

POSITIVE FEEDBACK FROM AN NFL DRAFTEE

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CANTON — Brian Leonard once lay at the base of a ladder with his teeth jutting through his lips and his nose broken.

His brother, Nate, had watched Leonard decide descending the ladder face first was a noble idea.

"I basically hit every rung with my face," Brian Leonard said. "I was one crazy little kid. I did some stupid things."

He likes to think the ladder stunt and "basically trying to wreck" his dirt bike added toughness.

Now the Gouverneur native is a bit more mature. He played Division I football at Rutgers and went on to the NFL with the St. Louis Rams. He was traded in the offseason to the Cincinnati Bengals after rotator cuff surgery ended his 2008 season.

Fully recovered, Leonard returned to the North Country to host his own football camp Monday at St. Lawrence University. He hopes to generate more positive interest in football, while providing guidance and mentorship to athletes of all ages.

"I want the kids to see me around," he said. "I don't want to be one of those guys that have their name on the camp and come by, say hello and take pictures with the kids and then leave. I want to be here every day and hanging out with the kids and teach them what I know.

"Everyone needs someone to look up to. The person I looked up to was my brother."

The same person who witnessed Leonard's early shenanigans, Nate also played football at Rutgers.

"When I saw Nate getting recruited, and I realized I had the opportunity to play at the next level. That's when it clicked in my head and I focused," Brian Leonard said. "I would say, 'Your brother can do it, why can't you?'"

His motivation piqued and Leonard set state records in points scored (696), touchdowns (107) and rushing yards (5,854) during his scholastic career.

"I really think (getting to the NFL) is building a work ethic early," Leonard said. "I'd be at football practice after school. Then after football practice, I'd be in the weight room. Then I'd eat dinner and be studying. I think kids need to do that more nowadays."

By hosting the Leonard Camp, he wants to show school-aged kids that there is potential for professional football careers in the North Country if you work for it.

"These kids see me coming back and can say, 'Brian Leonard can do it, why can't I?'" he said. "We finally have a camp in Upstate New York where kids can come and be seen and younger kids can learn the fundamentals of football."

Leonard, along with numerous high school and college coaches from the region, are helping with the camp, which runs through Thursday.

The high school coaches all hope it leads to more productive discussions and better fundamentals for kids early in their development.

"It's a great opportunity for the kids to go out and enjoy football and see someone local who made it through working hard and doing it the right way," said Indian River coach Cory Marsell.

Said Watertown defensive coordinator Justin Rich: "I think that any time you can put a focus on football in the North Country, it's a good thing. We have just as good of athletes as anywhere in the state."

Potsdam head coach Jim Kirka feels, in time, seeing Leonard each year will get young athletes wanting to play football.

"Brian is a great spokesman who appreciates the North Country and wants to give back," he said. "He wants to get the community talking about football again and get the kids interested. Even if it doesn't, the kids that are here are having a great experience with him, and that's all that matters."