

Former Detroit Lion Emphasizes Importance Of Making Right Decisions To Local Teens

By Bruce Rolfe

Former Detroit Lion Tony Semple thought he had the world figured out with all the answers when he was the same age as the 40-50 students he spoke to at the 10th annual Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) Chicken and Hog Combine last Saturday at C-S High School.

But through his journey from high school through college and later as a professional football player, Semple discovered he was wrong.

Semple, who enjoyed a nine-year NFL playing career with the Detroit Lions from 1994-2002, attended Lincoln High School in the small town of Lincoln, Illinois. He said as he drove into Climax Saturday, he saw many similarities to the environment he grew up in. Small town surrounded by farmland, and youth who are at the age where they will make decisions that could impact them for the rest of their lives.

Semple intertwined stories outlining mistakes he made in his life along with the importance of making the right decisions as you walk through life.

As his playing career flourished, he obtained financial rewards he said turned into a multi-million dollar contract. Yet, he was just as empty as he was when he didn't have money.

Semple said when he reached the NFL, he had God in his life, but he wasn't carrying it far enough. He had God on Sunday and then it was all about him again on Monday. He labeled it as having the token God. When he needed him, he pulled the token out of his pocket and tucked the token back in his pocket until he needed him again.

Then Semple told the group he started a relationship with Jesus Christ, accepting him into his life, which he said helped him become a changed man.

He told the youth his faith opened his eyes and adjusted his attitude towards what is important.

The former NFL player stressed to the young teenagers while it is great to compete for titles and reach goals, it is more important not to let those championships, trophies and money define who they are.

"You've got to find something that fulfills you that is not from this world," points out Semple. "And if you don't, you will always be searching. If you don't, you're never going to be good enough and you'll never be good enough for yourself."

The former Lion emphasized the importance of treating everyone the same, while ignoring peer pressure to be part of the "in" group.

"I want those kids to go back and I want them to help somebody. I want them to remember and go, 'you know what, maybe I need to give that guy that's not in the popular class over there a chance,'" said Semple in an interview following his visit with the youth. "Break down those stereotype barriers that we face every day as a society. Because if they don't get it now, it gets worse when they get older. Now all of a sudden, I start judging people by the position they hold in the community."

When he visits with youth, Semple stresses the importance of making the right decisions, especially to the age group he was interacting with last Saturday at C-S High School.

"I enjoy talking with kids because they are at such an impressionable age right now that they could make or break the rest of their lives in the decisions they make and who they make them for," observed Semple. "I think it's important to be able to reach kids like this. I think we don't put enough stock in teachers and facilitators, and counselors. Anybody that's hands on at this age. I think it's at a crucial stage, so anytime I get an opportunity to come back and talk to kids, I like to."

Semple offered tips to C-S youth as they ran through the Chicken and Hog agility drills and weight lifting exercises. C-S senior Bobby Taylor and junior Dony Sowles were two of those students Semple offered encouragement to as they lifted weights on the bench press. Both C-S students were inspired how Semple overcame many of life's challenges to get to where he's at today and hoped others grasped his positive message.

"I thought it was really good. It brought something new to our lives and what we can look forward to," said Sowles, who said it meant a lot to him that Semple took the time to offer some weight lifting tips.

Senior Trevor Haas, who has heard Semple talk at previous FCA camps at Albion College, said he was glad some of his schoolmates had the opportunity to hear the former NFL player's message about making right decisions.

"He's a really good speaker. I think that he was a good person to come here and talk. I could tell he probably affected a lot of people. He affected me in FCA," said Haas.

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Because he enjoys being around young people so much and feels it's important to give back, Semple and a friend established the Tony Semple Foundation for Hope.

The Foundation provides a unique 3-4 day experience for today's life challenged youth through hunting or fishing outdoor adventures. Semple's adventure camps provides an opportunity for all to hunt and fish and share their faith, all while learning about each other's incredible life journey.

"We take kids that are suffering a debilitating illness, a life deficiency. We take them hunting or fishing. Get them into the great outdoors. I have a passion for hunting and fishing. I love to just work with kids that might not have the means or opportunities to get out there themselves," observed Semple, who said he started the foundation in 2004 and has enjoyed watching it grow.

Drafted in the 5th round in the 1994 NFL draft by the Lions out of Memphis, Semple said his nine-year NFL playing career was rewarding, eye opening and a learning experience. He said he experienced full circle what the game's all about, including the business aspect of it.

He enjoyed playing in 112 NFL games, including 47 as a starter. His playing career spanned a period of time when the Lions franchise went through numerous coaching changes starting with Wayne Fontes all the way up to Steve Mariucci and five coaches in between. And then he faced the reality that his services were no longer needed. "But it's been a great journey and a great road for me. It's opened up a lot of doors," said Semple. "I used to think it was just for me because I deserved it. But now I realize it was just a platform for God."

He said watching the number of players come and go during his playing career was an eye opener as well. When he first came into the league in 1994, free agency departures or signings wasn't as prevalent as it is today and the team basically stayed the same.

"By the time I left in 2003, you would have 50 percent turnover. You would come in there and half of the team was different. It's tough when you're playing and it's a family game. You bond with the guy you're playing next to because it's a battlefield," points out Semple. "It was hard to try to reestablish that connection year after year with different strangers."

The former Detroit Lion offensive guard said he was fortunate to play with many good teammates, but having the opportunity to play alongside and block for Barry Sanders, was one of the highlights of his career.

"He was something special," points out Semple, who resides in Ada, Michigan with his wife, and 6-month old and 2 ½-year-old sons. "I think what made me admire him more than just his ability on the field, was his character off the field and his demeanor. He wasn't a showboater, and he wasn't a guy who was always looking for the headlines. It just kind of came to him. He was very subtle about what he did, very good at what he did and he just kind of put an exclamation on it. He wasn't flamboyant in any way. That's what I admire most about him and really respect him. It's pretty awesome and humbling to be able to play and be a part of that guy's career knowing you had a piece of that, and an honor to play for a guy like that."

So how did a nine-year NFL veteran wind up making an appearance in Climax?

Semple said he first met C-S Jr. High instructor, Athletic Director and varsity football coach Kevin Langs at an FCA camp at Albion College five years ago and the two developed a good relationship. Semple appreciated the way Langs has helped steer students in the right direction for many years, trying to shape them into better people. The former Lion said after watching Langs instill core values as well as be the positive role model he has been for students, he didn't hesitate to accept Langs' invitation to speak to the group of students at Saturday's FCA sponsored Chicken and Hog event.

"When you're at the high school level, you're young adults. You're at an impressionable age. You've got factors that are interfering with your lives that are drawing you in one direction or not. He's a grounded source here at Climax-Scotts. What's really great about it is you say, man, why does he teach such great principles? He uses those great principles that he facilitates in his own life and structure for his family," said Semple. "Just all of the life lessons that he can bring to the table is what makes Climax-Scotts so successful. Not just successful athletically. I think if you go back and you look at the character of the kids he tutors and teaches, the impression that he leaves, lasts a lifetime. That's priceless. You're proud when a guy like that says, 'Tony, come speak to the kids'. You're like, absolutely. If you think enough of me to do that. Because I know where you come from, I know what you stand for."

If you would like to learn more about the Tony Semple Foundation visit www.tonysemplefoundation.org or call 616-446-6241.