

Reflections from WT Podcast

Episode 1 Transcript

Speakers:

Randy Ray, Director of Broadcast Engineering and Associate Lecturer of Media Communication

Dr. Walter V. Wendler, President of West Texas A&M University

Hunter Hughes, West Texas A&M University Head Football Coach

[Music playing]

Randy Ray: Well, hello everybody. Welcome to our very first podcast from West Texas ANM. We are calling it reflections from WT, the heart and soul of the Texas panhandle. My name is Randy Ray. I'm the director of broadcast engineering here on campus and I'm really excited about our new podcast. I'm real excited today to talk to President Walter Wendler.

We'll talk to him for a little bit and then later on in the podcast, we'll talk to coach Hunter Hughes and we'll get his reflections on football on campus and everything that's going on over in athletics. So for the first half of the podcast I'm going to talk to Doctor Wendler. Doctor Wendler, welcome and it's good to talk to you. Always good to talk to you.

Dr. Wendler: Randy, same here. It's always good to see you. You're a consummate professional, having a tremendous impact on the lives of young people and it's good to visit with you.

Randy Ray: Well, I work in a good place and I tell everyone that I'm honored to be here. A lot of excitement on campus and they're all coming back.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah. Yeah, they are. In droves, and we're glad to see it. We've been back at school now for a little over a week and it's keeping everybody busy and we're excited about it. There's a lot of energy in the air. Our enrollment is about the same as it was last year, so we're satisfied with that.

It's tough, higher education is tough right now. A lot of competition for a number of students. That's not growing that much, if you look at the national demographic. So there's a lot of competition and we feel like we're holding on and doing a great job and we're excited about it. Students are excited and we had buff branding. All the kind of introductory activities for the first of the year and there's a lot of energy in the air and it feels good.

Randy Ray: Yeah, I agree with you. Let me ask you this. When you walk across campus, do students stop you and talk to you?

Dr. Wendler: They do. They do all the time, and I walk a lot. I walk about two and three quarters of a mile every night that I can. Last night, you're going to talk to Coach Hughes in a minute, but some guy ... I can't say his name, but he was twice as big as I am, and I'm no shrimp. This guy put out this meat hook of a hand. He

said, "Hi President." And he stuck his hand out there, and I didn't want to break stride, but I grabbed his hand and luckily, I got a good grip on it because otherwise, I would've been crying. I mean, he had a huge hand and he was very, very obviously, in good shape and everything.

But I see the football players out there. I see students all the time. One of the things that amazes me about this place and I've been on a lot of college campuses, is how polite and courteous students are when they greet you. It's a very refreshing thing on the University campus to see that level of civility and cordial behavior. I really like it.

Randy Ray: Yeah, I agree with you. I think a lot of that has to do with our Panhandle culture.

Dr. Wendler: I agree with that. I was talking to somebody this morning and I said it almost seems to come out of the ground up here. The fella that I was talking with whose involved with the Randall County Historical society said, "He thinks it's the ranch culture and I think it is." The challenge is not other people. The challenge is the weather and this god awful dirt that people have to try to grow stuff in. It's just a challenge and people treat each other, I think, in a very dignified way. Not 100%, but generally very nicely. The challenges are with the climate and the geography and trying to eke out a living on the ground up here and it does make for a very special place.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I think the Panhandle has been so secluded from the rest of the country in years past and I think we had to depend on our neighbors to get through. I think we see reflections of that still in our culture and the friendliness and people just reaching out to shake your hand and talk to you. It's a good place to live and I feel that on campus too. A lot of exciting things going on, on campus, especially, this last week. It was crazy.

Dr. Wendler: It has been crazy. We cut the ribbon on the brand new ag science's complex over on the corner of Russell Long Boulevard and WTAMU Drive. We had ... I'm going to guess there were over 1,000 people at that ... in the rain. Over 1,000 people and there may have been as many as 13 or 1,400. It was quite a turnout and people are excited.

The Ag community is very excited because they're on a second life, basically. They've been born again. Back in the last 80s, it was decided to eliminate the ag program. They didn't pay much attention to it. It has come back and is strong as can be and it's so nice because it is responsive to the needs of the Panhandle. I think that's one of the reasons we've gotten such a good response to that new facility.

Secondly, that was a 48 million dollar project, which is a good size project. That would be a good size anywhere. Houston, Dallas, it doesn't make any difference, but up here, it's particularly a significant project on our campus here on Canyon.

But 38 million came from the State House and another 10 million dollars came from private gifts and philanthropy from people in the Panhandle community.

Paul Ingram, although his gift ... We named the college for him, but his gift did not go to funding the college, but Happy State Bank funded the ag and science the main building. Peel and Shaffer, Helen Peel and Stanley Shaffer funded one of the pavilions and the other one was supported by ... named after Mike Bane, The Bane Events Center. So the three buildings that are over there all represent significant philanthropy.

What I like about this, Randy, is that it shows the partnership between government and private citizen [inaudible 00:06:24]. I think that's really important because government a lot of times gets a bad rap. People think that any government engagement is not a good thing. I don't buy that. I think government does a lot of good things. They do a lot of things that don't seem good as well, but this is a good thing.

They put in seed money, seed corn actually and we then, raised another 10 million dollars to finish that off and we had an Ag Development Advisory Counsel that worked diligently. They worked as hard as paid staff and they were all light leaders. So it was a big day for us and it's a glorious facility. It's absolutely-

Randy Ray: I agree.

Dr. Wendler: ... stunning.

Randy Ray: The thing that I noticed about it when I went over there, it felt to me like, "Yeah, it is part of our campus." But that building is also going to be used for the community to ... Like, the big arena in that back. I mean, I thought about all the different activities and events that we could have out there and not just for WT.

Dr. Wendler: No.

Randy Ray: Maybe things for Canyon and the entire Panhandle.

Dr. Wendler: Well, and there's a meat store in there. You can go in there and buy beef. As a matter of fact, in the Caviness... I forgot to mention the Caviness family, but the Caviness family has dedicated the meat science labs in there. They're named in their honor with a two million dollar gift.

This is the "sure as I'm sitting here" the truth, you can watch a cow walk in to one end of that building and out of the other end, you can get a hamburger.

Randy Ray: We don't do that at the Fine Arts building. You do know that?

Dr. Wendler: No, I know you don't. But I'm telling you, it's an amazing ... and you can watch the whole process. They were saying, the people that I've talked with, they used to try to hide these processes. These hallways are lined with glass, so you can actually see the cow being processed. It's a learning experience and it's not for the fainted heart. It's not enough to make a vegetarian out of me. It doesn't bother me that much, but I come out of there and some people think, "Man, that's kind of rough to watch." But it is what it is and I like it.

Randy Ray: So you watch the cow come in.

Dr. Wendler: Walking in.

Randy Ray: And he comes out a hamburger.

Dr. Wendler: He comes out a bunch of hamburgers the other end.

Randy Ray: All right. Well, we were talking about ag. Let's talk a little bit about Fine Arts. Fine Arts is something that's kind of near and dear to my heart. We found out, today that over in Fine Arts in the Media Department, we won several new Telly awards. So we're excited about that.

Dr. Wendler: As you all should be and the impact of the Fine Arts and Humanities Sybil B. Harrington College of Fine Arts and Humanities on our communities is very powerful. We're in the last stages of writing our long range plan, WT125 and one of our efforts is going to be to sustain small communities in the Texas Panhandle. First, in the Panhandle, then it will spread like a Panhandle grass fire to a lot of other places because there's still a lot of small communities.

Everybody thinks of the big cities and the major metropolitan areas and heavily populated suburbs. 22% of the Texans live in small communities and in the nation, it's a little higher than that and worldwide it's almost 40% of the population lives in small communities. I'm saying all that to say one of the things that ties those small communities together and gives them sustenance is the cultural life of those small communities and Sybil B. Harrington and the activities that go on here.

The music, the history, the culture, the language, all of that actually helps keep alive small communities and my hope in the future is that we pay a lot of attention to that and make this college very, very focused on helping. Not do this alone, but as one of our primary initiatives in the future. Make sure that we help sustain small communities.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I think that's great target to have. Well, we're going to take a break and when we come back, we're going to talk to coach Hunter Hughes and we'll talk a little bit about the football program here on campus. We'll be back in just a second.

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Randy Ray: Well, welcome back to Reflections from WT, the heart and soul of Texas Panhandle. My name's Randy Ray and I am talking to Doctor Walter Wendler, who is our University President and joining us now is Coach Hunter Hughes. Coach, welcome and it's good to see you sir.

Hunter Hughes: Thank you Randy. Good to be here. Appreciate it.

Randy Ray: Yeah, congratulations first off on last Saturday.

Hunter Hughes: Thank you. Thank you.

Randy Ray: Man, it was a fun day, wasn't it?

Hunter Hughes: It was a fun day and any time you could win a game ... It's hard to go out and win a game-

Randy Ray: Yeah, but 42 to seven. That's got to be even more fun than a normal win.

Hunter Hughes: It's a lot more fun for the people in the stands. It seems like when we were up like that and we haven't been ... when we were up like that, I worry about all the little things that are going on to make sure that we are still performing the way we should perform. So I probably am harsher on the kids during that moment because I'd want them to continue to focus on like at zero, zero, so they'll play hard.

Randy Ray: Yeah. I heard you talking to Doctor Wendler early and it really impressed me, Doctor Wendler asked you, first thing, "What were your thoughts about Saturday?" And you talked about the injury. Tell us a little bit about that. What happens to a coach when you see an injury out in the field like that?

Hunter Hughes: We don't yet exactly if this young man's going to be out for the season or not. We're still waiting on the doctors and some MRI results. But you see a young man has come in and we're talking about Logan Vallo who's a running back. He came in this summer, did everything we asked him to do. Is a good student, good academic student in the classroom and just worked. He had a little injury with his hand and fought back from it and put himself into position. Three or four plays earlier, he actually took a ball and went 80 yards for a touchdown that was called back. So you're really ecstatic at that point and then to see

something like that happen and just have an idea that it could be the last time he takes a snap all year is devastating.

I mean, the first thing I did was went out there and grabbed him and told him it's going to be okay. Just to breathe, relax and regardless, of what happens, I still love him. I think that's the biggest thing is, you see a guy work so hard and put himself in a situation and just in one play, it be taken away, that's what hurts.

Randy Ray: Do you get pretty close to the players?

Hunter Hughes: I try to. I try to stay away so they can grow as an adult and growing into adult, but I try to get involved. I need to put a couch in my office for them to come in. It seems like I deal with a lot of their issues, which first off, I want them to know I care about them. Anything they have, they can come in and talk to any of our coaches. Our doors are always open.

But it does, it pulls you to them and it makes you want them to be more successful in every phase. Not just on the football field. I get a lot of joy out of graduating. When I was at graduation, there were probably eight guys who walked across the stage and there were two or three of them that either had quit the team or I had let go from the team and I still had some joy. They saw me and I went up and congratulated them and they were shocked like, "He does care."

But all of our coaches are like that. So it's not just me, it's kind of ... When I came here last year, it was about the culture of the program and I wanted our players to understand that our players and our coaches got to work together to do what we want to do academically and athletically. We're there for them and they can come to us with any issues and we're going to help them as much as we can.

Randy Ray: Yeah. Dr. Wendler, I wanted to ask you, what does a football team bring to campus?

Dr. Wendler: Well, in many ways, Hunter just crystallized it. He loves the players and I know exactly what he means by that. It's important and what the football team brings when it's founded on that kind of basis or that foundation. What it brings is a commitment to people as individuals and that's very important. But there's also this thing about being committed to something that's larger than yourself. I do think that the teamwork of a football team is very important and there's no good football program that's not built on teamwork and there's no good university with its academic prowess that's not built on teamwork.

You're here doing R and T, radio and television kinds of issues, but the fact of the matter is that the other people in Fine Arts, communications and so on aren't doing their job. It diminishes what you do, so it's all about team work. I

appreciate that Coach Hunter lives that with the kids. I think that's really important and he wants them to become adults. That's what we all want. That's part of what this experience is. So I think in many ways, it becomes ... A really well-led football program can become kind of a barometer or what the campus is all about and these programs that might've seemed for a season to get ahead by bending the rules or getting close to the edge of the rules and so on, They may get ahead for a season. But in the end, to sustain excellence and quality in the kind of experience we want here for our students here at West Texas A&M University, the football program can be a bright example of that ... and I think that's happening. The GPA is going to go up. Pretty soon we're going to have a GPA in collegiate athletics that's over 3.0 on average and that is in part going to be because of what Hunter's doing in the football programs because the cold truth is that those are the programs sometimes that bring down the overall academic athletic performance.

But I'm committed. I told Hunter, when we talk to them, that the one loss record is important. This is West Texas, it's important. But the fact of the matter is, if they're not doing well academically, I don't care about the won loss record. After they're doing well, academically, it's all I care about. I'm a competitor. I like to compete. I think it's important to compete. It sharpens you. Adam Smith had it right, competition is the ... it's the guidepost for a free society. That's all exhibited right in the football program from my perspective.

Randy Ray: Well, speaking for someone like me that teaches. Some of my best students, it's not always the case, but some of my best students have been athletes and I think it's a discipline.

Hunter Hughes: Yeah.

Dr. Wendler: Yeah.

Randy Ray: I think it's a discipline.

Hunter Hughes: I think there's a discipline in athletics that there's a structure for the players. For our guys in particular, they're getting up and they have to be at weights. We go at six o'clock in the morning with our meetings and eight o'clock in the morning for practice. There's not many players going to miss a six o'clock football meeting. Whereas, in my opinion, they might oversleep and not think to go into that eight o'clock class. We do that for a couple of reasons. One, to get them up, and get them moving. That's the first thing. The second thing is none of our players are on full scholarship. So we try to help find them jobs on campus first and then within the community to help them where they can be able to pay and afford to go to school.

So we look at it from a lot of different perspectives. The last one is we have our academic game plan program, which Coach Ryan McDonough our offensive coordinator brought here and put together. That's at five o'clock in the

afternoon, not after a practice where they're tired and they just go eat and come back. So they have the opportunities, all of our players have the opportunity to go and eat and come back and their mind is still kind of fresh at five o'clock. Whereas, if they've practiced for two hours then go eat and are rushing to get back to study hall, their mind's not completely in there. I think that's been a huge benefit for us and our GPA has gone up.

Randy Ray: Well, we have just a couple of minutes left and as we talked about earlier in the podcast, there's lots of activity going on campus right now. One of the activities and I'm excited about is the new campus stadium, on-campus stadium that they are working on right now. I'd like to hear from both of you, what you think that's going to do for our campus?

Hunter Hughes: I think not only the campus, let's look at the community. I was part of two teams that came down here as a visitor and played. I never saw Canyon Texas. I never saw this University. We stayed in Amarillo and we played, and we left. This community itself, people are going to come in, they're going to stay in Canyon. They're going to eat at the local restaurants. They're going to shop here. They're going to do those type of things.

On campus, the buzz on a Saturday is going to be like none other that this place has seen, when they allow the tailgates. My perspective coming through this is, I want to walk right through the tailgates with that team two hours for a game time and I want our players to see who supports them and I want to see our supporters and boosters see our players before they go into a game. Because right now, there's no interaction, but I think that's going to be very vital to our getting fired up ready to go. I think it's going to help our guys immensely as they come into it and I mean, they're just walking by every day at practice and seeing that hole getting deeper and deeper and clearing out the ... there is a buzz and excitement as our players go to practice every day as well.

Randy Ray: Dr. Wendler, what do you think about it?

Dr. Wendler: I'm looking at my watch doing some arrhythmic in 358 days we will play our first game at Buffalo Stadium and it's going to be remarkable. When we left Kimbrough, we didn't leave it behind because Canyon Independent School District is going to soon field three teams over there. Two now, but they're going to build another high school. It's on the way and I truly hope that bond issue passes, that puts that high school in the ground and they'll still play football over there.

But Hunter has hit the nail on the head. This campus, it's going to change the nature of Saturday afternoons of this campus. I was talking to somebody outside, one of the tailgates on Saturday, and we were there kind of looking at each other with our hands over ... shielding our eyes from the sun and it was hot. It was warm because we were standing out in the direct sun. I said, "Next year, we'll be able to stand under a tree when we'll be on campus, because we're going to be in the middle of a very beautiful campus."

People have said to me, "What about the parking? We don't have enough parking?" We've got 200 more parking spaces on the campus than we have at Kimbrough and they're all nicely paved with sidewalks and trees and bedded plants around them and all that sort of stuff. The fact of the matter is, the walk from wherever you park to the football stadium is going to be a pleasant walk. If you've got kids in strollers, you'll be able to push them. I mean, it is going to be a whole different ball game, no pun intended.

I actually think it's going to change the nature of WT, by bringing people back here and allowing them to be proud of the change and all that. We're always going to be respectful of Kimbrough Stadium and we'll always cherish the memories that have created the culture that exists here. But this new stadium is going to be different. I couldn't be more excited about it.

Randy Ray: Well, I totally agree with both of you and I have said this to a lot of people and I believe it with all my heart. There's better days ahead for WT.

Dr. Wendler: I agree.

Hunter Hughes: Well, real quick Randy, I'd say this. Imagine the business school coming back having a homecoming. The communications school coming back at homecoming and they just walk. They have a tailgate and walk to the stadium and they're able to come back afterwards. Those are the things that is benefiting more than just athletics. It's benefiting the entire University in those aspects, which is I think just going to make it more energetic.

Randy Ray: I do too. I do too.

Dr. Wendler: By the way, I know we're pressed for time, but I did just want to mention that, right now, this season we're going through the various coaches and the eras of Kimbrough Stadium and recognizing at each home game. In the future, we're going to recognize, at each home game, a different college will be highlighted and we'll get into rotation on that. They'll be able to, as Hunter just said, have a homecoming or have a tailgate near their building, for example. It's going to change the nature of the place.

Randy Ray: Very exciting. Well, I'm excited about the future and I'm also excited about our next podcast. This was our first one, and I've certainly enjoyed it and I'm looking forward to the next podcast. I think the next one, I would like to Dr. Wendler, just talk to you about what it's like being a President and what your day is like.

Dr. Wendler: Okay. Okay.

Randy Ray: Does that sound okay?

Dr. Wendler: Hold on to your hat.

Hunter Hughes: And it's going to be 20 minutes?

Dr. Wendler: I'll tell you, well, it's the best job I've ever had and I don't think I'll have another one and this is the best place I've ever lived and it may well be the last place I ever live. I'm no spring chicken, but this is all just perfect for me and Mary feels the same way.

Randy Ray: Well, we are fortunate to have you. Thank you all for listening to our podcast reflections from WT, the heart and soul of Texas Panhandle. Join us next time as we talk to Dr. Wendler and we may have a surprise guest. We'll see you then.