

For Saquon Barkley, football is temporary: ‘The impact you make in the community is what lasts’

By Dan Duggan

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EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — An hour after the Giants’ 10-7 win over the Patriots on Sunday, running back Saquon Barkley was standing in the corner of the MetLife Stadium field surrounded by three young adults. As light rain fell, a young man named Tyree played Barkley a recording of his rap music. Then 21-year-old Wenieshia played Barkley some of her R&B music.

“He liked it,” Wenieshia said. “He told me that no dream is too unrealistic if you want it.”

Tyree, Wenieshia and Armoni, 19, were Barkley’s guests at the game through Covenant House, a charity that supports young adults experiencing homelessness. They were joined by three boys ages 8, 9 and 11 from Children of Promise, an organization that supports children who experience parental incarceration.

Barkley hosts three young adults from Covenant House and three kids from Children of Promise, plus a chaperone from each organization, at every New York Giants home game. They meet Barkley on the field pregame, watch the game from the eight seats he buys in the lower bowl of the stadium, and then interact with the Pro Bowl running back outside of the Giants’ locker room after the game.

“Some of these kids don’t even know who I am. Some of these kids don’t really know anything about football,” Barkley said. “That’s what I like about it. It’s true. It’s authentic. They’re asking me genuine questions, and I’m giving genuine answers about my life and how I got to where I am and the best advice I have for them.”

Barkley greeted the group on Sunday in the tunnel that leads from the Giants’ locker room to the field. After chatting about the game and the kids’ athletic interests, Barkley opened the floor to questions.

The queries ranged from, “What kind of car do you drive?” — an electric Mercedes-AMG — to “What advice would you give to someone whose goals are unrealistic or hard?” Barkley told his guests that no goal is unrealistic, and he encouraged them to work as hard as possible to reach their dreams.

“It’s really, like, think of therapy. We’re just not sitting in a chair and they’re saying, ‘I’m this ...’” Barkley said. “It’s more of, ‘How do you battle this?’ In a way, they’re telling me that they’re struggling and they’re going through a certain thing in their life, and they want to know the advice that I can give them to help them during that time.”

Barkley wanted to make an impact in his NFL community even before the Giants selected him with the No. 2 pick in the 2018 draft. After he was drafted, Barkley and his parents were drawn to the Newark, N.J.-based Covenant House, which had a personal connection.

“I’ve been homeless before,” Barkley said. “I was probably six or seven and we got evicted. I bounced around. Having the support of family and friends helped us, and that got us back on our feet. Seeing what Covenant House does, that’s where the relationship happened.”

Wanting to expand his reach, Barkley began a similar partnership last year with Children of Promise, which has centers in Brooklyn and the Bronx. Though Barkley’s father, Alibay, was briefly incarcerated before Saquon was born, the connection with Children of Promise is driven by a desire to impact the youth.

“My dad’s been to jail, but it didn’t affect me growing up,” Barkley said. “It was more just how I feel about kids, and it was something we could do with kids.”

Barkley, who was the Giants’ Walter Payton Man of the Year Award nominee last year, was named the Week 10 NFLPA Community MVP for his work with the homeless near his Coplay, Pa., hometown.

A key element of Barkley’s charity work is being hands-on. His foundation, the Michael Ann & Saquon Barkley Hope Foundation, conducted its annual Thanksgiving turkey drive last week in the Bronx River projects where Barkley’s mother, Tonya Johnson, was raised. Barkley and his parents were at the Bronx River Community Center handing out turkeys and other Thanksgiving items to those in need.

“I don’t think you should just write a check,” Johnson said. “I think you should participate in everything. You experience everybody else’s experiences.”

It’s the interactions that Barkley treasures. He gains as much as he provides during the meetings.

“I love sitting down and just having conversations,” Barkley said. “It could be something I said that they could take, and it goes a long way with them. There’s stuff that they say that I can learn from them and give me more ideas of what I can do within my foundation to continue to grow.”

Sunday’s postgame meeting was upbeat because the Giants had just won their second straight game. But it’s not always easy to be in a cheerful mood, like after the Giants lost 34-27 to the Jets during the 2019 season.

“I had one rushing yard; I let up two sacks,” Barkley said. “On one sack Jamal (Adams) stripped it from (Daniel Jones) and scored a touchdown. I banged up my shoulder that game, I had a hurt ankle already going into that game. That probably was the toughest one.”

But Barkley puts a smile on his face because he knows the young people he's meeting are dealing with far greater challenges than losing a football game.

"I get so locked in and so focused in a game — which is important to who I am and my makeup and as a competitor — but it also brings you back to reality," Barkley said. "It's like, 'That's not the only thing that really matters.' It shows me that there's so much stuff that no matter what just happened, I'm highly blessed. So I use the gift that God gave me and the position that God gave me to make change."

After answering the group's questions, Barkley signed a football for each guest. Then they exited the tunnel onto the field to take photos. That's when any initial shyness wore off and the young adults began playing Barkley their music. Meanwhile, the young boys from Children of Promise ran onto the field.

After about 30 minutes, Barkley headed home and his guests left with an interaction that will provide lasting inspiration.

"His beautiful gift is he speaks to them and into them instead of just at them," said Jenny Allen, who chaperoned the group from Covenant House. "He was like, 'You've got a future.' That is going to echo louder than anything we've ever said. That's going to resonate, and that's going to empower them."

Hearing that feedback is what drives Barkley to give back.

"You're only going to be Saquon Barkley for so long," Barkley said. "Everybody has their day when the game is taken away from you. You're not that fast anymore; you're not that strong; you're not that explosive, and there will be a new wave of players that will come around and will have a name. But it's the impact you make in the community. That's what lasts. That's what's going to go a long way, not how many touchdowns I score."