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[COLUMN: Players open up for class](#)

By Bob Hertzell

MORGANTOWN — They wear armor, these modern day knights who play football.

Helmet, shoulder pads, rib pads, thigh pads, knee pads, face masks offer protection from the blows that are delivered in the games that they play.

Too often, though, they symbolize a different kind of protection, for they ward off not only the physical pain but they keep the inner soul hidden.

They are thought of as hard and tough, and because of their image the world is kept at an arm's length from getting inside them, but despite their chosen vehicle toward fame and, hopefully, fortune, they are not so different than anyone else.

There is the same soft underbelly, the same needs of love and companionship and guidance.

To the lucky ones, it comes from a strong family structure, but too often in the world in which we now live there is something lacking.

A void is created and our children are put at risk, teetering on the edge of falling off into a life that is heading nowhere.

So it was with a couple of West Virginia football players who told their tales Wednesday as part of Carolyn Atkins' "Athletes Speak Out" presentation that caps off her public speaking class. Safety Robert Sands and cornerback Brandon Hogan explained how their lives were pushed in the right direction by youth coaches who stepped forth at just the right time.

They grew up 1,000 miles apart, Sands in Miami, Fla.; Hogan in Manassas, Va., yet their tales in some ways were very similar.

"Whether we want to admit it or not, the people around us often influence the choices we make in life," Sands said as he began his talk. "There comes a time when we need to be responsible for ourselves; however, as a child, you need some type of guidance. Fortunately, I had several people who helped me along the way and, basically, they all were coaches.

"That's why I want to reinforce the message that coaches can have a powerful impact on players' lives."

Sands father died when he was 2 and he has no memory of him. He has two older brothers and he was closest with in age with Ronald. His mother worked long hours, so they were alone a great deal and spent a lot of time playing football and running at the park until middle school.

That was when he stopped hanging out in the park. There were fights that led to trouble at school involving Sands and his friends.

“An assistant principal called us a gang, but we were far from it. We had no name, no colors, no initiation ... we didn’t have anything you would normally associate with gangs, but we were a problem,” Sands said.

He obviously needed guidance and it came in high school when Coach Walter Frazier of Miami Carroll High entered his life.

“Both men were the most positive role models that I had in my life,” Sands said. “They emphasized that we had to be students first and athletes second. They taught us about being respectful, responsible and disciple. They wanted us to have good character and be leaders in school,” Sands explained.

He took the advice. As the recruiting letters came in, he began thinking about college.

“Looking back on my life, I wonder where I would have been if it hadn’t been for all the coaches who supported me and believed in me,” he said.

Hogan’s life story is eerily similar, enough so that one can assume they are far more common than you’d like to believe.

Hogan grew up under rough circumstances. Like Sands, his father died shortly after he was born and he never knew him.

“My mom really didn’t care of me, so I lived for a while with my aunt. She was like a mom to me and continues to support me in everything I do,” he said.

His mom came back into his life but she lived on the other side of town from where he wanted to play football, so he wound up living with his godmother and her family.

“In the 8th grade I met a man who changed my life. He ended up being my high school football coach, Steve Schultze,” he said.

The high school team at that time had lost 32 consecutive games. Schultze had just taken it over and he allowed Hogan, just an 8th grader, to be ball boy.

“He won his first game when I was the ball boy and I’ll never forget that,” Hogan said.

Schultz wanted him on the varsity the next year but his godmother, Karen Morris, thought he was too small, so he played on an undefeated freshman team.

Schultz saw talent and he saw a good kid in Hogan and backed him, sending him to camps he could not afford and working with him at every opportunity.

Hogan's senior year saw him quarterback and undefeated state championship team. He wound up getting a college scholarship at West Virginia and believes all of it was made possible by his coaches.

"I still remember those coaches and still have contact with them today. They have been my role models and they are the reason I am majoring in athletic coaching education. I want to do for others what they did for me," he said.

Email Bob Hertzal at bhertzal@hotmail.com.

- See more at: http://www.timeswv.com/bob_herzel/x681705097/COLUMN-Players-open-up-for-class#sthash.q85WCi9R.dpuf