

Concordia University-St. Paul's Hank Goff Named 2015 Disney Sports Spirit Award Winner

Senior defensive lineman and veteran Marine credits football with helping him cope with life after combat

Concordia University-St. Paul defensive lineman Hank Goff, who is using football to help him overcome post-traumatic stress disorder stemming from an Afghanistan combat tour in the U.S. Marines, is this year's Disney Sports Spirit Award recipient. Goff will accept the coveted award, given annually by Disney Sports to college football's most inspirational figure, at The Home Depot College Football Awards on Dec. 10 at the College Football Hall of Fame in Atlanta.

After a nine-month combat stint in Afghanistan in April 2008, Goff struggled with post-combat trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, which led to depression and excessive drinking. It was a dark period during which Goff said he felt like a monster. Goff credits football with helping him find his way back to the light. Today, at the advanced football age of 28, Goff has become a stellar Division II football player (this year, he was a preseason second-team All-American) who has begun to counsel fellow veterans coping with similar post-war challenges.

"I'm honored to receive this prestigious award," Goff said. "An award and recognition of this magnitude allows me to reach many thousands of vets and show that there is hope and you just have to find what makes you happy. I don't view awards like this as possible without support from my girlfriend, mother, teammates and coaches, and I'm looking forward to expanding my role in veterans' advocacy."

Before he made his way to Concordia-St. Paul, Goff was an All-State high school football standout from Minnetonka, Minn. In 2005, he was on his way to being in the starting lineup for South Dakota State. By 2006, however, he was a college dropout. Knowing he needed to get his life together, he enlisted in the Marine Corps in August 2007. He served four years, including a nine-month tour in the Helmand province of Afghanistan.

As part of the "War Dogs" (2nd battalion, 7th Marines Echo Company), Goff saw many of his fellow soldiers suffer — 20 men lost their lives in combat and another 160 were wounded, including several with permanent injuries. Within a year of returning to civilian life, four of the soldiers who served with Goff committed suicide in the same month.

After that, everything changed for Goff. He returned to school and football in 2013, and honors the memory of fallen Marines by writing their names on his wrist tape before each game.

"With Hank's background and experiences, he's been a one-of-a-kind leader for this program," Concordia-St. Paul interim head coach Derek Branch said. "He has brought in a perspective to

show our younger players that life just ain't all that hard right now and football is fun. He truly enjoys every second of his return to college football, and doesn't take a second for granted."

While Goff embraces football in his mental recovery, he remembers dozens of other fellow Marines in his company

who could not cope with civilian life after their experiences in combat. His own experience and the memories of fallen comrades has led Goff to start working with 22 Too Many, a veterans' suicide prevention and awareness group.

"Goff exemplifies everything the Disney Sports Spirit Award stands for, particularly his resilience in avoiding the worst pitfalls of PTSD and using football to return himself to being an athletic success and, more importantly, a productive citizen," said Faron Kelley, director of sports marketing strategy for Disney Sports. "Many veterans are still struggling to manage life after war, and Goff's dedication to supporting them is inspiring."

Kelley will present the award during The Home Depot 25th Anniversary College Football Awards on Dec. 10, airing on ESPN at 7 p.m. EST. The show – hosted by ESPN's Chris Fowler; and joined by Lee Corso, Kirk Herbstreit, Desmond Howard, Samantha Ponder and Tom Rinaldi – will originate for the first time from the College Football Hall of Fame in Atlanta.

The Red Carpet Special at the Home Depot College Football Awards — hosted by Ponder, Rinaldi and Danny Kanell — will air at 6 p.m. EST on ESPNU. Championship Drive: CFB Playoff Preview — hosted by Chris Cotter; and joined by Kanell, David Pollack and Joey Galloway — will follow the awards show at 9 p.m. EST on ESPN.

Goff becomes the 20th recipient of the award, joining past honorees 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.

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Media Note: Media interested in attending The Home Depot College Football Awards Show can apply for credentials by emailing Elizabeth McCollum at elizabethm@bzapr.com.