Profiles in Success: Michael Schreiber

Seeing What Others Don’t: From Having To Leave the Classroom to Read to Building a Billion-Dollar Company

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Long before Michael Schreiber founded Playfly Sports, there was one moment that made him feel different from everyone else.

Every day in second grade, when it was time for reading, Michael would quietly leave his classroom. He hadn't yet been diagnosed with dyslexia. He only knew he was "special"—a word that, at seven years old, didn't feel like a compliment.

His school placed him in a classroom with the children of Japanese engineers who had recently relocated to Baltimore. They were learning English. Michael was essentially learning to read all over again.

They couldn't easily communicate. But they taught him origami."I became an amazing origami folder," he laughs.

At the same time, his teachers noticed something equally important: while reading was difficult, math came effortlessly. Since he was already moving between classrooms, they began sending him to the grade above for mathematics.

For the first time, Michael experienced two very different realities at once. He struggled in one subject while excelling beyond his grade level in another.

It became the first clue that being different didn't mean being less capable.

After extensive testing, Michael's parents learned he had dyslexia alongside above-average intelligence—a combination that wasn't well understood in the early 1980s. They enrolled him in a small experimental school outside Baltimore built specifically for students with learning differences. The school recommended he repeat fourth grade.

But something much more important happened there. Instead of focusing only on what students couldn't do, the school helped them discover what they could.

Alongside reading and math, Michael studied engineering, woodworking, drama, and nature science. He built projects with his hands. He performed in plays. He solved problems."The school took that special nature and let you excel in the things you were good at," he says. "It built confidence. I started realizing, 'Wait a minute... I'm really good at stuff.'"

That confidence changed everything.

When it came time for high school, several private schools refused to accept students from his specialized elementary school. Michael remembers feeling like they were viewed as "damaged goods."

He enrolled elsewhere, and four years later, he graduated as valedictorian.

It was an early lesson he would carry for the rest of his life: someone else's first assessment doesn't have to become your final outcome.

Michael never fit neatly into one group. He played sports. Worked on the yearbook. Wrote for the newspaper. Moved comfortably among different social circles.

Because he wasn't always automatically included, he developed another lifelong habit: creating opportunities instead of waiting for them.

He made the phone call. He introduced himself. He found a seat at the table.

That instinct followed him to college, where he explored photography, architecture, engineering, art, and film before settling on business because, as he saw it, business could open doors to almost any industry.

He became a yearbook editor, photographed sporting events, and even created an organization connecting Jewish students across fraternities and sororities.

Only years later did he recognize entrepreneurship had always been part of his story. One side of his family had built a grocery-store chain in Baltimore. His maternal grandfather started by reselling used furniture behind a convenience store before growing it into a successful furniture business.

Michael had inherited the instinct to build long before he ever called himself an entrepreneur.

His first job after college was consulting in Chicago. Within two years, he left for a technology startup digitizing the plastics marketplace.

The timing couldn't have been more dramatic. The company exploded from roughly 30 employees to 180. At one point, it reportedly received a $250 million acquisition offer. The founders declined, believing they were headed toward an IPO.

Then the dot-com bubble burst.

At just 23 years old, Michael experienced nearly every stage of entrepreneurship in rapid succession: explosive growth, soaring valuations, difficult decisions, and painful contraction. Rather than discouraging him, it taught him how quickly businesses can be built—and how quickly markets can change.

After earning his MBA from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, an unexpected encounter with former GE CEO Jack Welch opened the door to GE's prestigious leadership program and eventually NBC.

At NBC, Michael developed a reputation for thinking differently. Whenever the company faced a problem without an obvious solution—digital advertising, online video, emerging technology—the answer became: "Ask Mike."

He gravitated toward areas where no playbook existed.

He worked on the team helping create a legitimate digital alternative to video piracy—an effort that ultimately contributed to Hulu. Later, he helped develop other digital media businesses, including an early subscription-video platform that preceded Peacock.

Ironically, success delayed his entrepreneurial leap."I always said I wish I got fired in my first 15 years," he jokes. "I had all these business plans, but I kept getting good jobs."

Eventually, Michael made the leap. He joined a small team building a new cable media company backed by private equity. The decision required a significant sacrifice. He accepted roughly one-third of his previous compensation for the opportunity to build something from scratch.

Just 13 months later, after assembling the company and completing acquisitions, the business went public. He never looked back.

Michael later helped launch 76 Capital before founding Playfly Sports. Playfly represented the purest version of everything he'd learned. It began with an idea. Relationships. A willingness to ask people to believe in a future that didn't yet exist.

Today, Playfly has grown to approximately 1,300 employees and roughly $1.2 billion in annual revenue, partnering with professional sports organizations and many of the nation's leading college athletic departments.

Michael served as CEO during Playfly's first four years before transitioning to chairman—a move that reflected another important insight about himself. He's happiest creating what's next. He loves ideas, he loves change, he even enjoys the uncertainty that comes with building something no one has built before.

His advice to emerging leaders is simple: “Always say yes before no. You never know who you're going to meet, what you're going to learn, or how something might pivot."

He believes organizations should encourage unconventional thinking rather than dismiss it. “The crazy ideas sometimes lead to the best outcomes," he says. "Creativity isn't only art. Creativity is problem-solving."

Looking back, it's remarkable how much of Michael's life traces back to that second-grade classroom. A little boy who struggled to read learned origami from classmates who didn't speak his language.

Teachers noticed his strengths before he fully understood them himself. Someone gave him permission to excel where he naturally excelled.

Today, Michael asks his own children a simple question before bed: "Tell me five things you're good at."

It's a small question with a powerful purpose, because confidence is often built long before success becomes visible.

The child once labeled "special" eventually discovered what that word truly meant. He didn't see the world the way everyone else did. And that difference became his greatest advantage—allowing him to build what others couldn't yet imagine.

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