

# IN NO ONE'S SHADOW

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

TY DARLINGTON PROVED HIMSELF A **POWERFUL FORCE**, NOT ONLY IN HIS POSITION AS OU'S CENTER, BUT IN THE CLASSROOM AND COMMUNITY AS WELL.

**W**hen Gabe Ikard departed for the National Football League after the 2013 season, he left a void in the Oklahoma lineup that was significantly larger than his sizable 6-foot-3, 298-pound frame.

Ikard was more than just a great football player; he was the epitome of a student-athlete at the collegiate level, the type of young man whose accomplishments off the field rivaled those he produced as a four-year starting offensive lineman and center for the Sooners.

Finding one player to step into that position and not be overwhelmed seemed like an almost impossible task for Coach Bob Stoops and his staff. After all, consensus All-Americans with 4.0 grade point averages don't exactly grow on trees.

Amazingly, Stoops needed only to look as far as the next guy on the team's depth chart. That's where Ty Darlington resided for much of his first two seasons at OU, working as a part-time starter and main understudy behind Ikard in 2012 and 2013.

Darlington came equipped with a great football pedigree, an abiding love for the University of Oklahoma, valuable game experience, and aspirations similar to those of his former teammate and mentor where football and classwork are concerned. All he needed was an opportunity to start building his résumé.

And that is exactly what Darlington has done in the past two seasons, not only proving himself to be a more than capable replacement at center, but also serving as an exemplary student-athlete who has matured into an outstanding ambassador for the football program and university.

"It's unusual to have two high-caliber guys like Gabe and Ty playing the same position and following each other up like they have the last few years here," says Stoops. "Gabe set the bar very high for anyone who came after him — All-American, a number of great academic achievements and just a great all-around leader — but Ty has stepped in and lived up to the standards that he inherited and really has been everything we hoped he would be."

All Darlington has really ever wanted to do is play football at OU and represent the Sooners to the very best of his ability. He dreamed about it as a child growing up in Florida and has gone on to live it as a young man who put together two final seasons that would make Ikard proud.

**He succeeded on all counts.**  
*continued*

---

As scary as he is on the field, there is more to OU center Ty Darlington than intimidating size and fearsome ability. When he wasn't hiking the ball to Baker Mayfield, Darlington could be found studying—he has a 3.9 GPA—or offering his help anywhere from tornado victims in Moore to earthquake survivors in Haiti.



Josh Gateley



National Football Foundation

Ty Darlington accepts the Campbell Trophy as college football's scholar-athlete of the year Dec. 8 at the Waldorf Astoria in Manhattan. The OU center also won the Wuerffel Trophy, which honors athletic performance combined with community service and academics, and the Bowden Award, a national honor presented annually to one exemplary college football player by the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

"Ty's combination of talent, intelligence and passion for the game has made him a great leader for OU football," says Ikard, now a backup offensive lineman for the Detroit Lions. "With his performance in the classroom and his display of toughness on the field, he has been a great example for the young guys in the program."

to operate on the field," says Darlington. "He set the bar extremely high and I've worked hard to live up to that. To be able to follow in his footsteps has been a real honor for me."

The Sooners would have been happy for Darlington to step in and become a good, solid contributor, a player who does his job on and off the field without much fanfare. That is normally

the life of a college lineman — working in the shadows of the trenches while the higher-profile players soak up all of the glory.

Darlington is certainly no headline seeker, but he is also not your average college offensive lineman.

He's not even your average college student.

Besides earning a 3.91 career GPA at OU (he made one B while completing his undergraduate degree in the College of Arts and Sciences' Planned Program with an emphasis in Health Promotion) Darlington has twice garnered First Team All-Big 12 Academic honors and is a two-time Academic All-

“TY'S PASSION FOR HELPING OTHERS IS DRIVEN BY HIS FAITH AND HAS MADE HIM A GREAT LEADER FOR THE ENTIRE OU COMMUNITY. HE IS THE ULTIMATE EXAMPLE OF A COLLEGE ATHLETE.”

Darlington basically picked up where Ikard left off and has been very conscious about trying to have a similar impact on people.

"Gabe was my mentor and an excellent role model my first two years at OU and I learned a lot about how to play at this level from him, especially how to prepare yourself and how

American. This season alone, he took home both the William V. Campbell Trophy and the Wuerffel Trophy, something that even Ikard did not accomplish during his OU career.

The Campbell Trophy is annually awarded to the individual recognized as the top football scholar-athlete in the country, while the Wuerffel Trophy honors the collegiate football player who best exhibits exemplary community service, along with qualifying academic and athletic achievement.

“Ty’s passion for helping others is driven by his faith and has made him a great leader for the entire OU community. He is the ultimate example of a college athlete recognizing the platform that he has and making the most of it,” says Ikard, the 2013 Wuerffel Trophy winner.

When he is not on the football field or in the classroom working on his graduate degree, Darlington somehow finds time to involve himself heavily in campus life. He is currently the 2015-16 president of the Big 12 Student-Athlete Advisory Committee and one of 15 Division-I student-athletes who serve on the NCAA’s autonomy legislation committee, which oversees an ongoing quest to provide student-athletes with more of a voice in their intercollegiate athletic experience.

“That whole deal has been a great experience. I learned a lot as far as how the legislative process works and what the NCAA represents; just to be a part of the governing process and to have the responsibility of representing so many student-athletes is an honor,” says Darlington, who also served two terms as president of OU’s Fellowship of Christian Athletes chapter and continues to be very involved in the FCA.

The list of Darlington’s non-football efforts is seemingly endless. He helped lead the OU football program’s volunteer efforts to aid victims following the May 2013 Oklahoma tornadoes and is a regular volunteer at the Oklahoma’s Children’s Hospital. For the last three years, he has traveled with other OU athletes to Haiti as part of Mission of Hope, which provides earthquake damage relief to children and families.

Where does he find the time and energy to reach so far beyond the normal scope of an average college student?

“That’s the way I was raised — you always strive for excellence and you work to serve your community and help others any way you can. My favorite verse in the Bible is Colossians 3:23, which says, ‘Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for man.’ So that’s pretty much the approach I take with everything I do,” says Darlington. “I am always going to give my best on the football field because that is what I was recruited here at OU to do. But my life and who I am go way beyond football.”

Those principles are easily traced to his parents, Rick and Shelly (Fried) Darlington of Apopka, Fla. They provided a fundamental road map of hard work, charity and ambition



Holly Cowden

OU center Ty Darlington blocks for quarterback Baker Mayfield during the Texas Tech game Oct. 24 in Norman, which the Sooners won 63-27. After the Orange Bowl, his last game as a Sooner, Darlington tweeted that his four years at OU “have been a heck of a ride.”

that have served their oldest son very well, especially during his OU journey during the past four years.

“My mom and dad always stressed the importance of a good education and how you should treat people. I guess I took those things to heart and do my best to live by them,” says Darlington, the oldest of seven siblings.

His mother believes her son’s generous disposition and wide range of accomplishments can be traced to a more compelling source.

“The Lord has blessed Ty with a special drive to do well in everything he chooses to do. It doesn’t matter what he is doing, he always gives a maximum effort,” says Shelly Darlington. “He continually sets very high standards for himself and then makes it look easy. His father and I are obviously proud of everything he has accomplished at OU, but even more proud

“I always dreamed of someday playing for the Sooners, and to have that become reality has been even more special than I could have imagined.”

because of the person he has become.

“He makes us a better family, and I believe he makes the people around him want to do better and be better.”

Two other qualities he received from his parents have also helped define Darlington as he has grown into a young man — a love for all things OU and a passion for football.

His mom grew up in Midwest City, Okla., and was a member of the OU pom squad during the latter part of the Barry Switzer era. She came from a long line of Sooner faithful and shared that devotion with her son at a very early age.

“My first baby clothes had an OU logo on them and I was a diehard Sooner fan growing up. I always say that, ‘I’m Sooner born and Sooner Bred,’ and I was taught to say, ‘Texas sucks’ when I was a little kid,” says Darlington. “I always dreamed of someday playing for the Sooners, and to have that become reality has been even more special than I could have imagined.”

Of course, a critical part of the equation came from his father, a prep football coach who taught his son the fundamentals at an early age and coached him all the way through high school.

“Growing up, all I ever wanted to do was play football at OU. And by the time I was a senior, I had grown enough and developed and matured to the point that I found myself in a position to potentially play at the next level,” says Darlington. “God blessed me in a lot of ways, but having my father for a coach was the best blessing of all.”

He arrived on the OU campus as a four-star recruit in 2012

and eventually saw action in nine games that fall. The following season, Darlington was limited to just three games due to injuries, but he spent much of his time shadowing Ikard in an effort to better understand the center position.

All of his hard work finally began to pay off in 2014 when he became an integral part of the offense as the starting center. Prior to the start of the 2015 season, Darlington was voted team captain by his teammates, an honor he cherishes as much as being an All-American or national award winner.

“It’s great to be recognized for what you do, but to know that you’ve earned the respect of your teammates and coaches — that’s a pretty special feeling,” says Darlington. “I take an awful lot of pride in that role.”

Oklahoma quarterback Baker Mayfield credits Darlington with playing a major role in the team’s overall success.

“Ty has been such a positive force for our young offensive line all season. He really has been a great leader for the entire team, just in the way he works and approaches the game,” says Mayfield. “I couldn’t ask for a better center. There is a lot of trust involved there and we’ve developed a great relationship during my time here.”

Darlington’s time at OU will come to a close this spring. He is scheduled to earn his master’s degree in Adult and Higher Education with an emphasis in Intercollegiate Athletics Administration in May. But that could potentially be put on hold depending on how things go with April’s NFL combine and his pro football future.

“Ty is an athletics director in training, but he may have much bigger sights than that,” said OU Athletics Director Joe Castiglione. “He’s exceptional. I start to run out of adjectives. He’s just an extraordinary leader.”

Whatever the future holds, Darlington will no doubt be ready for it. For now, he’s soaking in his last few months on campus and looking back on what has been a memorable collegiate journey.

“My time at OU has been such an incredible experience, from being a student-athlete and being a part of this special program and playing for Coach Stoops to all of the experiences I’ve had outside the game of football,” says Darlington. “So many incredible opportunities have opened up for me during my time at the University of Oklahoma, and I’ve embraced them and enjoyed every second of it.”

“You kind of know what to expect with the atmosphere, the facilities, the level of tradition and things like that, but there is no way to predict some of the experiences and the people you meet along the way. Those experiences and people have made a lasting impression on me.”

---

Jay C. Upchurch is editor of Sooner Spectator.

