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[Ashley DeWalt](#) is the Co-Founder and Managing Partner of The Collectiv, the sports industry's first community-powered venture capital fund. He's a Venture Advisor at Mercury Fund and was formerly the Managing Director at DivInc, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting diverse founders in sportstech, healthtech, fintech, and other sectors. With two decades in the game, his path is anything but traditional – but it's one that continues to shape the future of venture investing in sports technology startups, and emerging pro sports franchises and leagues.

Hustle, Vision, and Super Bowl MVPs

Ashley grew up in Port Arthur, Texas, just outside Houston. A former athlete with dreams of making the league, he pivoted once he realized the NBA wasn't in the cards. But he knew he had to stay close to

the game. “I didn’t know what that looked like at the time,” he says, “but I wanted to be connected to sports forever.” While studying finance at the University of Houston, Ashley launched a brand strategy and marketing consultancy that built websites for pro athletes – what we’d now call early digital fan engagement platforms. “This was the days of dial-up internet,” he laughs. “We were building sites for players like Ray Lewis, where fans could buy merch, ringtones, Xbox skins, and his custom workout app.”

His first break came from a college classmate who went on to become an NFL draft pick. That connection opened the door to Select Sports Group, a Houston-based agency that would later be acquired by CAA. He was 21, pitching brand-building strategies while still in college. “I just needed them to trust me,” he recalls. “And I was going to outwork everyone.” That drive led to client relationships with some of the biggest names in the NFL – Ray Lewis, LaDainian Tomlinson, Hines Ward, and Santonio Holmes among them, as well as former WBC Heavyweight Champion, Deontay Wilder. “At one point, I was in my early twenties working with three Super Bowl MVPs,” he says. “It was surreal.”



The Power of the Pivot

Ashley’s early years were defined by hustle – built on trust, integrity, and an ability to connect. But after 10 years helping athletes build personal brands, he felt the itch to evolve. “I wanted a new challenge,” he says. “It’s one thing to build an individual brand, it’s another thing to build a sports property.” That opportunity came in 2012 when Kevin Sumlin invited him to College Station, TX to help with their recruiting efforts at Texas A&M. Ashley developed a behind-the-scenes digital campaign called Aggie FB Life – a lifestyle brand that gave recruits an inside look at life as an Aggie. “It provided an exclusive glimpse behind the scenes of the program,” he says. “It was 24/7 storytelling, way before content was the king.”

The campaign helped Texas A&M land the top recruiting class in school history. The success spread – Ashley would go on to consult with football programs at Maryland, Minnesota, TCU, and the Houston men’s basketball program. At Minnesota, he pioneered virtual reality recruiting experiences. “I didn’t realize it at the time, but we were setting trends,” he reflects. “We were always trying to do what hadn’t been done yet.”

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Finding His Calling in Founders

The next chapter took shape in the startup world. Introduced to sportstech through the accelerator ecosystem, Ashley became a lead mentor at Stadia Ventures, helping startups refine their strategy and build connections. "I'd lived the grind. I could relate," he says. "I wasn't just giving advice – I was rolling up my sleeves to accelerate their GTM strategy, business development, and more."

It was there he discovered his new passion: working with entrepreneurs. "I realized I could do this forever," he says. "It was still sports, still innovation – but it gave me energy in a new way." Eventually, he became Managing Director at DivInc, a nonprofit accelerator focused on diverse founders. Their first sportstech cohort saw six of eight startups go on to raise venture funding. "It showed me what was

possible when you provide people access to knowledge, capital, and networks,” he says. “And I realized the problem I wanted to solve.”

Creating Access Through The Collectiv

Ashley had spent years in rooms with superstar athletes and executives. He noticed a troubling pattern – most of the people helping to build startups and brands weren’t getting equity. “I saw it over and over,” he says. “People driving innovation but not participating in the upside.” That became the spark for The Collectiv – a venture fund built to democratize access to premier investment opportunities in the sports industry. The fund isn’t just for Top Tier Pros or Hall of Famers – it’s built for the people working across the sports ecosystem: C-Suites, VP/SVPs, heads of innovation & strategy, product managers, growth marketers, and more. “I’ve been on the other side of not knowing what I didn’t know,” he says. “I never want others to miss opportunities because of that.”

Leadership Lessons from the Best

Across his 20-year career, Ashley has learned from legends – Ray Lewis, LaDainian Tomlinson, and coaching greats like Kelvin Sampson. He’s taken pieces from each. “Ray showed me how to lead with an exceptional work ethic, dedication, and passion. Coach Sampson demanded excellence every day in your craft. LT was quiet, but he led with actions more than words,” he says. Now, as a leader, Ashley prizes emotional intelligence, accountability, and work ethic over pedigree. “I don’t care what school you went to,” he says. “What’s your why? Are you coachable? Do you have that dog in you?”

If he could go back, Ashley would give his younger self a simple message: Be comfortable being uncomfortable. “All of my biggest growth came from the pivots,” he says. “Those moments where you step into the unknown? That’s where the breakthroughs happen.”



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