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Face Your Challenges Like a Linebacker—And Don't Be Afraid to Blitz

By Nicole Willis
UCF Forum columnist
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Jen Welter, the first female coach in the National Football League, worked with the Arizona Cardinals in 2015.

I traveled to New York last summer to hear some inspirational women at Her Conference 2018, a development event for college women and recent graduates. I arrived excited to soak up as much information as I possibly could—especially from the speakers who were currently living out my dream career as a writer—and I left with a notebook filled with ideas and quotes to inspire me.

Surprisingly, the lessons that stuck with me the most came from former NFL coach Jen Welter. Welter was the first female coach in the league, having worked with the Arizona Cardinals in 2015.

When Welter was introduced to the crowd, I wasn't sure what to expect. I'm a diehard New York Giants fan who rarely misses watching a game, but I was surprised to hear from someone associated with football or any other sport at a conference dedicated to building your career as a woman working in the media. As it turns out, though, football has more in common with the professional world than I thought.

Before she began her talk, Welter surprised the audience when she asked us to assume the stance of a linebacker. She directed us to stand with our feet shoulder-width apart, our shoulders pulled back, our knees and hips bent, and our elbows tucked back.

"That's a perfect linebacker stance," she told us. "You can move any direction, and you can tackle anything."

"Every time you take the field, whatever field that is, you get to determine the tone."

The theme of facing your challenges head-on defined Welter's message as a speaker, and it also defined my experience at Her Conference. I've applied her advice to my career, my social life and my personal philosophies. Most of all, Welter changed the way I look at leadership.

As the editor-in-chief of *Her Campus at UCF*, I lead our online publication's editorial team of more than 70 writers. Before the New York conference, I spent much of my time leading up to my first semester as editor filled with anxiety over leading such a large team, worried whether I could find the right balance between being a strong leader and maintaining the friendships I'd formed with many of our writers. But before I stepped into the room for our first meeting, Welter's advice popped into my head:

"Every time you take the field, whatever field that is, you get to determine the tone."

It's so important to set a positive tone, especially when you're in a position of leadership. Whether you're a linebacker or an editor, if you're too busy worrying about other people's judgment of you and your abilities, you'll never get out of your own head. I know that I'll never serve as a good leader if I'm too busy criticizing writers for their mistakes, or worse—worrying so much about my own insecurities that I fail to set a good example.

"What you have to do is be good and be consistent and be authentic," Welter told us.

With Welter's advice in mind, I make an effort to set a positive and empowering tone at every editorial meeting, and the response from my writers has exceeded my expectations. The bonds I've formed with them have grown stronger, and the articles they wrote last semester were more personal and moving than ever. I plan to keep setting that tone for the semester to come, and I know the *Her Campus at UCF* team will continue to grow—both in numbers and in prowess—as a result.

Life's challenges might manifest on a football field in the form of a defensive line, or they might be your own negative thoughts and insecurities forming a defensive line in your mind. Even if you balk at the thought of physically assuming the stance of a linebacker, you can still channel that mentality into your personal and professional life.

You can tackle anything—and don't be afraid to blitz. As Welter told all of us at Her Conference: "You never know what that one step outside of your comfort zone can accomplish."

Nicole Wills is a University of Central Florida junior in the Burnett Honors College studying advertising-public relations, political science, and writing/rhetoric. She can be reached at nwills@knights.ucf.edu.