

Exhibit 16

Exclusive: Aaron Rodgers — in his own words — on his ‘journey of self-actualization,’ why he’s kinder now, and why he’s not worried about how many more Super Bowl chances he has left

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SPORTS

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GREEN BAY — The “journey of self-actualization,” as Aaron Rodgers has taken to calling it, did not begin in the mountains of Peru.

That offseason trip, to see the ancient ruins of Machu Picchu, was crucial, to be sure. But the Green Bay Packers quarterback had started down this path even before he ascended the legendary mountains, before his Argo-esque last-minute escape as the country went into lockdown amid the rapidly spreading COVID-19 pandemic.

The journey continued as he arrived back home in southern California, carrying him through a trip to the pantry to pour himself a tall glass of tequila the night of the NFL draft, through a 40-minute phone call with reporters a few days later from the parking lot of a suburban Los Angeles Bed Bath & Beyond that he looks back on as a test of his commitment to meaningful change, through an offseason program during which he bonded with his coaches and achieved a thorough understanding of the Packers' redeveloped offensive scheme, through a topsy-turvy, protocol-restricted uncertain regular season during which he found his voice and rediscovered his greatness, through a year in which he managed to grow closer to his teammates while socially distanced from them.

And it has all led the 37-year-old Rodgers here, to the precipice of Super Bowl LV, set to earn a return trip to the biggest game in American sports a decade removed from leading the 2010 Packers to the Super Bowl XLV title.

"I think he's done an amazing job with the amount of attention and scrutiny that he's always under because people expect so much. He's delivered, and it's nothing short of what I expected from him," said veteran tight end Mercedes Lewis, who has grown into one of Rodgers' closest friends and confidantes. "He's delivered in the locker room, he's delivered in the film room, he's there as a mentor to the younger guys. I just think he's at a point to where he's at such peace. And it's been really good to see. I'm proud of him."

So if Rodgers has seemed different while putting together what could be a third NFL MVP season this year, well, that's because he is. He is addressing the full team more than he ever did before, which has come as a surprise to even him. He is no longer so demonstrative on the field toward receivers who make mistakes, which he insists is an offshoot of his altered attitude and not an intentional act. He is not thinking about his football future, which is more uncertain than ever before following the team's decision to trade up in the first round of the 2020 draft and choose his heir apparent, Jordan Love.

"I don't want to say night and day. That's probably a little bit extreme," said defensive coordinator Mike Pettine, who in three years on the Packers staff has fostered a close relationship with Rodgers despite coaching on the opposite side of the ball. "But just from the standpoint of being engaged, you can tell. He's enthusiastic and excited about what we're doing, and just how much he has stepped forward and spoken to the team, I just can't tell you how great that's been to hear.

So how did Rodgers get here? As he drove home from Lambeau Field late last week, done with the day's game-planning for Sunday's NFC Championship Game against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Rodgers spoke for 20 minutes about his journey, a conversation that was largely one-sided and rarely interrupted — except by a stop for gasoline.

He spoke of that trip to Peru, of his brutally honest approach to that conference call with reporters several days after Love was selected, about no longer worrying about having his long-standing desire to play his entire career in Green Bay cast into doubt.

In his own words

Here is what Rodgers said that evening, with minimal editing for clarity.

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with saying it is a journey of self-actualization. I think we’re all on that journey, whether we acknowledge it or not. Those are the words I would probably use. I think it started years ago, but I think this offseason especially, there were just a few moments that were really meaningful to me.

“My trip to Peru, although it got cut short, was very meaningful to me — and being able to have that mountaintop experience, which was really a day. We got to Mount Machu Picchu at like 7 in the morning. The ruins are kind of the base level, and some people choose to climb Mount Machu Picchu, some choose to climb Huayna Picchu, which is the other mountain that overlooks the ruins. We had a guide who was of Incan descent, and he was taking us on a slow, slow journey up the hill. That was a really special moment for me, just the whole day. It was a very quiet day. The guide, he stressed and asked for not a lot of conversation, for us to just kind of enjoy the sights and views and nature.

“A lot of things that happened on that trip stuck with me, and it really resonated with the journey I was on in my own self-actualization. So, when I came back, I just knew I couldn’t be the same. That’s why everything that happened was very important to my own journey — because it tested the things that I was learning and working on and wanted to be pillars of my personality and character. And I think the first test of that was really getting on the phone with you guys a couple days after the draft, and having that conversation and being able to start the open dialogue.

“I think if you would go back and look at what I said, it was a lot of the things that I’ve been saying all along (since). It wasn’t contrived answers, it wasn’t a cookie-cutter explanation. It was real. Raw. I think that’s kind of been a mantra of mine this year. For so long I felt that there were ways in which I could control narratives or get my message out — on Wednesdays at my locker, or when we did our show (on ESPN Wisconsin) — and I think in this whole process, what I’ve just learned is that the easiest thing to do is just tell the truth all the time.

“I think that’s why it’s so startling or different to people and people talk about how I’ve been different this year — you just don’t see a lot of people or athletes who talk like this. And maybe more of them should, I don’t know. But a lot of the hammering in of these lessons that I was learning about all got kind of nailed home on that trip to Peru.

"I think first and foremost, it's the perspective that has definitely been adjusted. There's just a greater appreciation, I think, of my everyday life. I talk a lot about 'an attitude of gratitude,' and that's something that really means a lot to me. It's kind of rooted in the understanding that things aren't happening to you, they're just happening. And when you change that perspective just slightly, you take out the opportunity for the 'victim mentality' to set in, which is associated with the excuses, the woe-is-me, a lot of I-statements. I've really tried to eliminate that mindset from my life.

"So, when things happen, they just happen. They weren't happening to me. They were just things that were happening, and what I can control is my own reactions and my own emotions. But just deal with those emotions — not letting them stew, or letting that resentment build up. Instead, it was just dealing with them in the moment and realizing it was just happenstance or circumstance. And I think it's allowed me to really enjoy everything a little bit more and to have more of an acute awareness of all the responsibilities that I have.

"Which, it's funny, because I've never really been a big rah-rah guy, a big speech guy. And now, I'm kind of the speech guy on the team. Which is so strange — because that's never been my personality. But it just has naturally given me the opportunity this year to share some of that wisdom and my teammates. I don't know if what I'm saying or even some of what I'm saying is going to resonate with every teammate, but what I'm talking about — positivity, manifestation, mindfulness, finding the time to be quiet and visualizing things — at some point, it's going to stick with guys, and I don't have to be the one to hammer that home. Everybody's on their own journey. I think it has freed me up to just focus on my own journey and enjoy all the things that come with it.

"My on-field demeanor, I don't think it's been a conscious effort. I really don't. Because it just doesn't vibe with the authenticity that I'm trying to live my life with. I really think it's been more of an approach to be as kind as possible and focusing on kindness — combined with integrity. Integrity is not just the way you live your life, in my opinion. It's also the way that you speak, it's your communication style. And when I combine having a stronger sense of integrity with my communication, with kindness, I feel like that's allowed me to just relax a little more, just to be more calm. Things don't rile me up the way they used to.

'A different groove'

"Obviously, we're in a different groove offensively, and A.J. (Hawk) joked about it the other day (on The Pat McAfee Show). He said, 'If you weren't winning, would we still be talking about this?' And my answer is, 'Yes.' Because again, the things that I'm talking about have really nothing to do with Xs and Os and winning. It's about a way of living your life more than it is about winning. And so, I think as I've refocused on pairing integrity and kindness together, things that maybe used to bother me on the field a little more just don't bother me the same way. I still feel like I'm fiercely competitive, but I'm not as maybe prone to allowing frustration to seep in. I just try to maybe deal with it a little differently.

“To me, it has nothing to do with winning. It’s just a way different, it’s a different mindset, a different way of viewing everything. And when the perspective has changed for me, the enjoyment of things has probably gone up.

“I’ve always been a very nostalgic person, and nostalgia obviously has to do with looking backwards. I have never really been a very nervous person about the future. I understand the questions this week about, ‘Are you going to be able to get back here? Do you look at it that way?’ And I hadn’t actually thought about a response until I was asked that question. Really, the adjustment in perspective, all the things I’ve talked about, the last part is about being present. And when you’re present, and you’re focused on being present in the moment, in your body, it’s allowed me to not have any of those worries about the future or too many thoughts about the past.

“Now, I’m still a nostalgic person, and I do have a lot of appreciation and gratitude for those things. But I think you look at it differently. You don’t look at it as, those are your last opportunities. You just look at it as, this is an opportunity — an opportunity. Instead of, ‘This could be my last opportunity.’ Or, ‘This could be my last time in Green Bay. Who knows?’

“I don’t know what the future’s going to hold, but I haven’t been spending time worrying about it. I’ve come to a real good peace about it — and it’s allowed me to just stay present and stay in my body and enjoy all these little things that come with it.”

Williams elevated to active roster

The Packers have elevated recent cornerback acquisition Tramon Williams to their active roster for Sunday's NFC championship game with Tampa Bay.

The move Saturday comes two days after the Packers announced they had signed Williams to their practice squad. The 37-year-old Williams was waived by the Baltimore Ravens on Monday, two days after their 17-3 AFC divisional playoff loss to the Buffalo Bills.

Williams previously played for the Packers from 2007-14 and 2018-19.

Green Bay may need some extra depth in the secondary due to the uncertain status of starting cornerback Kevin King, who didn't practice Friday because of a back injury. Green Bay's injury report Friday listed King as questionable.

The Packers also elevated defensive lineman Brian Price and cornerback KeiVarae Russell from the practice squad to the active roster for game day. In other moves, they signed punter Ryan Winslow to the practice squad and released running back Dexter Williams from the practice squad.

Photos: Packers' 2020 season so far in pictures

