Matt Forté reflects on football, family and legacy

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Matt Forté, a former NFL player who got his start with Tulane Green Wave Football, spoke with President Michael A. Fitts as part of the Presidential Speaker Series. (Photo by Kenny Lass)

Former Green Wave great and Chicago Bears star Matt Forté returned to his alma mater last Friday, headlining a Wave Weekend conversation in which he traced his journey from a football-obsessed child in Slidell, to a record-setting Tulanian, to one of the most versatile and respected running backs in the National Football League (NFL).

As part of his Presidential Speaker Series, Tulane University President Michael A. Fitts welcomed Forté to a packed Dixon Hall, where the crowd included dozens of cheering Chicago Bears fans. Fitts described Forté as one of Tulane's most successful alumni and someone who "epitomizes the Tulane principle of 'not for oneself but for one's own'."

"He has a unique combination of intelligence, determination, natural talent and grit that defined his success, not just on the gridiron but in life," Fitts said.

Forté, who played 10 seasons in the NFL with the Chicago Bears and the New York Jets, set an NFL record for receptions by a running back in a single season and is one of only three players in league history to record at least 1,000 rushing yards and 100 receptions in a single year.

With his wife Danielle and four children sitting in the front row, Forté spent much of the hour-long conversation discussing his love for Tulane and the role it played in his life, both athletically and academically.

His new memoir, "Stay in the Game: Making the Most of Every Season," blends stories from his football journey with reflections on family, faith and the lessons that shaped his views on success, resilience and legacy.

"When you choose to go to Tulane, it's not a four-year decision. It's a 40-year decision," Forté said, noting his finance degree from the A. B. Freeman School of Business prepared him for life after football. "When you get your Tulane degree, it really means something."

Forté said Tulane taught him what it truly means to be a student-athlete — and how he had to stay committed to his studies to prepare for life after football. It is a message he emphasizes whenever he speaks with college athletes.

As a Tulanian, Forté was one of the most accomplished players in Green Wave football history. He racked up more than 4,200 career rushing yards and delivered a record-breaking 2007 season in which he ran for 2,127 yards — the most ever by a Green Wave player. In his senior year, he earned First-Team All-Conference USA honors, AP Third-Team All-America recognition and semi-finalist spots for several national awards.

Forté traced his love of football to his preschool years when he became obsessed with the game while living in Lake Charles. His father Gene, a former Tulane defensive lineman and team captain, wouldn't allow him to play until he was 7. By then, the family had moved to Slidell.

"I remember the day we signed up and they give you your helmet and shoulder pads, and I think I slept in the pads that night," he said. "I went out to the practice field and in the first contact drill I got knocked on my back." He said he got back up, tried again and mastered the play — an early glimpse of the determination that would carry him through Slidell High, Tulane and the NFL.

Drafted in the second round by the Chicago Bears in 2008, Forté spent eight seasons in Chicago and two with the New York Jets before retiring.

But he says he's found his greatest purpose off the field.

His What's Your Forté Foundation, founded by him and his wife in 2013, supports youth in the Chicago area through family services, economic empowerment and educational programming. The couple also partners with Pro Athletes Outreach to help professional athletes navigate financial and personal challenges.

Before Forté came out on stage, Fitts shared Tulane's recent successes with the Wave Weekend audience, which included many returning alumni and parents of current students. Fitts cited soaring research achievements, expanded scholarships and more than $1 billion in new campus facilities — from The Village's living and learning residential community to Tulane's expanding downtown campus.

Fitts also celebrated recent athletic achievements, including national rankings, conference championships and new facilities.