



Thanksgiving takes on heightened meaning for Florence and a beloved athlete

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Sports mean a lot to Darien Woody, which has been quite evident judging by his success as both a football and track athlete at Florence High School. In football, the senior has been a standout halfback and linebacker for the Burlington County school beginning with his freshman year. In outdoor track, he was the Central Jersey, Group 1 champion last spring in both the long jump and triple jump.

“They’ve both been important to me,” he said of his two-sport participation. “Sports have shown me ways in life, and with the coaches, they’ve helped me through a lot.”



Athletic participation has also helped him grow. And for all the work Darien put into being an outstanding athlete for the Flashes, something else means much more - serving his school and his overall community.

The list of his activities is long - aside from serving on and with the Student Council and Black and Latino Student Union, he’s also a part of the National Honor Society. He also takes part in the Sigma Beta Club, and engages in volunteer activities like working at teen mom facilities, soup kitchens and senior citizen homes, where he engages with the older people in ways that go right down to playing bingo with them.



Darien with his classmate and best friend, John Paul Dunphy, who is also the Florence quarterback.

“I do a lot of volunteering,” he said. “I try to get involved with my community as much as I can. I feel you should always be involved with your community because it helps build a bond with them. And when you’re down, they’re there for you.”

There’s also a major catch to Darien’s story. Eight months ago, his father Delando, a commercial truck driver, was killed in accident on Route 95 in Maryland when a vehicle crossed the median and drove into his tractor trailer. Aside from its obvious impact on Darien and his family, which includes his mom and two brothers, the sudden tragedy also rocked the Florence community.

In the time since, the school and the town have made sure to give back to Darien, who had already given so much to them. It’s something that will be on display again on Thursday, when Florence plays host to Riverside in its Thanksgiving game.

He’ll be honored as a senior, and the game will also be the final one for Joe Frappolli, the Florence coach who is retiring after 50 years at the helm. Frappolli has coached thousands of players, and Darien has earned a special place for all that he represents.

“He’s a scholar-athlete, and very involved with school, community and his church, and a lot of different things,” Frappolli said. “He represents the good stuff about youth, and epitomizes for young people the whole idea of fair and competitive play, and really what the NJSIAA stands for.”

Darien is also a great example of what became the foundation of the Florence program during Frappolli’s long, successful tenure - that on-field performance is important, but character means even more.

“You have players, and you have people who do a little extra,” Frappolli said. “When I first started coaching, I didn’t want it to be just about playing football. I wanted it to be about giving back of yourself. We get our guys to work at our youth football camp, we’re going to deliver Thanksgiving baskets and turkeys for the needy, we’ve done Read Across America at the elementary school, and other things. it’s about teaching things that you will do for the rest of your life.”

Darien’s personality, character and involvement have made him a much appreciated member of the school community.

John Paul Dunphy is the senior quarterback for Florence, and is one of Darien’s closest friends. He’s been by his side for years, and especially over these last months.

“Darien has been my best friend since I was a little kid,” he said. “We’ve played football together since third grade, when he moved here. Darien has always been loyal to me, and has been like a brother. I always tell people that he’s not just my best friend, he’s like blood to me and is like a part of my family. He’s someone who I know will always have my back no matter what. The last year has been very tough for him, and since we’re like family, it’s been tough for all of us, but makes us want to be there for him.”

That caring feeling goes deep throughout the entire community, especially after Delando Woody passed away.

“It was very hard for everyone, because Darien is very popular and big in this town,” Dunphy said. “Everyone Darien talks to, he makes an impact on. I feel like even if you don’t personally know him, you still know him as a friendly face you see everywhere. When that happened, everybody gathered together and did whatever we could. It was hard for all of us, especially because it was so hard to see him go through that.”

One of the most heartwarming moments of the season came at Florence’s homecoming game, when Darien was voted the school’s 2023 Homecoming King.



Darien Woody in action as a running back for Florence

Photo credit: Rich Hundkey III/NJ Advance Media



Darien’s volunteer work includes working at area soup kitchens.

“That was pretty good,” Darien said. “I actually was not expecting to win it. It was surprising. I was just happy to be on the court.”

Classmate Kaycee Carnival was selected Homecoming Queen, and she was overjoyed to share in the moment with Darien.

“Darien is one of my really good friends, so having him beside me as the king was really special,” she said. “It was a huge shock to me when I heard my name called as queen, so to be able to celebrate with him meant a lot.”

The relationship between Darien and the community also makes Kaycee proud to call Florence home.

“Being such a small town allows us kids to bond and form great relationships with each other,” she said. “Florence as a community is super close, and is one big family, so being able to grow up in this town is something I’ll always cherish.”

So too will Darien, who is also busy sorting college opportunities. He’s leaning toward track as a college sport, and Rider University is a possible destination.

“I’m thinking exercise science and maybe going on as an athletic trainer or strength and conditioning coach,” he said.

But whatever he chooses, he’ll continue to give, and apply all of the other experiences he’s learned from his family, friends, coaches and the overall Florence community.

“I’ve had a lot of adversity, but I try to stay focused,” he said. “There’s definitely been a presence of people being there for me, and I appreciate that a lot. I see Florence as not just a town, but a family.”



Kaycee Carnival was named Queen and Darien was voted the King at the Florence Homecoming game.