

University of Pittsburgh Running Back James Conner Honored with 2016 Disney Sports Spirit Award

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

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. (Nov. 21, 2016) – University of Pittsburgh running back James Conner shook off the most formidable would-be tackler he’s ever encountered – cancer – and ran back into the college football spotlight this season, earning him the coveted 2016 Disney Sports Spirit Award.

The award is given annually to college football’s most inspirational figure. Disney Sports Vice President Faron Kelley will present the prestigious award to Conner at *The Home Depot College Football Awards* on Dec. 8 at the College Football Hall of Fame in Atlanta.

“I am incredibly humbled by this recognition, especially when I see the unbelievable list of people who are past recipients of the Disney Sports Spirit Award,” Conner said. “A year ago at this time, I was just beginning my battle against cancer. Being able to stand here today, cancer free, and accept this honor is a blessing beyond words. I’ve been fortunate to have so many wonderful people — Dr. Stanley Marks, Coach Narduzzi, my teammates and countless others — support me every step of the way.

“To those who are fighting their own personal battle, I want them to always remember that fear is a choice. You don’t have to fear cancer. I defeated it and I know you can, too.”

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.”

Two weeks after his last chemotherapy treatment earlier this year in May, he 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 nearly 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.”

Kelley will present the award during ***The Home Depot College Football Awards on Dec. 8***, 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 from the College Football Hall of Fame and Chick-fil-A Fan Experience in Atlanta.

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

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.

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