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NFL Players Moved by Experiences on Reservations, Part I

Randall McDaniel stood on the wind-swept South Dakota prairie taking it all in. The streamers fluttered against the fence surrounding the cemetery. The wreaths, tobacco ties and smaller memorials were just bits and pieces to the larger picture.

The sign at the entrance to the mass grave read “Massacre of Wounded Knee.” McDaniel played in 12 straight Pro Bowls during his Hall of Fame career with the Minnesota Vikings and Tampa Buccaneers, but nothing prepared him for this moment. The wind blew through the buffalo grass as he looked over the site where the U.S. government’s 7th Cavalry slaughtered hundreds of unarmed men, women and children. Some estimates placed the number of dead at 300.

It was his fifth trip to Jim Warne's Warrior Society youth football camp at the Pine Ridge reservation. He learns something with each visit. This time Warne, a good friend and former college teammate, took him out to see a piece of American history. The experience was almost unexplainable.

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"To see where all the people were buried, let's just say it puts things in perspective," McDaniel said in a near-whisper. "Everybody goes through struggles in their history somewhere along the line. But when [the massacre] happens right here in your own country ... this is very eye opening."

Earlier this summer, former Pittsburgh linebacker Marv Kellum was a guest coach at the Seneca Nation football camp in upstate New York. For Kellum, who played for the Steelers when they won their first two Super Bowls, it was his first trip to the rez. Whatever might have been shared during the two-day camp, he walked away with an education he never learned in school.

"I never even knew the true meaning of the word Redskins," Kellum told ICTMN. "I had no idea it was linked to the government's bounty on men, women and children. It's hard to believe that the government was paying money for killing people. Most white people are ignorant to all of that. I was. How can you have a [mascot] name like that once you know what it means?"

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The NFL opened the 2015 season in the midst of a national firestorm surrounding the Washington Redskins name and its defiant owner, Daniel Snyder, who says he will never change the mascot. ESPN analyst and former Chicago Bears head coach Mike Ditka says the change-the-name movement is a joke; and the latest ESPN.com poll is running 75 percent in favor of keeping the name. It's Game On in Indian country and Native Americans are not backing down in their fight for respect. Natives have been joined by senators, state legislators and others, strengthening their voice on the battlefield.

In the middle of it all, two former NFL players are coming at the debate from a position of respect. Their visits to Native reservations have helped guide their perspective.



McDaniel and Warne were on the same offensive line that paved the way to Arizona State's victory over Michigan in the 1987 Rose Bowl. Warne brings his Warrior Society youth football camp to South Dakota every summer. McDaniel, a NFL Hall of Famer named to the NFL's All-Decade Team of the 1990s, clears his schedule every year to be a part of something special.

"I knew it wouldn't be like the movies. I'm glad to be able to learn something new every time I come here," McDaniel told ICTMN. "The Native American perspective, just like the Afro-American perspective, was left out of the history classes I took in school. I knew when I was growing up there was slavery in my own culture, but they never talked about that in the history books. They mentioned it, but they swept aside what it was like for the people that actually lived it. So it's nice to be able to come here and learn the other side of the story from an Indian perspective."

Read Part II: [NFL Players Learn on the Rez, Part II](#)

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