

The Job That Taught Me the Power of Work

On his path from the NFL to Hollywood success, Terry Crews had to support his family by sweeping floors—and learned to take pride in it

By Terry Crews



When I signed with the Los Angeles Rams coming out of Western Michigan in 1991, I got paid \$75,000 as a signing bonus. At the time it felt like all the money in the world, but NFL contracts are game to game. Since I didn't play a single game my first year, I had to make that 75 grand last the whole year. The rest of my NFL career went pretty much the same. I was a journeyman player, and I never made more than the absolute minimum.

After I retired from football in 1997, I moved to Los Angeles with my wife Rebecca, hoping to break into film as an actor. Rebecca kept saying, "You need a job." I kept saying, "Hey, I'm still trying to make this thing happen. I'm a football player and a filmmaker and artist. What will it look like with me working at McDonald's?" My pride wouldn't let me do it. Instead, I was pawning everything I could put my hands on: Rebecca's wedding ring, my watch. It was a bad time.

The only reason we made it through was my friend Ken Harvey. Ken and I had played together in Washington, D.C. He was one of the stars of the team and one of my few true friends; he'd invite me over to his house to shoot pool or hang out and talk. Ken wanted to help me make it in Hollywood, but he couldn't mail me checks without his wife knowing about it. He was a bit of a gold bug and had accumulated a pile of gold coins, so every few weeks he'd send me one. "Each coin is an ounce," he said, "If you get into any money trouble, take the coin to a jeweler. Whatever the price of gold is that day, they'll give you that much."

They usually cashed in for around \$300, and he probably sent me 15 or so over the course of our first year in L.A. It got to the point where I was basically a dependent, all because I was too proud to go get a damn job. When that first year was up, I finally hit rock bottom: I hocked my car, which in L.A. is suicide. I called Ken. "Dude, I need some help," I said. "Can you send me just a little bit?" "Terry," he said, taking a deep breath, "I can't do it." In all the years we'd been

friends, it was the first time he'd ever said no. I was stunned. I didn't know what to say. It was that horrible moment of shame where I realized I'd overstepped. "Why not?" I asked. "Hey, man, it's just...it's enough," he said. "I've given you all of the money I can."



Terry Crews as an actor today.
Photo: Per Bernal

"Hey, I understand," I said. "No problem. I'll talk to you later." But what I said was not how I felt. In that moment, instead of being grateful for everything he'd done for me, I got mad. I have rarely been angrier at any human being than I was at that moment. The feeling lingered for only a few minutes, and then all of a sudden I realized, "Wait a minute. Why am I mad at the only person who's been trying to help me in the first place?"

The reason I was so angry was that I'd become entitled. It was the same mentality that had plagued so many of the people I knew growing up in Flint, Mich.: "He got some, how come I can't get some?" I was a grown man, but I was expecting him to take care of me. I'd become so dependent on that help that I hadn't learned how to do for myself.

At 5:00 a.m. the next day I went over to a place called Labor Ready, which I knew about because I'd driven by it a few times. It was an employment agency where you could show up and wait and get assigned to work an 8-hour gig somewhere. The vibe at Labor Ready was basically like a halfway house. Many of the workers had just come out of prison. There were homeless people and drug addicts, too, dirty and scratching themselves. That's when the realization hit me hard: I was no better than them.

The agency sent me to a factory, where I was handed a broom to start sweeping. The moment I took it in my hand, I thought I was going to die. I thought I was going to throw up. I could not believe how far my life had come down, from the NFL to this. I had tears in my eyes when I started sweeping. The voice in my head kept saying, “You suck. You failed. You’re nothing. Here you were telling everybody that you were going to be this big shot. Now look at you. You’re going to do this for the rest of your life.”

That moment broke me—in all the good ways. It brought me to my knees. It humbled me. It forced me to look myself in the mirror and swallow my pride. It forced me to do the thing that I was most scared of in life: I had to admit that I’d been wrong. Wrong about everything, but especially about money. I wasn’t entitled to it.

I swept that floor for eight hours. The first hour was pure misery, but as I swept, this magical feeling came over me: I was actually doing something about my situation. I was working. For the first time in my life. Don’t get me wrong, I busted my ass in the NFL. I killed myself out on that field. But I was never in control of what I was doing. In the NFL, the team signs you or doesn’t sign you. The team trades you or drops you. All you do is wait for the phone to ring so someone can tell you what to do. I’d been stuck in that mentality, waiting for someone else to help me or tell me what to do or just do everything for me.

But the moment I started sweeping, I wasn’t waiting for someone to call anymore. I wasn’t wondering when some big break was going to come my way. For the first time in my life, I was working. It felt so good. I swept every inch of that damn floor. I was getting in the corners, under the boxes. The busier I got, the less I thought about my troubles. I started thinking about the money I was going to get at the end of the day and the smile on Rebecca’s face when I brought it home.

I worked the whole eight hours, went back to Labor Ready and presented my slip to folks working there. My wage was \$8 an hour, which came to a total of \$64, which after taxes came to \$48. They’d cash it for you right there, so when I left, I had \$48 dollars in my hand. I put \$20 in the gas tank, went home, gave \$20 to Rebecca, and I had \$8 in my pocket. It wasn’t much, but it was \$8 that I hadn’t had the day before. I knew from that moment on that I would never be broke again. Because I knew there was no job too low that I wouldn’t do it to support my family.

—Mr. Crews is an actor and former NFL player. This essay is adapted from his new book “Tough: My Journey to True Power,” published this week by Portfolio.

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