

Posted on Fri, Jun. 23, 2006

Hood's camp hard work

There were speeches about the value of hard work, about toughness and tenacity, about the importance of not quitting.

Better yet, there were living, breathing, football-tossing, in-the-flesh examples who were capable of reinforcing those messages without saying a single word.

This is why the two-year-old Rod Hood Football Camp kept kids ages 8-18 running, smiling and sweating through a sweltering Thursday afternoon that would have allowed you to cook an inch-thick ribeye well-done on the sidewalk within two minutes.

At midfield in A.J. McClung Memorial Stadium, Washington Redskins backup quarterback Jason Campbell threw spirals to high school kids in 7-on-7 drills. A few feet away, Minnesota Vikings defensive tackle Spencer Johnson coached middle-schoolers on proper fundamentals.

And then there was the camp director, Rod Hood, the Philadelphia Eagles cornerback who played at Carver High School and Auburn University. He buzzed around the whole place, making sure everybody was drinking enough water and seeing if 280-some campers were learning as much as possible.

Hood started his camp last year, in partnership with the United Way and a slew of corporate sponsors, because he wanted to maintain a connection with this community. He remembers the impact former Carver players-turned-NFL stars Nate Odomes and Brentson Buckner had on him as a teenager when they came home for camps and clinics.

"They gave back and I want to give back," said Hood, who will enter his fourth season with the Eagles. "I know a lot of kids want to play this game, but I don't want to just teach football. I want to teach life experience."

That's why Hood and his NFL friends have spent the first two sessions of the three-day camp playing up the value of sportsmanship and work ethic more so than the art of reading two-deep zone coverage.

The abilities to pass block, make a catch over the middle while wearing the free safety like Superman's cape or run a 4.4 40-yard dash fade over time. The qualities that Hood, Johnson and Campbell emphasized, everything from respecting your elders to being a good listener, hold the power of permanence.

"I remember going to Steve McNair's camp when I was 15 or 16," said Campbell, an Auburn teammate of Hood and Johnson. "I looked up to him as a role model. Now the tables have turned and kids are looking up to us.

"The little things (McNair) told me about respect, education and the way you treat people around you, those were the key things that stood out for me. It's not about getting caught up in the fame. It's about how you act and carry yourself."

With any luck, those messages will have an impact on this year's campers as much as they did a younger Campbell. If nothing else, Hood's camp provides a dream incubator for any child who has ever been picked last in P.E. class or told he was too (fill-in-the-blank) short, slow, skinny or weak to be a good football player.

All they had to do was look at the guys doing the instructing to see that first impressions aren't always correct.

Hood received limited recruiting interest coming out of Carver, walked on at Auburn and eventually earned a scholarship. An NFL career seemed like a longshot, but Hood made the Eagles as an undrafted free agent in 2003 and has been on the field ever since.

Johnson went undrafted in 2004 after a solid career at Auburn, but emerged from a pile of free agent candidates to make the team and started seven games as a rookie.

Then there's Campbell, a prized recruit who didn't gain the full trust of Auburn fans or emerge as a pro prospect until leading the Tigers to a 13-0 record as a senior. He won the starting job, lost it and regained it during the course of his career and typically carried an approval rating that no politician would want, but remained level-headed and confident throughout.

"I took a lot of heat I shouldn't have, but you bite your tongue in those situations and keep pressing on," he said.

And, when everything seems to be spiraling into chaos, you trust in what you can control.

"Just hard work, staying with it and having the right mentality," Johnson said. "Having the goal and the dream and not letting anything stop you from doing it."

"I want to teach them hard work," Hood said. "That's what got me to the next level."

And that provides some insight into why Hood plans to keep coming back and preaching the gospel of sweat to pre-teens and

high-schoolers.

He appreciates where football has taken him, but he wants his campers to understand the difficulty of the journey.

© 2006 Ledger-Enquirer and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.ledgerenquirer.com>