



Mask Off

INSPIRATIONAL SPEAKER, PODCASTER AND FORMER PRO FOOTBALL PLAYER **LEWIS HOWES** SHAKES UP THE CONVERSATION ON MASCULINITY AND DISCUSSES HOW WE CAN BETTER SERVE THOSE AROUND US.



BY TESS LOPEZ
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK ONKEN

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he five-star accolades for Lewis Howes' *The School of Greatness* podcast are numerous, though two themes among the praises from reviewers stand out:

"I'm so grateful; the content saves me hundreds of years of trying to figure out things by myself," and, "I'm so thankful for Lewis's curiosity and the authenticity he brings to every conversation."

Being a curious facilitator of life-changing information is exactly what Howes was aiming for when he launched the podcast in 2013, though the path to get there wasn't exactly that of a conventional, starry-eyed entrepreneur. Instead, it took a career-ending injury and a broken dream to inspire Howes to start on his own path to greatness.

The dream in question was professional football. It's the dream for a lot of young boys, particularly those who, like Howes, recognized their prowess on the field and quickly wrapped their identity within the game.

The small-town Ohio native's drive catapulted him to two-sport All-American status in college, followed by a season playing professionally in the Arena Football League. Then, Howes suffered a wrist injury that shut and locked the door on his dream. In recovery and without any prospects, he crashed on his sister's couch for the next year and a half.

"I had all my ability tied to sports," Howes recalls now, almost 15 years later. "When that was gone, it was like my identity was gone."



Howes' connection to sports took root after a particularly hurtful fourth-grade dodgeball game: Two captains, selected by the teacher, began selecting students to be on their teams. With height and innate athletic ability on his side, Howes awaited his turn. But one by one, every student in the class was called before him, leaving him the last one to be chosen.

In his book *The Mask of Masculinity*, Howes recalls the horror and embarrassment of being selected dead last.

"In that moment, I decided that I would never be picked last in sports again. In response to their snub, I set out to 'prove' those boys wrong and show them how good I actually was," Howes writes.



“I returned the humiliation they gave me by dominating them, not only in that inconsequential game of dodgeball but in every game I ever played from that point forward, physically reminding them of their mistakes. I dedicated my life after school to becoming the biggest, fastest, strongest athlete I could become.... Winning and succeeding at sports made me feel the opposite of how I felt as a vulnerable, picked-on kid.”

As a successful athlete, confidence came easy to Howes—until the wrist injury. The end of his football career stripped him of his mask—and, therefore, his ability to cope with his circumstances.

“When you play football every day, you have an outlet to get all your emotions out,” Howes explains. “But you take that away from someone, and the person doesn’t have the tools to communicate with their emotions in a healthy way.”

Howes realized he’d been leaning on football to harness the limited range of emotions he learned to express as a young man: stoicism or anger. Vulnerability wasn’t an option.

“That’s just the way I think a lot of young boys were taught, in America specifically,” Howes says, referring to notions of masculinity where crying is a sign of weakness and expressing emotions is discouraged. In *The Mask of Masculinity*, Howes explains that some men who subscribe to this traditional and limited view of masculinity often shadow their vulnerability through excessive pride, by flaunting wealth and by using humor as a crutch in uncomfortable situations—all essentially a disguise, or mask, to their authentic self.

In a bid to remove his own “mask of masculinity,” Howes attended an emotional intelligence workshop with a group of about 50. It was here that he opened up about his childhood sexual abuse for the first time.

“I thought my life was over,” he recalls. “I was like, ‘Man, these people know about this. Now they’re all gonna laugh at me.’ And it was the opposite. All the men in the event came up to

me afterwards, one by one, and shared their story. Probably like a third of them had been sexually abused too and never talked about it.”

Now, Howes is on a mission to help other men remove their masks. He encourages vulnerability in his books, in his podcast and in his interactions with others to change the narrative around what it means to be a man.

He likens his approach to a Trojan horse. “I try to bring men into my sphere and show them you can build a big personal brand and be successful in business and be athletic and all these traditionally ‘masculine’ things,” he explains. “But, then, while you listen to me, you gotta hear me talk about these things.”

Howes has just finished a book—his fourth—titled *The Greatness Mindset*. It’s a blend of his two missions: helping people achieve greatness and encouraging men to embrace vulnerability. As Howes puts it, working toward a greatness mindset can’t begin without the process of healing.

“People really have three main fears in adulthood: the fear of failure, the fear of success and the fear of judgment. And other people’s opinions are at the center of each one of these fears,” he explains. “When we learn to say, ‘I am enough, and I want to improve from here and accept where I’m at...,’ then we can start to eliminate these fears or work with the fears in taking action.”

Perhaps one of the best role models is Howes himself, who’s an open advocate for the benefits of therapy and authentic conversations.

“It’s very scary to drop the masks,” he says. “It’s very hard to do at first. But once you do it consistently, you feel free to be yourself all the time.”



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Howes says he lives mask-free now, comfortable in both his shortcomings and his newfound skills in marketing and communication, which he didn’t tap into until after his wrist injury. While living with his sister during his recovery period, Howes began scrolling Craigslist and LinkedIn for job opportunities and questioning what value he could offer to others in his next venture.

“I started reading a lot of information online, watching as much content as I could about what successful people did,” he explains. Along the way, he began connecting with others on LinkedIn, specifically business owners, CEOs and entrepreneurs with impressive resumes.

In an effort to better understand how they got there—and perhaps adopt some of those same strategies—Howes needed the whole story.

He spent hours a day for several months connecting with people on LinkedIn and quickly learned that the best way to guarantee a response was not by asking for advice but rather by asking people to share their success stories.

What he didn’t expect was a steady stream of very vulnerable, human exchanges peppered with business acumen. Very rarely did prodigious talent or marketing savvy play a role in these tales of success. Instead, these stories detailed a shift in mindset, lessons learned from money management mishaps and the willingness to move beyond failure.



Lewis Howes interviews innovators, entrepreneurs and thought-leaders on his podcast, including Mel Robbins (top) and Jay Shetty, shown above.

Impressed by his persistence and approach, several of Howes' contacts began asking him for tips on how to leverage their own LinkedIn profiles. Howes created a webinar, which quickly turned into his first online course. The popularity of this course bloomed into a business planning networking events and helping professionals and budding entrepreneurs through a series of marketing courses. After five years, Howes earned enough money to move to Los Angeles.

But even with a prosperous business, he still felt unfulfilled. Reflecting on his situation, Howes asked himself, "If I could do anything, what would I want to do?" He thought back to earlier days of listening to people's success stories and realized that these weren't just business stories but life tools that could help others overcome challenges. The answer was immediately apparent: "I just want

to interview great minds," Howes recalls. "That's when the podcast started—kind of from a need to help more people."

That was 2013. As of November 2022, Howes has aired more than 1,300 podcast episodes, sharing the mic with guests such as Esther Perel, Dr. David Perlmutter, Dwyane Wade, Mel Robbins and Jay Shetty. No topic is off-limits. The show, which was picked up for distribution by broadcasting giant SiriusXM in September 2022, covers everything from brain health and breaking up to building confidence and finding financial success. Howes says it's everything he wished he'd learned in school.

"I was a bad student in school," he admits. "I would watch all the smart kids and just try to observe people because I never felt confident speaking up or asking questions in class."



It's this knack for analysis—and perhaps his perceived incompatibility with others—that made Howes such a shrewd observer.

Take, for example, Howes' interactions during the photo shoot for this story. While kicked back in a brown leather lounge chair in a home tucked high in the hills of LA's Glassell Park neighborhood, Howes takes turns chatting with the videographer and me, asking where we're from and how long we're visiting. I offer a cheesy disclaimer that it's my first time in California and how (embarrassingly) thrilled I was to see the Hollywood sign on our drive out to the shoot.

Later in our interview, while illustrating how much can be inferred about someone based on the power of a keen eye and genuine inquiries, Howes teases out details of my life. "Seeing the Hollywood sign... you're lit up about it! So it tells me a few things about you: One, it's exciting for you to see new places. [Yet,] you probably haven't traveled a lot of places."

Bingo.

He continues rattling off minor details I told him in passing, capping each of them neatly with a brief character summary.

"So, you don't have to have every skill in the world to add value to people," he concludes. "You can see people, you can listen, you can appreciate, and that might be more valuable than giving them money."

Case in point: Howes makes a point of ending every podcast interview by

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homing in on his guest's contributions or accomplishments. "I want to acknowledge you for..." he begins, highlighting the positive impact of their vulnerability or how they pioneered a new way of thinking in their field.

Sarah Livingstone, Howes' chief of staff, says this is just one of his strong suits.

"Relationships are his superpower," she tells me. It's later in the afternoon, and we're sitting in the sun-drenched living room with Matt Cesaratto, Howes' head of operations and friend since college, while Howes preps for photos. They've been on staff at Greatness Media for 10 and eight years, respectively.

"He's an empowering leader, and he trusts," Cesaratto adds. "That's one thing a lot of leaders you see don't do: They micromanage because they can't let go of that trust. [Howes] trusts."

He and Livingstone are smiling as they reflect on Howes' optimism and energy, and Cesaratto explains that he's been that way as long as they've known each other.

"I literally remember the moment he kind of came into my life," Cesaratto says. "He had an energy that was different than most." When asked to describe that energy, Cesaratto paused thoughtfully and responded, "I would call it childlike joy."

It's easy to see how graciously Howes embraces life with this sense of innocence. If he was nervous or restless that day, you couldn't see it.

When we move onto the deck outside to capture some photos of Howes in a striking maroon suit, he pauses on the stairs and stoops over with his hand held out toward a giant grasshopper, a gentle invitation and simultaneous sign of respect. And in between shutter clicks, he steps, sways and swirls to the rhythm of salsa music playing softly in the background.

He exudes an air of lightness and wonder—and, more than anything else, freedom. ♦

LOPEZ IS A WRITER WHO WOULDN'T MIND SEEING THE HOLLYWOOD SIGN A SECOND TIME.

