

[00:00:02] Omar Easy: The way our student athletes are disrupting this status quo is that they're entrepreneurs because their brand is what they use to make money. Everything they do, every post that they make, every move that they make, is a part of building their brand, is a part of putting the stake in the ground for their business. They themselves are incorporated.

[00:00:28] Ryan Newman: This is dare to disrupt, a podcast about Penn State alumni who are innovators, entrepreneurs and leaders, and the stories behind their success. I'm your host, Ryan Newman, and on the show today is Omar Easy. Omar is the newly appointed assistant athletics director for the Penn State Brand Academy, a program designed to support student athletes to manage and leverage their personal brand name, image and likeness, and support their entrepreneurial interests. Omar was a running back in the NFL for the Kansas City Chiefs and for the Oakland Raiders. He received his bachelor's degree in broadcast journalism in 2001 from Penn State. He also received both his Master of Education in the field of education administration and his PhD in educational leadership from Penn State.

[00:01:18] Ryan Newman: Well, today I'd like to welcome Omar Easy to the Dare to disrupt podcast. And this is a first for us on dare to disrupt, because, Omar, you were the first person we've had on that actually has experience working in the space of name, image, and likeness, also known as NIL, which we'll get into today. But first, and most importantly, thank you so much for joining us today.

[00:01:38] Omar Easy: Thank you for having me, Ryan. It's a pleasure. I'm looking forward to a conversation.

[00:01:42] Ryan Newman: So, Omar, I'd like to start, as we always do, which is at the beginning. So can you tell our listeners where you grew up and where you spent your earliest formative years?

[00:01:51] Omar Easy: I was originally born in Jamaica in a place called Spanish Town. Moved to Everett, Mass when I was a sophomore in high school.

[00:02:00] Omar Easy: Played football for two years. Really didn't have any idea what that was. I've seen it played on tv before. I grew up playing soccer, cricket, and track. It was pretty fast back in those days. Ran a 10.5 for 100 meters. I thought that was quick, but then this guy named Usain Bolt came along and forget about it. And then, obviously, I had a choice to go anywhere in the country for college, and I chose the Pennsylvania State University, and it was a match made in heaven, obviously. You know, college brings some difficulties at times, but if I have to do it all over again, I would choose Penn State all over again.

[00:02:36] Ryan Newman: Well, we're so lucky you did. But before we get to Penn State, let's spend a little time talking about those early years. So you're in Jamaica before you move to the US. First of all, how old were you when you made that move from Jamaica to Everett, Mass?

[00:02:49] Omar Easy: Yeah, I was about 16, I think, just finishing up my sophomore year.

[00:02:53] Ryan Newman: So you had a lot of formative years in Jamaica. Can you talk about what that experience was like living in Jamaica, and then what your earliest impressions were of the United States? And at what point did it actually become this notion that you might actually move there one day?

[00:03:08] Omar Easy: You know, my wife, she laughs at me all the time because she always say, I don't even remember my younger years beyond, I don't know, twelve or 16. I was a really good athlete when I was younger. I mean, I ran everywhere. I rode my bike everywhere. Being a kid in Jamaica, obviously very hot. It's below the equator.

[00:03:32] Omar Easy: I think we all know that the best athletes are from Jamaica, fastest humans from Jamaica. But, you know, I mean, I grew up not knowing my father. To this day, you can walk in this room, and I wouldn't even know that's my dad. I never met the man. I was raised by a single mom. I'm one of four. I'm the oldest. So I had to grow up fast and quick.

[00:03:52] Omar Easy: And I think that's probably one of the reasons why I don't remember my early childhood days. But I was always, like, really responsible and try to make sure I take care of my younger siblings, and it was always a part of the drive. Right? So, I mean, Jamaica is a third world country, right? But a beautiful third world country. I mean, the best beaches and resorts are there. It was tough.

[00:04:12] Omar Easy: It was a dog eat dog world, right? I remember going to high school there, and we wear uniforms to high school, right? The uniform for my school was green. And we had, like, green patches on our shirts, our khaki shirts.

[00:04:26] Omar Easy: And the school was located, unfortunately, in an area where red is the color. It was dangerous at times where, you know, took our badges off just to go through that area, because you wear a different color in that zone and you probably get, you know, you can get put down. Right? Beat up. So it was just kind of having to navigate a space as a young kid was very, very dangerous, but it builds some character and builds some survival instincts.

[00:04:58] Ryan Newman : Did you have to balance school athletics and work when you were young, or was it kind of like they all sort of intertwined? I assume, you know, 20 years ago, athletics,

you know, club sports, you look at what's happened in the US, it wasn't even this way 20 years ago. I can't imagine what it was like, in Jamaica back then. I mean, were people talking about using athletes, athletics as a way to sort of raise your station in life, or that really wasn't a consideration when you were growing up 15, 16 years old?

[00:05:26] Omar Easy: Yeah. I mean, there weren't really club sports to speak off. The way sports were used back then was we come to Philadelphia for the Pen relay, where all of the high school will converse and do the pen relate. And, guys, that was kind of the motivation, right? We come there and schools here would see you and want to offer you a scholarship. And that was kind of a way out of going to school in Jamaica. Getting out of third world country, that was one avenue, and that's one thing that we always kind of look forward to.

[00:05:58] Omar Easy: But when I was growing up, I loved everything to do with my younger years. I was good at cricket. I was good at track. I was good at soccer. And my mom finally decided she wanted to move here and live close to my aunts and uncles in Boston. I cried.

[00:06:15] Omar Easy: I hated it. The first winter. Imagine a kid that's never seen snow before, right? And the first winter I experienced in 95, it was a blizzard. And I remember having to wear, like, two jeans pants, like, together just to kind of survive. It was torture.

[00:06:32] Omar Easy: That winter was torture. I was like, I want to go home. I was done. But I, since then, got used to this cold weather, but still don't like it.

[00:06:40] Ryan Newman: Well, I'm sure you're not alone on that. So you come to the US, and at the time you get to the US, was that like starting over for you in terms of having to acclimate yourself socially? And what was that early inception like, when you sort of started to go to school in the US? Coming from Jamaica?

[00:06:57] Omar Easy: Yeah. I mean, it was essentially starting over, but my uncle was about two years older than I am. He was going to high school there. So it was kind of a, was kind of a transition for me. New friends, a new environment, and having to get settled into academics.

[00:07:13] Omar Easy: One thing I know for sure, when I first moved to the US, I was ahead academically. There were things that I was getting taught in Everett junior year. I already been through in Jamaica education, so there was some good difference there. But, you know, sports is an amazing thing, because through sports, it was easier for me to find friends and make friends and become a part of that community and that school.

[00:07:43] Ryan Newman: So you moved to Everett at that point. Did you have an awareness of what football was? Did you, was it even on your radar? You talked about cricket and track, but had you played any football in Jamaica or that really didn't start until you got to Everett?

[00:07:55] Omar Easy: Yeah. I mean, I knew what it was, but it wasn't a sport that we played in Jamaica at all. In fact, truth be told, in reality what we call soccer now here in the US is actually football in those parts of the world, right?

[00:08:12] Omar Easy: And when I first was asked and told that I'd be a great football player, I said, yeah, I'll play, because I thought it was soccer, right?

[00:08:21] Omar Easy: So it was interesting because when my coach started talking about, you know, helmets and shoulder pads, and I was like, what are you talking about? You know, just give me the socket bar and get out my way. I'm good. But, yeah, it was interesting. But, man, and they clocked me right in my 40 yard dash, and they were like, oh, my God. Like, you know, they couldn't believe how fast I was, right? I mean, I was weighing 238 in high school, right, and running the 40 yard in 438437. So my high school coach was like Omar, I just see a big dollar sign on your back. I'm like, what are you talking about? Is that you're gonna do whatever you want to do from an athletic standpoint.

[00:09:02] Omar Easy: Because you're so big and fast, you know, and. **[00:09:05]** : And that was it, man. It just took off from there.

[00:09:08] Ryan Newman: Well, how do you just process that? We're going to get into talking about nil. And you brought up the sign, this idea of dollar sign on your back. I mean, how did you kind of absorb that type of feedback? And how'd you make sense of it as a high school student, hearing it for the first time? And did it go to your head, or did you sort of try to just kind of be dismissive of it?

[00:09:26] Omar Easy: I don't think I really processed the dollar sign thing, but what I definitely processed was going to college for free. Like, that was kind of like the goal, right? I mean, if I didn't get a scholarship, I probably wouldn't have gone to college. I wouldn't. My mom wasn't going to pay for me to go to college. That wasn't going to happen.

[00:09:48] Omar Easy: I was going to end up going to work, right, and learn a trade. Football obviously provided that opportunity for me. It was really when, you know, getting to college and starting to understand intricacies of what is in front of us. [00:10:01] : And in front of me is when it was starting to sink in, like the dollar sign, all right? That's the next level, right?

[00:10:07] Ryan Newman: So you're obviously talking about not knowing what you're signing up for you're on the football team, which requires helmets and pads a little different than soccer, and so now you're playing this sport. I assume you had a great season in your high school, and how did it come to the recruiting? How did you approach recruiting? How did you think about recruiting in terms of where you were going to go for college?

[00:10:25] Omar Easy: My first game, I think I scored like four touchdowns and I didn't get tackled once. It was, it became something for all of us, my teammates, you know, we just make bets that I won't get tackled entire game.

[00:10:39] Omar Easy: We played a game, I remember, in like the worst field ever. It was rainy, it was wet, it was muddy, and it was in a place called Somerville, and there are goose poop all over the place, right on the field. And I said, listen, I'm not getting tackled in that at all. We played a game, I scored four touchdowns and didn't get tackled once to the ground. Man. I was like, nope.

[00:11:03] Omar Easy: It was just getting it, making my cuts and just turning the burners on. And it was gone. So it really got challenging towards the end of my senior year where we're in the playoffs and we're undefeated and we're playing some catholic schools, right? And catholic schools that can recruit to help against them, some more competitive schools. And we lost.

[00:11:27] Omar Easy: We lost the Super bowl that year. We played in Boston University. That's when it really, a switch went off in my head at that point because I was pretty upset that we lost that game. And I said, all right, now I gotta turn my attention to college and dig in a little bit to see how much better I can get and what I can win as a college athlete. So that's kind of, that's when it really kind of came home to me as to what I need to do to figure out how to get to that next level.

[00:11:58] Ryan Newman: That's really incredible, Omar. I love to see video of that video eclipse from high school because I assume, you know, it's not just speed, it's also, you mentioned making your cuts. I mean, you had to also have to not get tackled. I mean, you have to have tremendous agility and just be really quick at just faking the other guy out, too. I mean, that's part of it, too.

[00:12:17] Omar Easy: I would, yeah. Oh, most definitely. I mean, listen, for any and all parents out there, let your kids play soccer, football, soccer, whatever you want to call it, because the footwork that that provided me, it was, it was so translatable. It was incredible. I mean, the step and go and the quick and the fast twitch muscles. And just making people miss is soccer does that for you, right.

[00:12:41] Omar Easy: The dribbling and stuff like that? And that's kind of what I relied on to make people miss when I was playing running back. Right. And once you make that cut and get away from someone, a spin move or something like that, then you just turn the burners on and that was it.

[00:12:56] Omar Easy: But without having that conceptual understanding about soccer and dribble and making people miss, it wouldn't really. The game came easy for me at that point, right. Because, I mean, I played sports all my life, but soccer really, really helped for sure.

[00:13:13] Ryan Newman: Incredible. So now you got a decision to make. Where are you going to go to college? And anybody that's scoring four touchdowns and not getting tackled the whole game, I'm sure, had more than one choice. So what did it come down to for you? And what ultimately led you to choose Penn State?

[00:13:24] Omar Easy: Yeah, I mean, I had an opportunity of going anywhere in the country, and truth be told, I wanted to go to USC. I had Miami on my mind. We were going to go to Miami. I wanted to go to Arizona. Stanford was calling. I'm not too sure if you got the drift, right. These are all warm climate places. A lot more sun shining in these places.

[00:13:49] Omar Easy: Listen, that's where I wanted to go. Right. So those guys from Syracuse, you know came banging on my door and they started talking about Jim Brown and how, you know, great running backs and big backs and all that stuff was happening, and I was like, okay, all right. So I take a visit. So about middle of April, we went up to Syracuse for a visit.

[00:14:12] Omar Easy: A snowstorm, blizzard. It was just completely covered, white everything. I'm like. I was, all right, well, April, and it's a blizzard. Yeah, that's not going to happen. So they're off the list. So it came down to now Michigan.

[00:14:28] Omar Easy: Started to pick up the momentum on that, and it was very close to going. So now it came to Michigan, Penn State, who came into the picture pretty late in the game. Miami. Miami was going through some suspension stuff. [00:14:41] : Back in those days, so they were kind of fading off to the back. But USC was that place. I was going to SC for sure. And I remember the recruiter came to my house and was talking to my Mom and was just like, oh, my God, the weather is always great. We can go to the beach. Gotta do everything. Just like, relax. But lucky for me, when Penn State came to recruit me, man, we talked about academics, right? And I remember we were 89% graduation rate and number one in the nation.

[00:15:14] Omar Easy: Doing that for student athletes. And that was something that was really important to my mom. And she was like, you got to get your degree. You have to graduate, no matter what anyone is telling you about going to the NFL. Graduation, getting your degree, and making sure you have that paper was important.

[00:15:30] Omar Easy: So, Penn State, close enough. Six and a half hours away. Yes, it's cold, but amazing academics, amazing program. A tradition was always rich in terms of, like, Joe Pa was running the ship, and things were the way the expectations were the expectations. It was an easy decision after we kind of measure all these things out despite it being cold here and, you know, graduating here as an undergrad, that's for my mom. The rest of it just was just my drive and my perseverance.

[00:16:00] Ryan Newman: So, I imagine somebody that went through all the challenges you did in Jamaica, then the transition to Everett, mass. I would suspect the transition to Penn State was pretty smooth. But you tell us.

[00:16:10] Omar Easy: Well, you know, it really sunked in. When they were driving me, dropped me off here, and we drove because my first visit, we flew into Happy Valley. So I didn't get to see the very scenic road and the drives and the valleys and the corn fields and all of these different things. And we're driving down, man. I was like, where am I going? What's happening? Right? And honestly, it was like, man, do I really want to do this? Is this real? Like, I'm driving into mountains and seeing cornfield and just like, you know, valleys. And when I got, we just got down to state college and see the campus. I mean, the campus it is now obviously wasn't the campus in 19, 95, 97, right?

[00:16:57] Omar Easy: It's a different place, right? But when we set foot here, man, and when they dropped me off, unpacked the van, and they were heading back. And I was getting ready to head to summer camp, the camps, and I was like, they're actually leaving me here. Like, this is happening, right? And I remember my roommate at the time was Sam Crenshaw, who was a receiver from youngstown, Ohio. I knew I came in as a Freshman with a pretty dynamic class.

[00:17:25] Omar Easy: I met a few of the guys at the parade all american game that I was all american. So I knew I had Levar, John Gilmore, Tony Stewart, Kareem McKenzie, Bruce Branch, James Boyd. He's Tony. They're all all Americans, right? And I felt like, man, we're going to win some stuff here. We're going to get it done.

[00:17:47] Omar Easy: We boasted one of the best recruiting class in a long time in 97 when we came in.

[00:17:52] Ryan Newman: Incredible. And how was it balancing being a student as well as being an athlete.

[00:17:58] Omar Easy: So the academic piece. Yeah, I mean, I would consider myself to be a pretty good student, but it was difficult. I mean, I think for any freshman.

[00:18:04] Omar Easy: Student athlete going to a research one university, sitting in a lecture hall and literally all I saw was a red dot going across the screen as the professor's lecturing. That was different, right? That was an adjustment. Lucky for us, the way Penn State Football and or athletics set their structure around academics, way to set this up is all our freshman students have to go to study hall. So every day after practice, you go to study hall, you go to training table and you're back at study hall every day. And I think that was such a good structure for us. I know for me, helped me. It was mandatory, it wasn't an option. And I'm glad it was, because it was really easy to say, I'm tired.

[00:18:47] Omar Easy: I'm just gonna go home and sleep, right? And miss assignments and miss paperwork and stuff like that. I mean, leaving high school and having to come here and write ten page papers, I was like, what? What are we talking about? So that took some, took some adjusting. But at the end of the day, I felt very comfortable that the structure that Penn State, that in place for us academically was good.

[00:19:08] Ryan Newman: So you had this amazing Penn State experience both on the field and off the field. What stats are you most proud of in terms of your own accomplishments or the team's accomplishments, when you look back on your Penn State experience?

[00:19:21] Omar Easy: I gotta tell you the truth that I was disappointed probably still to this day, in our Penn State record for my class coming in, I truly believed at the time that we would have at least one, two championships because we were that good as a recruiting class. Coming in and we're coming into a class ahead of us that was pretty good, too, right? And me, and we, we didn't win anything, right? And that's disappointing to me. I mean, I know I talk to all my guys all the time and we always go back to how didn't we get it done? Like, why didn't we win as much as we should have won? But I'm proud of the fact that when I was here, I think Joe Pa got his 300 win, I think. And that was, that was something that we were a part of that.

[00:20:17] Omar Easy: I mean, we, my senior year, we were five and six. We didn't go to a ballgame, but I got invited to the blue gray all star game. I got invited to blue Gray all star game in mangarame, Alabama. And, man, I went down there and show out and won MVP, and just that changed the way my draft projection looked from that point.

[00:20:40] Ryan Newman: Incredible. Did you know that the stakes were as high as they clearly were going into that blue gray all star game in terms of a chance to outperform and really show your stuff?

[00:20:52] Omar Easy: Absolutely. I accepted that invitation, man. We're just like stars in my eyes, in the sense that I knew that I needed to show out, right. I didn't felt like I got enough playing time and was featured the way I should have been featured here as a running back here in Penn State, and that was my chance to match up against the best across the country. Right. Coming out, I mean, I went down there, I had one thing on my mind. If you get in my way, I'm running you over. It's on and popping.

[00:21:19] Omar Easy: So it was something different for me. But the competitive nature of who I am, that came out holistically. And, I mean, I went in there with a mission. I knew I needed to perform well, better, or maybe perfect to be able to get invited to the combines, because at that point, I wasn't even invited to the combines. He's going to that game and winning mvp. Then I got an invitation to go to the combines.

[00:21:45] Ryan Newman: So you go to the combines, and then you talked about the draft. Can you talk about how the draft went and what you're refilling that day?

[00:21:50] Omar Easy: Yeah. You know, going through the combines is like going to a meat market. You're getting pulled and prod and dragged and tested here and everywhere. It was an incredible experience, a lived experience for me. Right. And I never, ever forgot how that was. But seeing all the guys you, from the first pick in the draft to the last pick in the draft, that was around and being able to compete at that level, whether it's bench press, vertical jumps, 40 yard dashes, stuff like that, it was a unique experience for me. I left there feeling like, yeah, I'll be a third round draft pick. Not really the goal I set out. Coming into Penn State, and I felt like I can and should be a first round draft pick. It didn't really pan out to be that way, but was drafted in the fourth round. And, I mean, once you get drafted in third or fourth round and beyond, you got to make a team. I didn't want to go to Kansas City when they drafted me.

[00:22:47] Omar Easy: I was not as excited as someone should be getting drafted. I really wanted to go to Baltimore Ravens or the New England Patriots. When I visited both of those places, that brought me in. I had a good synergy with the organization and the coaches and the running back coach and the environment by which I would be in. But it was funny because those two teams traded a third round pick and ended up falling behind Kansas City in the fourth round. And it was just, it was just divine intervention, honestly.

[00:23:14] Omar Easy: It really was. I was meant to go to KC and mind you, I've never set foot in Kansas City, Missouri before. And when I got drafted there, all I could hear people talk to me about was, oh, you get to meet Dorothy. I'm like, Dorothy? Who was Dorothy?

But yeah, I mean, and that experience was amazing. I got drafted by an amazing coach and coach Vermeil and a bunch of guys that were like brothers. We're still friends, man. Those guys were diarreha, committed to the process. The main thing was always the main thing in Kansas City. So it was good.

[00:23:48] Ryan Newman: So you get to Kansas City, you have your experience and what do you take away the most from your NFL experience in terms of, you know, how it turned out versus your expectations?

[00:23:57] Omar Easy: I hated training camp. Dick Vermeer is hard. He's a hard nosed coach, he's a pounder, he's a 3 hours, twice a day type of guy. Even the old school, we barely got rested, we got beat up in training camp. But on Sundays, it was like Sundays was my sanctuary, man. It was my time to have fun and enjoy everything about it. I love playing the National Football League. But the first and most important thing I took away from that is that the NFL is not for long. You're as good as your last play and you got to make the best of it and the most of it. The discipline that organization, the coaching staff instill in me as a young man, going to National Football League is a lifelong lesson. Just being able to compete at that level and knowing that every day someone is gunning for your spot, right. And your job. So it forces you to be on your game all the time and understanding that we're there to win, and it's your job. So it forces you to be on your game all the time and understanding that we're there to win.

[00:25:01] Omar Easy: And if we're not winning, then folks won't be around for long.

So it helped me understand and maintain the focus by which I needed to transition into life after football.

[00:25:13] Ryan Newman: When you reflect back on what your high school coach said, where he said you've got like a dollar sign on your back and then you reflect back on your NFL experience. You mentioned about the way you sort of translated that was it got you a free education at Penn State and then going to that next stage and how competitive and hard it is, it just gets increasingly harder and more competitive. And we're going to get into this. When we talk about the whole role of the nil on athletes and finances, when you look back on it, I mean, do you think that really, it was like you had a dollar sign on your back, or do you feel like there's more to it than that? There's more context than that. I don't want to lead you. I'm just curious to get your reaction to that, how you think about it.

[00:25:50] Omar Easy: Yeah, I mean, I think the way he articulated that statement and the way he meant that statement was a chance to play football for a living, make money. That's kind of really what he was kind of portraying to me, I think. And, yeah, at the end of the day, being drafted and playing the National Football League helped me move my family out of the projects. Right. We lived in the projects when I was in high school, right. So from that perspective. Absolutely right. The Donald Stein was, was that right? Making sure I could kind of be the oldest and provide for my mom and my younger siblings.

[00:26:27] Omar Easy: And I think it was a stepping stone for life. Right. It gave me a step. If it wasn't for that at that point, the resources weren't available to kind of set the stage going to build on it. So, yeah, the dollar sign was that given all that, the athletic attributes I have and had, monetizing it and getting paid in the national football League, that was the dollar sign for sure.

[00:26:50] Ryan Newman: So you have your NFL career. Like many, it ends with some level of injury. What comes next for you?

[00:26:58] Omar Easy: It was a difficult transition. I had four knee surgeries before I left the national football League, and I wasn't ready to leave. I wanted to play for ten years. That was my goal. I wanted to play for ten years. But that's not the life expectancy of a running back in the national football League. It's two and a half years. I'm grateful that I played the years. played four years and, and was able to be pensioned and, you know, I have lifetime pension plan and medical and all that good stuff. But the sport dictate when I had to leave.

[00:27:28] Omar Easy: I wanted to be on my terms. But sometimes it doesn't work that way. Sometimes it tells you what you have to do. And it was time. I quickly sort of pivot into education and went back and started to get my MBA. And I was actually trying to finish my MBA because I started it while I was here as an undergrad, and that was a good thing for me, right. So it was difficult because not going to training camp, those training camps that I hated at that time, I started missing those training camps. It was like, right, if I'm not in training camp, then I'm not in the league, I'm not getting paid, and now I got to do something different. So it's funny that turns out, right?

[00:28:07] Omar Easy: And, you know, for me, I look back on that and I'm saying to myself, I could have taken this a little more serious and put a little more time into being a pro, right? I felt like I could have dedicated more time as I look at it. And I never really processed this the way I think I should in the sense that that is my job. Yes, I'm going to work, but I'm going to play and practice, but I needed to really look at this deeper as a job, meaning that I could have spent more time at the gym, in the stadium, doing extra stuff. I mean, I never left here before six or 07:00, but I could have done a little more.

[00:28:49] Omar Easy: And I felt like that probably would have helped my career and helped me prevent a few injuries here and there. But, yeah, I mean, if anything, I regret not putting more time into my craft, for sure.

[00:28:59] Ryan Newman: And so how did you take that mindset of resilience and wanting to go the extra mile with you when you transitioned into your next stage of professional life?

[00:29:09] Omar Easy: Yeah. I mean, when someone tells me no, I just tell them, watch me, because I'm the opposite of what you want me. When I first came back here in 2009 to do my master's degree and work as a grad assistant in football, I applied to grad school. And the pic, which is a professor in charge, said to me, you're not getting a master's degree here. There's no way- you're a football player. You have no understanding of what that looks like. And I was like, what do you actually mean? That was shocking and surprising for me to have that experience.

[00:29:43] Omar Easy: So I said, all right, well, I had a professor that I took class with the semester before that, but I really felt like I connected with her. And she appreciated my life experience prior to coming back to get my master's degree. And in conversation, I mentioned that to her, and she was like, what do you mean? She was like, well, forget about that.

[00:30:07] Omar Easy: Once you applied to her PhD program in ed leadership. I said, okay. So I gathered my stuff and got my recommendations and took my exams and applied, got accepted. That was it for me, right? The sky was the limit, and I made sure when I graduated as doctor Easy, and I make sure I look that professor up that said to me that I wasn't getting a master's degree and show her that I walked out of here with a PhD instead.

[00:30:35] Ryan Newman: Not only did you walk out with a PhD, you get to walk around saying your doctor easy. I mean, gosh, that's a mic drop right there.

[00:30:42] Omar Easy: That's right. That's absolutely right. And you know what? And her doctorate is no different than mine. It was interesting to me, that was a big, a big win for me personally. That was probably one of the hardest thing that you can put yourself through. I mean, honestly, yes, man, I got drafted national football league and managed to play for x amount of years to be a retired and former player. But when you have to get your PhD and go through all the content, the coursework, and defend that thing, yeah, that's a different beast. That's a different beast. What got me through that was my dissertation chair said to me, Omar, no one on your committee knows more about your work and the study of your work than you. They don't know more about it than you do. So when you start talking about it, you were fine. You were fine. And that got me through it, man. I'm telling you, the day I had. **[00:31:34]** : To defend my dissertation, I tried to eat lunch and I couldn't even do it.

[00:31:39] Ryan Newman: It's like you're back in training camps again.

[00:31:40] Omar Easy: Right? Honestly, it was nerve wracking, but it was good. I'm glad that I got through it.

[00:31:45] Ryan Newman: Well, let's talk about what brought you back into the Penn State ecosystem. So, for those who don't know, we want to go into great detail on nil and the brand academy, but let's first start with your official title. What is your official title, and how does it all work?

[00:32:00] Omar Easy: I'm an assistant ad and director for the brand academy.

[00:32:05] Ryan Newman: And the brand academy has ties to invent Penn State and Penn State athletics. Is it a standalone entity? Is it part of the university?

[00:32:13] Omar Easy: So it's a part of invent Penn State and part of ICA, so it's a partnership. And honestly, my hat goes off to the donor who endowed this department. This position, this initiative, it's overdue. And the innovative thought process around this is just incredible. Right? And I'm not surprised. We're Penn Staters, right? That's what we do. So being able to represent that donor that remain anonymous about their, you know.

[00:32:47] Omar Easy: Their generosity is a once in a lifetime opportunity for me. But I'm so grateful because I think no matter what happens, Doctor Eazy is, would be, and will always be the first director of the brand academy, right. But the mission, the goal of this is to create, innovate, and dominate this space that we're currently in. This space called nil, right, but beyond that is the education around what are we talking about and how are we talking about it? How are we helping these young people who are now making millions of dollars or hundreds of thousands of dollars as freshmen or sophomore, junior kids in college, right. What are we doing to help them monetize that and make that long live resource? If I was getting that much money in high school, I would have been at third base by the time I left here, right, because of find a way to invest this. So one of, one of the drives, the initiative, the purpose of the brand Academy is to provide insight in helping them find ways to invest entrepreneurial experiences.

[00:34:00] Omar Easy: Dive into what you can do. Startups, right, but making sure that, hey, you're going to file tax on that money, right. Or here is, you know, a path where these are different things you can do with x amount of resources you have. You can make it a 501 C three. You can, you can, you can start doing things that you wouldn't be able to do if you weren't getting this money. Right? Now, the beauty of this brand academy is we're covering all 31 sports, right? I'm a one man crew right now, responsible for 850 student athletes, and it's a pleasure and a joy for me to start to meet and know individual athletes from different sports. [00:34:40] : But the bottom line is I have to be able to help them get to the next level and make sure that I'm giving them, providing them the necessary skills and knowledge, education for when they leave here, because we all don't get to the next level. For some sports, there are no next level, right? There's no professional ranks. So getting those student athletes to monetize their name, image and likeness now to set up for the future is one of the primary goals of the brand academy.

[00:35:13] Ryan Newman: So I feel like we shouldn't have to define nil, because if you need a definition of nil, you haven't been paying attention to anything and happening in college athletics the last couple of years. But how do you define nil to somebody that doesn't actually have any awareness of what it is? And as part of your definition, what do you think both are the opportunities and the perils of nil?

[00:35:34] Omar Easy: The first thing I would say is don't follow or listen to some of the noise out there, right? Because there are a lot of external noise that adds to this.

[00:35:48] Omar Easy: This is something that, so let me just go back a bit, because I think it's important for folks who may be listening to this to understand that. I researched this stuff from 2009 to 2012. I wrote my dissertation on the legal and critical discourse analysis on the myth surrounding student athletes. And why is that?

[00:36:15] Omar Easy: Because way before now, in about 1940, 819, 58, student athletes who got injured on the field of playing sports were able to receive workers comp. That's documented. It's in my research. It's there. And it happened. It happened more frequently. But then the NCAA decided to coin the word student athletes to preserve the amortization of student athletes so that from that point on, they no longer can receive workers come. So there was always this thing about, okay, well, shouldn't they actually get something for what they do for universities and colleges and the money they generate for the NCAA? Why aren't they getting anything for the amount of jerseys that got sold easy? Or 34? I mean, in particular to Penn State?

[00:37:09] Omar Easy: I mean, we have black shoes, basic blue, and no name, but all game, right? So we don't. The name don't work for us in number 30. 411. Right? 43, 80. Like those numbers that we resonate and connect with over the years, the amount of money that the university would have received and had received from selling the merch, which is our name, image and likeness, but we get no compensation for it. This was a long time coming. The problem is the folks in Indianapolis, NCAA didn't plan for it appropriately. So you can see where other universities take advantage of what was not clearly defined, wasn't articulated the right way as to how the rules may apply and do different things with it. But I think the intent was that student athletes can now make money from Name, image and likeness, similar to other students who can make money off of their own name, image and likeness.

[00:38:14] Omar Easy: If you're a regular student here, you can do a startup and make money off of it. We couldn't do it back in the day. Right. You can sell your picture, you can do a commercial for a certain company, and you can make money off of it. **[00:38:26]** : You're a regular student. But athletes weren't able to even get summer jobs. We weren't even allowed to work back then. Right. So now they've opened the door to do that.

[00:38:36] Omar Easy: But I think they're way off in the way it's been implemented and where they need to go with this. This is a lot of things left to get resolved.

[00:38:44] Ryan Newman: A lot of high profile coaches have been out talking about this. Nick Saban recently was going for Congress and talked about this idea that he's a supporter of it, but in this current form, it's really, there's more work to be done. So is it fair to say, doctor easy, that in your role you're doing the best you can to provide guidance to, to our student athletes, to set them up for success, while also acknowledging it's a changing landscape that's going to be fluid and evolve over time? And if so, how do you position yourself in a way that you can be most helpful to students in this capacity?

[00:39:17] Omar Easy: Yeah, absolutely. Right now, what the brand academy is and can provide will change in April and be different in July. We are cognizant of that. We're trying to plan ICA that aside of my partnership, we're putting plans together. I'm putting plans together, outline as to what will it look like in two months. What's the structure, what does my personal support look like from the brand academy standpoint, we would then need an athlete marketing manager. Right. We need someone to be able to find strategic way of engaging brands and donors or fans or whoever wants to work with our athletes.

[00:39:59] Omar Easy: We need to be able to have a marketplace where you can go and see all of our athletes, their profile, their interests, their aspirations, and actually fair market value associated with that for any of our athletes to get a deal and they're getting a deal on a fair market price value.

[00:40:19] Omar Easy: So there are different things. There's so many different pieces of it. When I benchmark what other schools are doing, other competitive universities, I hate to say, but we're behind, right? We're behind and we got to pick up speed. We got to get there. We got to get to a place where we pull even. But for me, it's not just to catch up.

[00:40:42] Omar Easy: My intention is to blow the competition out the water. We're going to dominate this space and dominate the space in the right way. We're going to make sure that we're doing this the right way. So we setting our student athletes up for success. Right. So we're going to change. We are ready to adjust. We're getting ready to adjust. We're going to put everything in place. Doctor Kraft or ad, he thinks beyond just today or the next day. And I think we are in a place where we are going to be creatively moving forward and be ready for the next change in the nil process.

[00:41:11] Ryan Newman: Well, it's only by intervention of you, actually, the timing of your arrival, that your podcast recording is coming on the back of two podcast recordings that were both very focused on supporting the nil, West Shore home and Mitre brands. And those are both backed by substantial donors to Penn State. Very successful entrepreneurs who have been very supportive of Penn State athletics in this path along the journey on nil. You know, this is a show called dare to disrupt, and it really focuses on entrepreneurship and disrupting industries. So how would you say that student athletes who really are taking advantage of this new opportunity are being entrepreneurial in disrupting the status quo?

[00:41:54] Omar Easy: Very good question. So, I mean, when I was drafted national football League, one of the approaches was, it's Omar easy Incorporated. Right? I am my brand. I have to make sure that I preserve it. I create it right and make sure that I make smart decisions to make sure that my brand is not tarnished. And I think right now, the way our student athletes are disrupting their status quo is that they're entrepreneurs because their brand is what they use to make money and can use to make money. And everything they do, every post that they make, every content they create, every move that they make, is a part of building their brand, is a part of putting the stake in the ground for their business.

[00:42:39] Omar Easy: They themselves are incorporated. Right. So they're totally disrupting every aspect of what used to be. They're walking entrepreneurs, they're doing it right. And I think, for me, it's really trying to make sure that they understand that and that they understand that every decision that they make, the consequences, good or bad, and you gotta make sure you put yourself in the right place. [00:43:03] : At the right time and make decisions that are going to help you in the long run.

[00:43:07] Ryan Newman: Well, thank you, Omar, for taking the time today to share your journey with me, and thank you for accepting this position to lead the brand academy. We have exciting future ahead, and I think you'll be a big part of that. I'd now like to hand things over to a current student at Penn State, Miranda Heffelfinger. Miranda is a fourth year student studying psychology at Penn State. She's the captain and president of the Penn State women's rugby team and is an intern in the Penn State office of Entrepreneurship and Commercialization. Miranda, I'll now hand the interview over to you.

[00:43:39] Miranda Heffelfinger: Thanks for having me on the podcast, and thanks for letting me ask you some questions today.

[00:43:44] Omar Easy: Absolutely. No trick questions, though.

[00:43:46] Miranda Heffelfinger: Sounds good. I'll get right into it then. So, the first question I had for you is, how does the brand academy aim to serve all student athletes at Penn State?

[00:43:54] Omar Easy: I think it was built on the premise that that's going to be the future. That's going to be the mission of the brand academy. As you know, we are 31 strong, right? But there are other athletes at the university that are not part of the 31 strong that the brand academy eventually will branch out to serve and support. I mean, for example, I'm psyched because I'm hosting our first inaugural alliance to leaders symposium April 10. I'm bringing back three of our former student athletes One, LaVar Arrington, you may know who he is. Two, I'm bringing back Haley McLane Hill. And Jen Hudson, who is a former fencer who won a national championship in 2014. Why?

[00:44:41] Omar Easy: Because those three athletes, former athletes, are examples of building your brand from a diverse range of sports. Right. I'm anticipating all of our student athletes being a part of this. It's going to be open to all 31 sports and athletes. **[00:44:59]** : And, Miranda, all of our athletes in the university park, whatever sports you play will be open. Are welcome to join this activity. There's a registration that's going to be posted.

[00:45:08] Omar Easy: So I'm really looking forward to kick this off in a way where it's a panel discussion and then there will be Q and A. Our athletes get a chance to interact with our former athletes, and I think that's one step in just really opening the doors to like, hey, here is an initiative, here is a program that's built for you as student athletes here in Penn State.

[00:45:31] Miranda Heffelfinger: So my next question then was, can you benefit from nil post graduation if you do not continue to play professionally? And if so, what would be the steps to develop someone's name, image and likeness so that it could benefit you in the future after graduation?

[00:45:46] Omar Easy: Right. Well, it's my intention, it's our intention That we create and build your personal brand for you to take it with you. I hope you have no intention of leaving your personal brand here, Miranda, when you leave Penn State, you got to take it with you.

[00:46:01] Omar Easy: So we're going to build it strong, right. We're going to be very creative.

Right. We're going to be very innovative, and we're going to dominate how we do it. It's a part of what the brand academy lives and strives on.

[00:46:11] Omar Easy: We build it strong enough and build it the right way. When you leave Penn State, you'll be able to continue to monetize on your brand. We're hoping to really do a really extensive marketplace where you, as a former student athlete or athlete, you also have a space on that marketplace. And if a donor or dealer wants to say, hey, I want to see Miranda again, and try to bring her in for an autograph session. They can do that because you're still a part of the Penn State family.

[00:46:41] Miranda Heffelfinger: That definitely makes sense. So my question going off of that then would be what are the best platforms or marketplaces to use that can help us as athletes monetize our nil goals?

[00:46:51] Omar Easy: Wow, you're putting me on the spot. So we're currently in agreement with influencer, and we have an influencer exchange marketplace. There's several other marketplaces out there. We are sourcing some other ones to give you the athletes options and good options and be more public facing and be marketable. [00:47:12] : I won't drop the names at this time because I don't want to do any improv pr for individuals, but we are doing some benchmarking around other marketplaces that can be very helpful and provide monetary opportunities for athletes. And I'm psyched about it. Right. I tell you, I get really excited about the work ahead of us is difficult. It's a journey, it's not a sprint. But for me, we are in a place where we got to get moving and pick up speed because as these rules change, we don't necessarily know how it will affect the marketplace landscape because we don't know what those votes going to be in April. But whatever it is, I think we're nimble and flexible enough to make the adjustments to benefit our student athletes and how we get them out there.

[00:48:06] Omar Easy: And you will see a lot of communications from me, the brand academy, in how we can market you the athletes better and what we're doing to market the athletes better.

[00:48:17] Miranda Heffelfinger: That's really exciting. I'm interested to learn more about it. That's all the questions I have for you. Thank you for answering them for me.

[00:48:23] Omar Easy: Absolutely. Thank you.

[00:48:26] Ryan Newman: That was doctor Omar Easy, assistant athletics director for the brand academy. If you haven't already, be sure to subscribe to dare to disrupt wherever you listen to podcasts and look out for next month's episode. Thanks for listening.