

James Conner Accepts Disney Sports Spirit Award in Moving Ceremony at College Football Awards

Junior running back overcomes cancer to make “miracle” return to football and regain ACC rushing stardom

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. (Dec. 9, 2016) — In a moving and emotional ceremony, University of Pittsburgh running back James Conner accepted the 2016 Disney Sports Spirit Award, an honor he received for returning to the field this season as one of the top ACC running backs after a six-month battle with Hodgkin's lymphoma.

The award is given annually to college football's most inspirational figure. Disney Sports Vice President Faron Kelley, joined by ESPN's Holly Rowe and Shelley Smith (who faced public battles with cancer themselves) presented the prestigious award to Conner at *The Home Depot College Football Awards* on Dec. 8 at the College Football Hall of Fame in Atlanta, Ga.

Fighting back tears, Conner accepted the award and dedicated it to the millions of people around the country who are undergoing their own fight against cancer.

"With that cancer, it don't care if you're black or white," Conner said during the awards show. "It comes, and it comes hard. ... There's people fighting and they don't get this, they don't receive any awards if they win and when they win, and so this is for all of us."

After winning the 2014 ACC Player of the Year Award, Conner was poised to have another stellar season in 2015. But in the season-opener against Youngstown State, Conner suffered a season-ending knee injury that might have just saved his life. During his recovery in late November 2015, X-rays revealed that he had a mass growing on top of his heart, which doctors diagnosed as Hodgkin's lymphoma.

During the next six months, Conner would undergo grueling chemotherapy treatments every two weeks that left him exhausted and sick. However, he didn't endure it passively, but rather with the same tenacity and aggressiveness that once struck fear in the hearts of defenders during games. After treatments and wearing a surgical mask to prevent infection, he would sometimes work out at the gym. Other times he would join the team's practice, even the ones at 4:30 a.m. Tattooed on his chest are the words "Dream Believe Achieve."

During the awards ceremony, Rowe talked about the impact Conner's story had on her own recovery. After having a malignant tumor removed in February, Rowe described the moment as "one of the lowest points of my life." She said she lay on the ground in tears, unable to get past the side effects of her treatment. But then she saw a short video clip of Conner doing team workouts in between rounds of chemotherapy.

Inspired by Conner, Rowe said she got off the floor and walked three miles on the treadmill.

“Because of James Conner,” Rowe said. “Because he showed me what strength looks like.”

Two weeks after his last chemotherapy treatment earlier this year in May, Conner was declared cancer-free. Then this fall, he made an emotional and triumphant return to the field, scoring two touchdowns to lead Pittsburgh to a season-opening win. He has gone on to another standout season, rushing for more than 1,000 yards and setting the ACC record for career touchdowns (53). His coaches have called his return to the game a “miracle.”

“Faced with the same debilitating circumstances, there probably aren’t many people who would ignore the fear that cancer creates and stand up so defiantly to such a life-threatening diagnosis,” said Kelley. “It takes a rare person with an indomitable spirit, which is why he is the ideal choice for our Disney Sports Spirit Award.”

Conner becomes the 21th recipient of the award, joining past honorees Hank Goff (2015), Bob Stoops and Sterling Shepard (2014), Devon Walker (2013), Nate Boyer (2012), Carson Tinker and the University of Alabama (2011), D.J. Williams (2010), Mark Herzlich (2009) and Tim Tebow (2008), among others. The award was first given in 1996 to Rossville High School’s Daniel Huffman.