

# GENTLE GIANTS

*Football players show their tender sides at summer camp*

**FOOTBALL**

**By Anders Rotto**  
Sports Editor

Every Saturday during the fall, the school gathers to watch as the violence of football unravels for all to see. Bodies fly as people are tackled, hit and thrown in order to obtain a small object that used to be made out of pigskin. Wheaton students watch as the Thunder maul Millikin, eliminate Elmhurst and knock down North Central. But what about the other six days of the week? What are football players like off the field?

Over the summer, 10 players from the Thunder football team traveled across the country to different sites of a Christian sports camp called “Kanakuk.” Since 1926, the camp has strived to develop dynamic Christian leaders through sports training, Godly relationships, and spiritual mentoring. The participating players included junior Kody Thornburg, senior John Clark, junior Andrew Bowers, sophomore Austin Hoover, senior Tryg Veker, sophomore Erik Veker, sophomore Jerome Grey, junior Caleb Hood, sophomore Tex Ritter and sophomore Marcus Smith. While there, each player became a coach to several campers, who are referred to as “Kampers” at Kanakuk, ranging in age from kindergarten to high school depending on the group. For one to two weeks, that player aided his assigned group of nine to 10 kids in experiencing everything from archery to zip line to playing football and everything in between. If a child had a rough day, a football player was right there, ready to bend over and give the kid a hug or offer words of encouragement for the Kamper.

Thornburg was a coach at a Kanakuk camp in Branson, Mo. He took his kids on a canoe and camping trip to a nearby lake. They set up their tents and cooked sloppy joes and breakfast burritos over an open fire, which does not sound too challenging, until adding nine rambunctious and boisterous nine-year-old boys to the mix at the same time. Going off into the wilderness allowed the players and their Kampers to surround themselves with the beauty of God’s creation and shift their meditation and focus to their relationships with God.

“I really didn’t expect to get poured into as much as I did there,” Kody explained. “I expected to pour my faith into each of the kids, but I feel like they

poured right back into me in a way I didn’t anticipate.”

Many kids at camp gave their lives to Christ due to the relentless pursuit of each coach there, including the Wheaton football players. In the midst of an exhausting lifestyle in which they have to keep track of their 10 Kampers, each player got up a couple hours early every morning to train and lift in order to stay in shape for their upcoming season.

“We know that everyone else on the team is working wherever they are, and so we want to get better every day, no matter how tired we might be from working with our campers,” Kody said. Just as the players motivated and encouraged their campers, they brought this same support for each other to the weight room and the running trail.

The term “brotherhood” is a word that gets thrown around a lot in reference to the football program. This word stems from the fact that each member of the team cares for one another in ways that create deep bonds between them, similar to a brother. However, this brotherhood is by no means exclusive. For a few weeks this summer, each football player at Kanakuk allowed their assigned set of 10 rowdy, little boys into this brotherhood and made them feel a sense of belonging. They made them feel confident. But most of all, they made them feel the love of Christ. This selfless act is one that the Kanakuk Kampers will not soon forget, and it gave the Thunder players opportunities to share their faith on a daily basis — and they didn’t even have to play a game to do it.



Used with permission by Kody Thornburg  
Above: Junior Linebacker Kody Thornburg poses with his young protege Harry



Used with permission by Kody Thornburg  
Left: Front row, left to right senior Tryg Veker, sophomore Tex Ritter, senior John Clark  
Back row, left to right sophomore Austin Hoover, sophomore Marcus Smith, sophomore Jerome Grey, sophomore Hannah Hodge, junior Nikki Randall, junior Andrew Bowers, junior Kody Thornburg, sophomore Tyler Jones, sophomore Erik Veker