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Players team up for special holiday shopping

Underprivileged youths enjoy day of gifts, smiles

By Barry Byers - bbyers@heraldonline.com

MYRTLE BEACH -- Christmas came early for 44 underprivileged youths and teens on Thursday in Myrtle Beach, courtesy of Seattle Seahawks tackle Brandon Frye.

Each was handed a \$100 gift card and assigned two football players before being turned loose to shop at Walmart off S.C. 501.



It was Frye's third year holding the event, but it was the first time it has been tied to the SCADA North-South All-Star Football Game that will be played on Saturday at Myrtle Beach High School's Doug Shaw Memorial Stadium.

Normally, the North and South teams are kept separate. They practice twice a day starting half an hour apart. That way, they are not in the locker room at the same time. The same schedule applies to meals, and the teams spend the week miles apart at different resorts.

But what the heck? Christmas is just around the corner, and there is no way football players would do anything to wipe out the smiles and wide-eyed looks these special youngsters had on their faces.

The program was started three years ago by Frye and former Myrtle Beach football coach Scott Earley. Frye played for Earley and starred at Virginia Tech before moving on to the NFL. Frye wanted to do something for the youngsters in his hometown.

"We went with tying it in with the North-South game this year for several reasons," Frye said. "Young athletes need to see how it is to help others if they have the opportunity. We wanted them to experience what it means bring happiness to kids who have little joy in their lives.

"And it makes me feel good to see the players and kids interact. This shows there is more to success and football than what happens on the field. It's not the same and every group seemed to enjoy this little shopping spree."

Frye, dressed in his Seahawks jersey, is out for the season with a neck injury and said he'll return next year.

The youngsters nearly dragged their escorts — the South dressed in red and the North in blue — through the retailer's doors to get a shopping cart and get down to business. One group had children ages 9-12 that attend Myrtle Beach Intermediate School. The other group, ages 9-15, came from Tara Hall Boys Home.

"Every one of our kids comes from dysfunctional families," said Jim Dumm, Tara Hall's executive director. "Our kids live with one parent or a grandparent, and it's not working out. They are with us at no fault of their own.

"Some have been abused and neglected. If it wasn't for this event, they wouldn't have a Christmas. I think this and what Brandon is doing is fantastic."

The intermediate school youngsters had lists, but some never left their pockets. They piled their carts with shirts, jeans, coats, sweatshirts, socks, underwear, electronics and candy. The players held clothes next to their shopper in hopes the right size was purchased. The other used his cell phone calculator to add each item that stayed in the basket.

All the while, there were smiles, high-fives and plenty of friendship shared by each group of three. Even the regular shoppers smiled and patted the players on the

shoulders after figuring out what was happening. A couple of the pint-sized shoppers were a tad over \$100, but the amount was taken care of so nothing would go back to the shelf. No way.

The shoppers were told not to give anyone their last name for privacy matters, but that didn't keep them from expressing their excitement.

"My players are cool," said 9-year old Dalton, while Bethune-Bowman's Trevelle Stephens (South) and Emerald's Jeremy Tommie (North), held a shirt next to him to make sure it fit. "We're through over here. All that's left is a football and a basketball."

Jennifer, 12, kept Rock Hill's Jamal Tyler (North) and Crestwood's Travis McConico busy.

"My players are great," Jennifer said. "They are funny, sweet and kind. I'm excited about shopping with these big, strong football players. This is an exciting day for me, and I'm thankful to Mr. Frye for this opportunity."

Nobody was in a hurry, but the teams are on a schedule and had to eat lunch before heading back to practice. When the calculators climbed to 100, the happy shoppers headed to the checkout lines. Chester's Bobby Kelly (North) and North Augusta's Charles Coleman got Jessica, 9, through the line with no problems.

"This was a good idea," Kelly said. "I got to meet a good guy who I'll play against on Saturday. And I got to see a little girl have a great time. I feel kinda like a shrimp (he's around 5-6) Santa Claus. I got to watch her pick out what she wanted, and she used her gift card wisely."

"I want to do this someday," Coleman said. "Give back to little kids who need it. If I get to the big time, I'm promise I'm going to do something just like this. Jessica

knew exactly what she wanted, and she went straight to it. It made my heart feel good to watch her get so excited."

When everyone was finished, the players had one last job before boarding their buses. They lined up near the store's entrance and when the last groups were coming outside, they slowly made their way pushing their carts to the two buses the youngsters arrived on.

They loaded the gifts onto the buses, said some final farewells and gave hugs to their newfound young friends. More than a few tears fell.

It was, indeed, a wonderful day.

Want to go?

What: 62nd Annual South Carolina Automobile Dealers Association North-South All-Star Football Game

When : Dec. 12, noon

Where: Doug Shaw Memorial Stadium, Myrtle Beach High School

<http://www.heraldonline.com/sports/story/1801622.html>