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Growing up in St. Paul, MN., Casey O'Brien just wanted to play football and he wasn't going to let anything stop him – not even four battles with cancer. His relentless pursuit of his athletic dreams and the uplifting hope he has given to countless other cancer patients while playing football for the University of Minnesota has earned him the 2019 Disney Spirit Award.

O'Brien was presented with the coveted award – given annually by Disney Sports to college football's most inspirational player, coach, team or figure – by Disney Sports Vice President Faron Kelley at **The Home Depot College Football Awards** on Dec. 12. The awards show, hosted by ESPN's Chris Fowler, Lee Corso, Kirk Herbstreit, Desmond Howard, Maria Taylor and Tom Rinaldi, was televised live on ESPN from the Chick-fil-A College Football Hall of Fame in Atlanta.

"I'm thankful for every day that we get to spend together as a family – the good ones and the bad ones – because I know that tomorrow is never promised," O'Brien said during a speech earlier this year. "All the tests, scans, blood work, chemotherapy, loss of hair and everything else that happens when you fight cancer have been worth it."

O'Brien, 20, first encountered cancer as a high school freshman when pain in his left knee was diagnosed as osteosarcoma, a rare form of bone cancer. Doctors told him football was no longer in his future. Instead, he was looking at nearly 300 nights in a hospital, 14 surgeries and countless rounds of chemotherapy.

Each time he thought he had beat the cancer only to have it return again, O'Brien never lost hope. Instead, he clung to the words of former Minnesota player Eric Decker, who told him to "stay strong and never give up; you have the whole world behind you."

Indeed, O'Brien kept the faith when no collegiate football program offered him a roster spot – except his home state school Minnesota. And he held onto hope when he went more than two years without once playing in a college game. His perseverance finally paid off last month when he was sent into Minnesota's game against Rutgers, holding on an extra point.

The kick, of course, was good.

“He’s relentless. His response mechanism for what has happen to him is not really, technically human,” Minnesota Head Coach told ESPN’s *College GameDay*.

Fleck is just one of a growing legion of fans across the nation who are inspired by O’Brien, who spends countless hours of his personal time visiting young cancer patients, providing the kind of compassion and hope that can uplift the heaviest of little hearts.

“Casey’s story perfectly embodies the true essence of the Disney Spirit Award,” Kelley said. “His perseverance and unrelenting will to pursue his dreams are matched only by his compassionate drive to touch the lives of other young cancer patients. We simply couldn’t be more proud to present this year’s award to him.”

O’Brien joined 23 past honorees, including Tyler Trent (Purdue University, 2018), the Kinnick Wave (University of Iowa, 2017), James Conner (University of Pittsburgh, 2016), Hank Goff (Concordia-St. Paul University, 2015), Bob Stoops and Sterling Shepard (University of Oklahoma, 2014), Devon Walker (Tulane University, 2013), Nate Boyer (University of Texas, 2012), Carson Tinker and the entire University of Alabama football team (2011), D.J. Williams (University of Arkansas, 2010), Mark Herzlich (Boston College, 2009) and Tim Tebow (University of Florida, 2008), among others. The award was first given in 1996 to Rossville High School’s Daniel Huffman.

About ESPN Wide World of Sports

ESPN Wide World of Sports, located at Walt Disney World Resort in Florida, is the premier site for amateur sports in the nation. The complex hosts more than 100 entertainment and sporting events each year and has accommodated 70 different sports featuring athletes from 70 different countries. Designed to provide professional, amateur and youth athletes with experiences synonymous with the names Disney and ESPN, the 220-acre facility features multiple competition venues, including 16 baseball/softball fields; a 9,500-seat ballpark; 18 multi-purpose outdoor fields for soccer, football and field hockey; three field houses for basketball, volleyball, other indoor sports; a track & field facility; and a cross country course. The sports complex also contains a professional production center which produces content for the Disney family of networks and distributes programing globally through its extensive fiber network in HD, 4K and immersive 8K. For more information, visit www.disneysportsnews.com for news releases, photos and videos. Follow us on Twitter at @ESPNWWOS and at Facebook at ESPNWWOS.

Contact:

Darrell Fry, Walt Disney World Sports Public Relations

(407) 409-1612

Darrell.fry@disney.com