



A Servant's



Ethan and Caroline Downs.

Heart

OU FANS KNOW ETHAN
DOWNS FOR HIS HEROIC
ON THE FOOTBALL FIELD.
BUT IT'S DOWNS' WORK
OUTSIDE THE ARENA THAT
TRULY DEFINES HIM.

By Jay C. Upchurch

O**N FALL SATURDAYS, ETHAN** Downs is an all-conference football star adored by more than 80,000 faithful followers and lauded for his ability to wreak havoc on opposing offenses. His job as a defensive lineman demands a certain level of violence and physicality that helps him impose his will on whoever stands in his way.

Every other day, he's a husband, mentor, student-athlete and all-around good guy—guided by his unwavering faith and driven by an undeniable will to succeed.

Downs possesses a sense of selflessness, maturity and advocacy not often found in 21-year-old college students. While football has given the University of Oklahoma junior a platform and spotlight that burns brightly every time he takes the field, it's what Downs does when the lights are off and no one is watching that truly defines him.

"Giving back and paying things forward is what living is all about. To me, that's what a life of fulfillment looks like—and Ethan definitely gets that at a young age," says Brent Venables, OU's head football coach.

Downs has given Oklahoma fans plenty to cheer about during his two-plus seasons

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“It’s what you do beyond the material things and how you serve others that matters the most.”

—ETHAN DOWNS



Clockwise: Ethan Downs carries a load of canned food during the GIVE Mission drive. Downs led the Sooners in tackles and was ranked fourth in the Big 12 in tackles for loss last season. Downs with his father, Nathan. Caroline and Ethan Downs at their wedding with Sooners defensive lineman Reggie Grimes. Alongside his fellow Sooners, Downs volunteers at a beautification project for a Miami Gardens, Fla., elementary school.

with the Sooners. He led the team and ranked fourth in the Big 12 Conference in tackles for loss last season, and has steadily developed into one of the program’s most respected leaders.

The 6-foot-4, 265-pound Weatherford, Okla., native has all of the ingredients needed to become an All-America candidate—size, quickness, strength, instincts and a football IQ that is off the charts. His dedication and work ethic have earned him the respect of coaches and teammates, and his game-day performances have put him on the radar of most NFL scouts.

That is the stuff Downs grew up dreaming about. It’s what gets his motor running at full speed every time he straps on his helmet and pads. Needless to say, football is a huge part of his life.

But it’s not the most important part. Far from it, actually.

“I’m at a point now where I have to be more responsible, more mature. Obviously, school and football are extremely important to me, but before that comes my wife, Caroline, my family and





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my faith in God,” says Downs. “The accolades and awards—and if I’m fortunate enough to go to the NFL—all of that is great. But it’s fleeting.

“It’s what you do beyond the material things and how you serve others that matters the most.”

According to his parents, Downs has lived by those words for as long as they can remember.

“Even at a very early age, Ethan was always thinking of others, always so unselfish. As parents, you try to encourage and nurture that sort of thing—but it just came naturally to him,” says his father, Nathan Downs. “He’s always had a desire to help others.”

Growing up, Downs was constantly involved in charitable activities that included fundraisers for various causes and community food drives. He regularly volunteered to help less-fortunate kids, and in doing so, forged an abiding friendship with Skylar Bivens, a schoolmate who suffered from a variety of health issues until his untimely passing in 2019 at age 17.

“Ethan basically adopted Skylar and was

almost like his guardian angel, and they became such great friends during the time they got to share together,” says Downs’ mother, Dee. “Ethan has always had the ability to put himself in other people’s shoes. That’s just the way his heart and mind work.”

The most recent example of Downs’ willingness to help others came when he learned about the OU Food Pantry, which relies on donations and serves hundreds of students, faculty and staff each month.

Downs hatched an ambitious idea that would become known as the GIVE Mission (Greatness in Various Efforts) involving OU’s athletic teams and fraternities and sororities in a friendly competition to collect the most food, clothing, toiletries and money.

“Ethan came to us with this plan and wanted to get as many OU students involved as possible. He was so passionate about putting it together, and we just fell in love with the idea,” says Matt Marks, director of the OU Food Pantry. “Ethan





worked with a lot of student leaders, organizing and planning, and was extremely determined to make this effort something that would impact the Food Pantry in a big way.”

The campaign launched in February and concluded by the annual OU spring football game in April. In all, more than 20 athletic teams and Greek organizations participated. They gathered 7,000 pounds of donated goods.

“Ethan was the driving force behind the GIVE Mission and a big reason why it was such a great success. We already have plans to continue it into the future,” says Marks.

Joe Castiglione, OU’s director of athletics, watched Downs’ idea unfold from inception to fruition, and he could not have been more impressed.

“The way Ethan approaches everything he does with such passion and enthusiasm—he can’t help but inspire everyone around him,” says Castiglione. “He has a servant’s heart and truly is the embodiment of a great leader.”

For Downs, the genesis for the GIVE Mission was simple: He was looking for a way to bring together as many of his teammates and fellow OU students as possible for a worthwhile cause. The OU Food Pantry turned out to be the perfect motivator.

“It was absolutely awesome to see it all come together. College is very demanding, so it was truly inspiring to see how many people wanted to get involved,” says Downs. “If I’m able to use my voice to potentially inspire young people to join forces behind a great cause, that fills my heart up in so many ways.”

This fall, Downs was named to both the Chuck Bednarik Award and Lombardi Award watch lists—two of college football’s most prestigious honors.

As Downs continues to gain attention with his play for the Sooners, the work he has done outside Owen Field has not gone unnoticed. He was OU’s male nominee for the 2022-23 Bob Bowsby Award and was selected to the 2023 Allstate AFCA Good Works Team, which recognizes contributions to the community and world at large.

Downs works during an OU service trip to a Miami Gardens, Fla., school.

Downs also has participated in SOUL Mission service trips to Florida, where he and teammates assisted with an elementary school beautification project; Brazil to support a school’s construction; and South Africa, where the team served at a Johannesburg orphanage and local school. Venables established SOUL Mission (Serving Our Uncommon Legacy) to help with players’ personal development both on and off the field.

“We live in a world where all too often the main question is, ‘What can I get?’ Ethan is the exact opposite of that. He’s all about how much he can give,” says Venables. “He has an amazing perspective of gratitude and thankfulness about him.”

Downs’ position coach Miguel Chavis could not agree more.

“Ethan loves his teammates and has a real passion for the game. He’s the kind of kid who rises to every challenge. And he’s just as amazing off the field as he is on it. I’d take a dozen just like him.”

This summer, Downs married his high school sweetheart, Caroline Whitefield, a former Class 4A All-State soccer player and current student at Southwestern Oklahoma State University in Weatherford. While the couple recently settled down in Norman, Caroline still attends SWOSU via online classes.

“She’s my everything. She’s my better half. To be able to go home, get a hug and a kiss—that’s the best,” says Downs. “These days, there’s more at stake in everything I do, both on the field and in the classroom. To be the best student-athlete and husband I can be, I have to do a good job of budgeting my time and making sure I have my priorities in order.”

Downs credits his parents for being good role models for him and his two brothers. And he credits Venables for creating what he describes as an “amazing culture” within the OU football program.

“Coach Venables is building the kind of culture here that prepares young men not just for football, but for everything that comes after football. He preaches accountability, preparation, discipline and values—and if you embrace those things, your chances to succeed in any situation are going to be so much greater.”



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