Alum brings rugby mindset to new consulting program

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George Henderson, second from right, with students in the Freeman School's Consulting EDGE program.

When George Henderson looks back on his career, everything — the highs and lows, the wins and losses — leads back to rugby.

“Growing up, I'd always loved sports,” says Henderson, a 1996 graduate with a Master of Business Administration from the Freeman School of Business. But when he went to school in Shreveport, he says, “I completely fell in love with rugby in particular.”

Henderson was on his way to a promising playing career when his dreams came to a crashing halt: In one fell swoop, he tore his collateral ligament, ripped his anterior cruciate ligament, and ruptured his menisci. Worse than the pain was the news from

his doctor that he would likely walk with a cane for the rest of his life.

But fate intervened, offering Henderson a way to remain involved in the sport and ultimately develop the skills that would take him to the top of the consulting world.

“My old team came to me and asked me to be their coach,” he says. “That invitation gave me a reason to take the anger I felt about my injury and channel it into a purpose.

“In the first game I was coaching, the players immediately mishandled the ball and were playing terribly,” he recalls. “My first instinct was to get in there and fix it. My second instinct was to get mad and yell at them. Then, I had an epiphany. I looked down at this white line on the field. I was on one side, and the team was on the other, and I realized that from that moment on, anything I would achieve in this life would be from the accomplishments of others.”

So began a long career in coaching and consulting, which, Henderson says, are really one and the same.

Though he wasn’t able to play himself, Henderson made his mark as a coach. He led the U.S. Women’s Rugby Team, launched “Strategic Rugby Magazine,” coached the Eastern U.S. Men’s Developmental Team, served as Chairman of the Selectors for the East Coast, and founded the Rugby Business Executives Association. In 2024, he was inducted into the New Orleans Rugby Hall of Fame in recognition of his service to the sport. Along the way, he channeled sports leadership lessons into business, launching his own boutique consulting firm and going on to work for Deloitte’s organizational transformation practice.

Henderson says that in addition to rugby, the Freeman School’s Executive MBA program gave him the tools to achieve that career success.

“I knew returning to school would be a big commitment,” he says. “And it was. The EMBA program was one of the most intense things I did in my entire life.”

One of his first assignments? Setting up an email account in an emerging technology called “the internet.”

“It took me three days,” he says. “You had to write the code. You had to contact the help desk. It was an applied lesson, and it took a while to figure it out.”

After graduating from the EMBA program, Henderson headed West, landing in San Francisco, where he began subcontracting work for a consulting firm. It was there that he built his signature consulting methodology, which focuses on employee empowerment and teamwork.

“I challenge my clients to invest in their workers’ futures so that those workers have hope and a reason to believe in their organization,” he says.

Over the past 25 years, Henderson has led over 40 large-scale transformations, delivering $2.7 billion in value at 11:1 return on investment. He’s also served as a consultant for dozens of companies, including Fortune 500 firms and the Australian army.

And now he’s bringing those lessons into Freeman School classrooms, as managing director of Consulting EDGE, Freeman’s signature professional development program for students interested in consulting careers.

“Through the program, we’re putting in place new systems that I didn’t have when I was a student,” Henderson says. “We’re engaging alumni, getting them to offer advice and create industry pipelines for students.”

Much of the Consulting EDGE program focuses on experiential learning, giving students the chance to work on projects and deliver real results to clients. One of their first tasks was advising Henderson and other Freeman staff on how to create the Consulting EDGE program itself.

“We threw the students into a project where they were building the kind of consulting program they want to take part in,” he says.

EDGE’s three-pillar structure includes a badge program, where students complete tasks to achieve the ranks of analyst, consultant, and senior consultant, an eminence program that helps them develop their executive presence and gain industry insights, and a focus on networking with alumni and industry experts.

The EDGE program has exceeded all expectations in its first semester, with more than 40 students enrolled, around 750 alumni introductions, and one-of-a-kind programming in a Category of One.

Henderson hopes the Consulting EDGE program will help transform students into confident self-starters who can hit the ground running in consulting.

“Consulting is not just about ticking the boxes, turning work in and making a good grade,” he says. “It’s about being a problem solver who’s able to find a way forward and ultimately bring a solution for a company.”

For Henderson, this kind of work is nothing new.

“My entire life has been about building successful teams,” he says. “It’s about seeing the best in people, bringing that out and then challenging them to do things that they didn’t think were possible.

“It’s rugby applied. It’s figuring out how to win as a team, whether we’re a sports team or a business team, and inspiring people in the process.”