



ARMED FORCES MERIT AWARD

Media Conference

Presented by the Football Writers Association of America
November 11, 2016

TIM SIMMONS: Well, it's 8:00 in Colorado. 9:00 in the Central time zone. So we'll start the teleconference for the Armed Forces Merit Award presented by the Football Writers Association of America. To start off with, some opening comments from Brant Ringler, the Executive Director of the Lockheed Martin Armed Forces Bowl. Brant?

BRANT RINGLER: Thank you, Tim. Thank you, everybody, for being on the call today. I just want to say happy Veterans Day to everybody. This is a special day for us. It's just another extension of what we're trying to do in honoring the Armed Forces. So we truly appreciate the past and present members that have served our country and continue to serve and protect our freedoms.

Special thank you to Steven and your wife, Adrienne. I know she served as well. So thank you guys for your duty. And happy belated 241st birthday, by the way, as a Marine.

Wanted to say congratulations, Steven, on receiving this year's Armed Forces Merit Award. You are our fifth recipient of this award that's presented by the Football Writers Association of America. We've been watching you over the last several years. I remember a small conversation early on with Coach Stockstill in 2013 when Middle Tennessee State came down and played in our game. I asked, who is this Steven Rhodes? He was telling me you were just getting started with the team and that your leadership with the team on and off the field was exemplary and just continue to grow and help the team in so many ways.

That's what this award is about. It's about the men that have come back from serving our country and continue to give through college football. And you've been an outstanding example of that. And we are truly honored to have you as our recipient of this year's Armed Forces merit award. So thank you very much.

TIM SIMMONS: Thank you, Brant. Now to Steve Richardson, the executive director of the Football Writers Association of America.

STEVE RICHARDSON: Well, I will say this: I have seen Middle Tennessee play this season. Now, I wasn't particularly happy with the outcome of the game because they defeated my Missouri Tigers in Columbia, Missouri. I will tip my hat to them because they played a great game there. And I was just looking back through the stats for this season. And I know Steven's had an excellent season. It can look like he's had 29 tackles. He's had 4 1/2 tackles for loss. Broken up some passes. Quarterback



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hurries, recovered a fumble, and so forth and so on. So I know he's had an excellent season.

Middle Tennessee, I guess, is already bowl eligible, I think. They've won six games. So that's good. So they will be going to a bowl game, it appears, somewhere in the country.

And I would echo Brant's sentiments, you know, on serving our country on this very special day that we commemorate those that have done it over the years. And for both you and your wife, we certainly appreciate that.

The Football Writers Association of America feels like this is a very, very important award. And, just on a personal note, I certainly appreciate what the military does. One of the most moving moments of my life was being over in Normandy and seeing that area and what those people sacrificed in freeing Europe of the Nazi regime during that era and all the people that helped with that effort. It was truly remarkable.

And there have been many wars since then and all the duties that the Marines and all of our Armed Services have done. We think this is a very, very special award. Our football writers, we have many of them who have had relatives or even themselves who have been in the military over the years. And this is a very important award.

So, congratulations, Steven. We look forward to seeing you in Tampa.

TIM SIMMONS: Again, the official presentation of the award will happen on Monday morning on January 9th. It will be at the Tampa Marriott Waterside at an 8:30 a.m. breakfast that we have prior to the National Championship game. So, without further ado, Steven Rhodes, who is a defensive lineman at Middle Tennessee State University, is our 2016 recipient.

Right now we'd like to have the coach, Rick Stockstill, who is in his 11th season at Middle Tennessee as a head coach. Coach Stockstill, just some comments about Steven. Obviously, he was a walk-on in 2013 and, obviously, has started, I think, 25-26 straight games for you on the defensive line.

COACH RICK STOCKSTILL: First of all, Steven is an outstanding man. And he's very deserving of this award. And he'll represent this award with great honor and great dignity.

And we take a lot of pride here at Middle Tennessee in everything that we do. And Steven



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exemplifies everything that we do. And General Huber and Dr. McPhee, everything that we do here on campus to provide for veterans, former students, students that are veterans. We just try to provide everything that we can for them. And Steven has been exemplary as a leader, as a football player, as a teammate, as a member of this community involved in so many things outside of football and academics here.

I'm honored to coach him. I'm proud he's on this team. He has had a huge impact on this team, not only as a player but as a role model, as a leader for these young men on our team.

TIM SIMMONS: Coach, has there been anything that Steven has done, I mean, on and off the field -- obviously, we see the stats that Steve Richardson pointed out. But has there been something maybe off the field that has contributed to the team that Steven has brought?

COACH RICK STOCKSTILL: I think the big thing is, you know, obviously, he's older than everybody else on the team. And he can talk to them about his experiences as a man, as a husband, as a father with two young boys.

And I think his wife and his kids, they come to practice a couple of times a week. And I think just them being able to see him interact, how he treats his wife, how he treats his kids, be able -- for our players to be able to see that, has been a good role model in the sense that this is how you become a father. This is how you become a husband. And this is how you treat people.

So I think his leadership off the field has had as big an impact as it has on the field.

TIM SIMMONS: Okay. Well, good enough, Coach. We'll keep you on for a few seconds and have a Q&A afterwards, if there's any questions.

Right now, we'll introduce Steven Rhodes, the fifth recipient of the Armed Forces Merit Award, presented by the Football Writers Association of America.

Steven, congratulations. Just some thoughts about winning this award.

STEVEN RHODES: Hey, how you doing?



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Okay. I just first want to say thank you for considering me for this award. There were a lot of very good competitions within these nominations. And I really appreciate it.

I'm just happy that I'm able to represent my family, represent the Armed Forces, in particular, the Marine Corps, my branch of service, as well as representing my school. I'm just an extension of what Coach Brock, Dr. McPhee, Mr. Massaro, and showing up every day, not just being good football players but being good men, good role models, people in society.

So it means a lot to me to be able to represent all of those facets. And I'm just grateful, you know, that I'm able to be in this position.

TIM SIMMONS: Steven, can you talk about maybe some experiences you've had with some players maybe helping prep them up, get them up? You know, obviously, football, like any other endeavor in life, has its ups and downs. And, obviously, you've gone through things in the military that a lot of these young men that you're playing with have not gone through.

Have you had any experiences where you have been able to talk to the team or individuals about life?

STEVEN RHODES: Absolutely. You know, a lot of what I let the guys know is just about mental toughness, not just on the field but just in life, period. You have ups and downs in life, just like you have on the football field. And I got a lot of teammates that are just getting their feet wet. They are trying to figure out life and just now getting on their own. So being able to instill some knowledge into them, help them to remain humble regardless of whatever accomplishment they may have, it's going to take them a long way in life.

So just being able to mentor my little brothers in any facet of life, it's just been a blessing.

TIM SIMMONS: When you started your journey, did you think you would be a senior with so many starting things? Obviously, you're coming out of the military and so forth. Did you ever figure that you would be around? I think you haven't missed a game at Middle Tennessee. And, when you started this journey, did you ever think that you would have a consecutive game streak? I think it's something over 40.



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STEVEN RHODES: I did not, actually. The plan definitely changed over the years. I didn't see myself being here. I didn't know if I would be able to do that. Everything has worked out the way it needed to work out. It's really been a blessing to be able to be here and contribute to this team and just to be a part of this team and this brotherhood. You know, I'm just grateful that I'm able to play this game and able to pursue my dreams of going to the next level. So it's been both a blessing and a surprise. From the very beginning with my eligibility situation, not looking like it's going to be -- like it's going to be favorable for me. But to be here, it's just -- it's just a blessing.

TIM SIMMONS: Talk a little bit about that when you initially got to start. I know that you went through an appeal process with the NCAA, and they granted you two years. And you ended up with four. What was going through your mind at that time?

STEVEN RHODES: The main thing is, you know, I just kept my faith strong in what I wanted, which was to get all my years of eligibility and to be able to play immediately, especially, you know, considering my age and not wanting to waste any time.

But I just -- I never let anything waiver my faith regardless of what the NCAA said. And the program here, you know, the people here on staff here at MTSU -- Coach Brock, Daryl Simpson, Dr. McPhee -- they have all helped me in achieving this goal. I definitely couldn't do it without any of them. And, I mean, it was a tough road with the eligibility process and to be able to change things.

TIM SIMMONS: Mark Owens did a great job in getting your nomination through over the years and did a wonderful thing. He told me that you're going to be out in San Diego in January trying to take your ability to the next level. What are your goals for the future?

STEVEN RHODES: I plan on going to training, getting ready for combine, Pro Day, whatever it may be, just to get ready to go to the next level, man, just in preparation for opportunities, however, it may come. I see myself on a team, on a NFL team, this time next year. I don't know how it's going to happen. My job is just to work as hard as I can and continue to have my excellent work ethic which got me here. That's the plan.

TIM SIMMONS: Steven, talk about your education. What are you studying? And, obviously, if football doesn't pan out at the next level, what do you hope to do in the future outside of being a good father and husband?



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STEVEN RHODES: I changed my major from air traffic control and aerospace to organized communication. I'm now an entrepreneur. So my goal after football, even during football, is to continue to work for myself. Doing a lot of different things. One thing I'm included in is direct sales.

So I definitely love being able to work for myself, create my own schedule. So that's my plan (chuckles).

STEVE RICHARDSON: Did the players on the team have a nickname for you? I mean, you're old enough to be some of their -- I guess you are the big brother. But, I mean, what kind of questions do they ask you about your service?

STEVEN RHODES: I have all kinds of nicknames. Sergeant Sack, Captain America, Old Man. You know, you name it, they probably called me it. But they've asked a lot of things just about life, about how -- you know, is it hard being married. Is it hard having kids? How do you deal with everything? How do you deal with football and school on top of everything? I just tell them things are possible. Don't quit. It can be done.

They ask me a number of questions. They really do. But I'm glad that I'm able to instill knowledge in them any way that I can.

TIM SIMMONS: Have any of the players ever asked you a question about going into the military service?

STEVEN RHODES: Yeah, I've had a couple, actually. I have one teammate considering do it once he's done playing football. It's definitely a consideration in some people's eyes. I just tell them to follow their heart, do what's right for them, pick the service that's right for them, and definitely have a purpose, a reason for why you're going to do it.

Q. Steven, can you talk about General Huber and how much he has meant to you since you have been at Middle Tennessee?

STEVEN RHODES: General Huber is a great guy. When I met him last year when he came to talk to the team for the first time, we got to have a conversation then. And he expressed how much he respected me, how much he appreciated what I stood for and the things that I went through to get here. Man, I just really appreciate him.



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He served our country 30-plus years. His accolades and his awards are numerous, you know. He's an amazing guy both from a professional standpoint and a personal standpoint. So I definitely appreciate his mentorship and what he's meant to me, and what he has instilled into me.

TIM SIMMONS: Mark, can you explain the full name for General Huber and what he does at Middle Tennessee?

MARK OWENS: General Huber has come on board. And here we're really dedicated to our veterans. And he helps lead our Veteran's Center, which is very rare across the country. I think there is only a couple. And then he's also instrumental in assisting Dr. McPhee with numerous activities. And something else probably some folks may not know here at Middle Tennessee -- we just had it last weekend -- but it was our 35th annual salute to Armed Forces and Veterans Day game. It's believed to be the longest in the country. And General Huber is involved with that as well. He has been really great for our University since he's come on board.

TIM SIMMONS: And Dr. McPhee is the President of the University, right?

MARK OWENS: Yes, sir.

STEVE RICHARDSON: What bowl does Steven want to go to?

STEVEN RHODES: I want to go to a warm one, Miami.

STEVE RICHARDSON: You're going to get to come to Tampa. So at least in January you'll be warm there.

STEVEN RHODES: Yes, sir. (Chuckles.)

TIM SIMMONS: This concludes our teleconference for the announcement of Steven Rhodes, a defensive lineman at Middle Tennessee, as the fifth recipient of the Armed Forces Merit Award presented by the FWA. Thanks to everybody. Congratulations. We look forward to seeing you in January. And thank you very much.