

Dept. of Military Affairs: Green Bay Packers players visit Wisconsin National Guard Challenge Academy cadets

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Seven members of the Green Bay Packers football team — linebacker Kingsley Enagbare, running back Aaron Jones, wide receiver Romeo Doubs, tackle Sean Rhyan, wide receiver Samori Toure, tackle Rasheed Walker and defensive lineman Johnathan Ford — visited the Wisconsin National Guard Challenge Academy campus at Fort McCoy, Wis., Oct. 18.

During their visit, players shared lunch with cadets, toured cadet living quarters and other buildings on campus, and answered questions from cadets.

The voluntary Challenge Academy program uses a structured military-style environment and state-certified teachers and counselors to reshape the lives of 16-to-18-year-olds at risk of not completing high school.

“It’s a privilege and an honor to be accepted into the Challenge Academy,” Joane Mathews, Challenge Academy director, told the visiting Packers players. “Not everybody can come — you can’t be court-ordered, you have to want to make a change, you have to want to get your high school education.”

Mathews explained that Challenge Academy uses a quasi-military setting to instill discipline and structure in the lives of cadets whose academic performance may have suffered from a lack of structure and discipline.

“They learn how to a leader, they learn how to be a follower,” Mathews said. “They

learn all these other soft skills that maybe they learned earlier, but it's a good reminder."

Cadets attend the Challenge Academy for 22 weeks during the residential phase, and their daily routine is rigidly structured. They wake up at 5:20 a.m. and take part in some physical exercise before breakfast, and then their day is split between academic classes, community service and courses on character development and resilience. Cadets also work on their post-residential plan — goals they want to achieve in the 12 months immediately after graduating from the Challenge Academy residential phase.

Cadets do not have access to cell phones, music or social media during the residential phase, but they do have access to hundreds of books on campus.

"They come from backgrounds and experiences where they realize that they weren't going down the right path, and they realize that they needed to change course," Mathews said. "We tell them they have to have the courage to change — that's our motto."

Jones told cadets that he was raised in a military household and understood the discipline and structure they were experiencing. This likely helped develop his personal dedication to excellence.

"You only get one chance at this football team, so you have to make the most of it," Jones said. "Take advantage of your opportunity and make the most of that."

Answering a question about what set them apart from teammates, Doubs said he was a quiet guy.

"But there's nothing wrong with that," he added.

When asked about personal sacrifices, Ford spoke of being a highly recruited high school athlete, but his 1.4 grade point average in his junior year put his college eligibility at risk. Applying himself to studying and taking online classes to improve his grade point average came at the cost of spending time with friends.

"I can relate to all of you guys in here," Ford said. "Just keep pushing and keep your head straight. This is the sacrifice for you guys right here, leaving your family, coming somewhere uncomfortable to succeed in your journey. Just keep pushing."

Walker expressed his respect for what the cadets were doing to turn their lives around.

"Keep it up — you all will be blessed," Walker said. "To be 17 years old and committed to change your lives, I know it's hard. When I first got here I didn't really know what I was expecting. I saw you marching in and I'm not gonna lie, I kinda chuckled a little bit. But once I started to understand what was going on — the discipline, the commitment — that's real stuff. I really respect you all."

The professional athletes compared the daily structure of the football season with the experience of cadets at the Academy.

"It's important for you guys to know what inspires and motivates you," Toure said. "When stuff gets hard, when it's early and you have to get to your training, you have to get to your 'why' — why are you here, why are you doing this — what motivates you to do this."

Rhyan recommended taking life one day at a time.

"You're gonna have bad days, you're gonna have bad thoughts," Rhyan said. "That's life — I'm not gonna tell you it's rainbows and butterflies, because it's not. But when you do have those bad days, you've got that schedule — take it little by little. Tomorrow is tomorrow — every day is new."

Ford encouraged cadets to retain what they were learning at Challenge Academy.

"You don't want to go home and go straight back to the same bad habits you had before you got here," Ford said. "You got to make sure you carry everything you learn here with you when you go home."

Doubs told cadets that at their age, he was not making the best choices.

"Things I was doing then, I shouldn't be here today is what I'm saying," Doubs said. Despite that, he overcame the challenge of coming from a small high school to play for a Division 1 college football team, and made it to the National Football League even though he played for a small Division 1 school.

"I beat the odds again," Doubs said. "I set a higher standard for myself so that when the day is over I don't live in regret. I can say I did everything I had to do for today."

Jones spoke about how perseverance and resilience shape his career.

"I want to be the best, when it's all said and done — I want them to say 'you were the best running back to ever play the game,'" Jones said. "But also, it's how I feed my family. You want to block the negative thoughts out, but if something negative happens you find the positive in the negative."

Members of the Green Bay Packers have met with Wisconsin National Guard Challenge Academy cadets since 2004, Mathews said.

"[It provides] a motivational tool for our cadets," she explained, "a rare opportunity to meet professional players. Our cadets have a unique opportunity to ask thought-provoking questions — listening to their answers helps [our cadets] learn and grow to be responsible citizens. Hearing from the Packers reinforces the role 'character' plays in our lives."

As they were returning to Green Bay, Jones praised the Challenge Academy.

"It's a beautiful thing you are doing," he said. "Thank you for letting us be a part of it."