

MSU FOOTBALL PLAYERS PASS THE BALL FORWARD AS MENTORS

By Vanessa Beeson

IN THE MIDST OF A HISTORICAL FOOT- ball season at Mississippi State University, the spotlight shines brightly on the bulldogs.

MSU athletes serve as role models on and off the field. Football players and seniors *Robert Johnson* and *Matt Wells* connect with local youth while completing their internships in the MSU School of Human Sciences.

Johnson is an intern at Sally Kate Winters Family Services in West Point, a non-profit agency that provides emergency shelter services to numerous children in need of a temporary safe haven. Matt Wells is an intern at the MSU Child Development and Family Studies Center on campus, an experiential child study laboratory sponsored by the School of Human Sciences for students majoring in Human Development and Family Studies. The facility serves children ages six weeks to five years.

“Student athletes have a considerable amount of pressure to perform on the field and in the classroom,” said Michael Newman, professor and director for the School

of Human Sciences. “Robert and Matt are keenly focused on their goals and work long hours to achieve those goals. It takes a considerable measure of perseverance, discipline, and drive and each of them possess these attributes.”

Both Johnson and Wells credit their desire to mentor young people as the reason behind their individual academic pursuits. Each of them had a mentor who helped shape their lives.

ROBERT JOHNSON

Johnson said his mother is his mentor.

“My mom was the one who introduced me to football,” said Johnson. “I have always loved the sport, which I’ve played since I was six-years-old. My mom has been my mentor every step of the way.”

He grew up in Hattiesburg as a Southern Miss fan, his parents having met and married on the University of Southern Mississippi campus. His close-knit family includes ties to Starkville, where Johnson’s maternal grandmother resides.

“That sense of family has been helpful

during my time at MSU,” Johnson said. “My family has been a great support and stuck with me throughout my entire journey.”

Johnson, who also ran track and played basketball in high school, managed to find time to volunteer for the Boys and Girls Club. That volunteer work inspired him to major in human development and family studies concentrating in youth studies.

Johnson said his coursework provided insight into essential fundamentals he has applied during his internship.

“My classes prepared me for one-on-one interaction with children of all different backgrounds and developmental abilities,” Johnson said. “I now have the skillset and training to care for children ranging in age from birth to young adulthood.”

Johnson said his internship provided lessons that are helpful on the field as well. Balancing both, he said, requires plenty of discipline.

“I am at the internship six days a week and dedicated to football seven days a week so it’s important to manage my time wisely



Robert Johnson, with staff members at Sally Kate Winters Family Services, where he is completing his internship. Clockwise from the bottom left: Mary Neal, Javeneh Bruckner, Georgia Sasso, Janeisha Stevenson, Kizzy Williams, and Robert Johnson. Photo submitted.



Matt Wells with children at the MSU Child Development and Family Studies Center. Wells is completing his internship at the facility. Photo by David Ammon.

and maintain that momentum,” he said. While he has NFL aspirations, Johnson said he would enjoy a career mentoring young people.

“I’m keeping my football hopes alive but beyond that I would absolutely enjoy working in the field of childhood development,” Johnson said. “I’d also be happy coaching high school and little league.”

MATT WELLS

Wells met his mentor, Ricky Sykes, in the fifth grade. Sykes was the physical education teacher and football coach at the

middle school Wells attended while growing up in Monticello.

“I played basketball growing up. I am the second youngest of four boys and both of my older brothers were big into basketball,” Wells said. “Coach Sykes saw me as a fifth grader and talked me into playing football my seventh grade year. He encouraged me and it resulted in a full scholarship to a Division I college.”

Just as Coach Sykes had a tremendous impact on the young athlete, Wells spends time at his internship connecting with kids, hoping to pass along a love for the game.

He created a sports-themed play area at the MSU Child Development and Family Studies Center. There, children learn about MSU football in addition to MSU golf, soccer, basketball, and more.

Wells said staying focused helps him excel on the field and in academics.

“I have to stay on schedule when it comes to practice and completing my internship,” he said. “It’s critical to stay focused, prioritize, and set goals.”

While Wells is focused on professional football first in his future career aspirations, he said he would love to coach and counsel

youth at the high school level someday.

“My goal is to serve as a positive role model in order to improve the lives of young people I meet,” he said.

The School of Human Sciences in MSU’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences offers a degree in human sciences with a concentration in human development and family studies and emphasis areas in child studies, youth studies, family studies, and family and consumer sciences teacher education.



Photo by Russ Houston.

JOSH ROBINSON ON CALS TEAM

Robert Johnson and Matt Wells aren’t the only bulldogs pursuing degrees in human sciences. One MSU bulldog known for his prowess on the football field is Josh Robinson. As a junior, Robinson has also made a home for himself in the School of Human Sciences, in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. The player who came to be known as the “Bowling Ball” this season for ironclad tenacity in avoiding tackles on the football field demonstrates that same persistence off the field as well. Robinson is currently seeking a bachelor’s degree in human sciences with a concentration in human development and family studies and an emphasis on youth studies.