is I did these big panel discussions in different cities and I was able to do things where you have these motivational talks with youth within you have to have the follow-up with them. And then the follow-up is just as important as the initial motivational talk. So the feedback has been so incredible that I don't want to stop doing it and so that's really what what I do with the foundation is being able to create these mass motivational talking platforms for them. Utilize the voices of athletes and entertainers and actors and people who they listen to and being able to pour positivity into them.

And positively motivate them. So that's really what I do with the foundation.

Michael Nathanson: You say that your goal is to reach more than 50,000 youth and parents in numerous cities across the United States with positive [00:34:00] messaging. How can people learn more about the Etan Thomas Foundation? Just Google it?

Etan Thomas: Yeah. And it's on my website. etanthomas.com, and you know, like I said before COVID I was doing a lot of traveling. Hopefully as we progress things will get a little bit more back to normal, whatever that may be. But yeah traveling and doing those programs, they can be exhausting at times, but the feedback is what really pushes me and keeps me going having somebody tell you that, you know, your words changed their life. That's because when a young person told me, yeah, you spoke at this program that I was at, you know, when I was younger. And it affected me this way and it put me on this path and that's what does it right there.

Michael Nathanson: Etan we're now going to move into the lightning round segment of our interview. And I have a segment that I want to go through where we're going to go through some key learnings and teachings. So I'm going to ask you some questions and look for [00:35:00] relatively quick answers. What's been your biggest either mistake or learning opportunity? However you want to see that.

Etan Thomas: I think a lot of times, especially with sports, having patience. Has been the hardest thing for any athlete when things aren't going right to have patients and, you know, to keep working hard, to keep, you know, and that's, it's a tough thing to do, you know, is tough and just be, keep yourself ready for you when your name was called. All that, all that cliché stuff you hear, it's tough when you actually have to do it. So that was always tough but then I always tell athletes that when my name was called, I was ready. And then you're able to shine and then you're able to do this and do that. But, you know, that's tough.

Michael Nathanson: What are you most proud of?

Etan Thomas: Oh my family. I'm definitely proud of my family and my wife and, we have three beautiful children and being able to help them grow and nurture them. And you have your son who comes to you with his [00:36:00] problems or your daughter, your teenage daughter that comes to you with her issues and thoughts and stuff like that. And I'm like, okay, this is great, but she's coming to me. It wants to talk to me about this. So that's definitely what I'm proud of.

Michael Nathanson: SYou mentioned Malcolm X, you've referred a couple of times to Muhammad Ali. You once said that you wanted to be the kind of athlete Muhammad Ali was speaking out on the issues of the day. So my question for you is who were your key role models or mentors?

Etan Thomas: So it's interesting. So I have in my Fatherhood book chapter, the importance of mentors and my mentors were my pastor growing up, Reverend Potter, who was also my AAU coach. And my grandfather, we were super close and I spent all my summers in Harlem, with my grandparents.

And we were just like, you know, That's why I'm a Knicks fan still. You know what I mean? Because my grandfather was a Knicks fan. You know, so mentors are so important for young people and it's those mentors that are constant. So those [00:37:00] were by far the biggest mentors for me.

Michael Nathanson: What do you want your legacy to be?

Etan Thomas: Someone who stood for what was right. That's what I would say stood for what was right.

Michael Nathanson: What single habit, technique, or tip would you offer that has helped you be your most extraordinary self?

Etan Thomas: To study your mistakes and learn from your mistakes. That's what I would say. Everybody makes mistakes, but then you learn from them.

Michael Nathanson: And, I'd like to ask also, do you have a personal mission?

Etan Thomas: A personal mission. That's interesting. I would say the best version of myself that I can be, and to always be on that path to learn and wanting to do better. No matter what that is, whether it's a better father, a better husband, a better speaker, a better, you know what I mean? To always be on that path, to just continue to improve.

Michael Nathanson: So we're just about out of time. This has been a fascinating discussion. How can people follow you on social media or otherwise? You're a prolific writer. [00:38:00] You're a prolific speaker. How can people follow you and learn more about you?

Etan Thomas: So on Twitter. My Twitter is @etanthomas36. 36 was my Jersey number. Same with Instagram. My website is etanthomas.com. Senior writer for basketballnews.com. So I do a lot of writing for them and my podcast, The Rematches with them. I also write for The Guardian that's where I can write a little bit more about my political topics and things of that nature with The Guardian. So I, you know, I keep myself busy.

Michael Nathanson: And they can get your books on Amazon?

Etan Thomas: Yes. Yes, sir.

Michael Nathanson: Predictions for the NBA championship this year.

Etan Thomas: Well, Brooklyn looks very, very good. They do. I know, you're not having to hear that.

Michael Nathanson: I was going to say, so you don't think the Celtics have any chance to get past them? Huh?

Etan Thomas: I mean, it's tough, you know, they're not healthy. I mean, this is just, you know, Jason Tatum was playing fantastic, but it's just, it's tough this year, you know, but I think building towards next year and things of that nature, but Brooklyn is, they are so loaded it's [00:39:00] scary. They are an All-Star team yeah.

Michael Nathanson: Interesting. Well, great. Well, thank you very much for this illuminating and very interesting conversation. Any parting words?

Etan Thomas: No, I think it was great. You know, you covered a lot, this was a good, you know, in-depth conversation. So you're very good at what you do. So I just want to say thank you for inviting me on and let me be a part of it..

Michael Nathanson: Coming from you I will take that compliment. Thank you very much. I greatly appreciate that. Ladies and gentlemen, that is the extraordinary Etan Thomas.

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