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Marc Daniels

University of Central Florida, mdaniels@athletics.ucf.edu

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It's Time for Daunte Culpepper to Come Home

By Marc Daniels
UCF Forum columnist
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As we have watched and cheered the growth of the UCF football program, the one who kickstarted it all has been missing from the celebration.



Daunte Culpepper — who played for the Knights from 1995-98 — helped put UCF on the map before he was drafted by the Minnesota Vikings. (Photo courtesy of UCF Athletics)

Inside the Wayne Densch Sports Center — the home of UCF football — the hallways and team meeting room feature the names and pictures of former Knights who have gone on to play in the NFL. There you will find the likes of **Brandon Marshall '06**, Blake Bortles, **Latavius Murray '12**, Matt Prater, **Shaquill '16** and **Shaquem '16**

Griffin, Asante Samuel '13 and perhaps the greatest of them all — Daunte Culpepper.

It has been more than 20 years since Daunte played his last game at UCF, and these days most recruits who visit the campus and football facility don't know much about him or just how special he was.

As UCF embarks on a new era under Gus Malzahn, excitement for the football season is sky high. Coaches, players and fans can't wait to fill the Bounce House once again. The buzz for the new year has brought back some of those former Knights to meet the new coach, and some have [even committed or added to their financial support](#) of the program.

But something remains distant. Someone who played such a significant role in putting UCF on the map and elevating the UCF brand is rarely found on campus.

Daunte Culpepper helped build the program, but on game days and throughout the season he rarely comes home.

There is no fallout or hidden story that divides him from the program. These days Daunte keeps a low profile. He rarely makes public appearances and has dealt with a number of challenges over the years away from football.

“If you never saw Daunte Culpepper play football at UCF, then you missed one of the game's best players.”

If you never saw Daunte Culpepper play football at UCF, then you missed one of the game's best players. He chose UCF over the Gators and honored a commitment he and his grandmother made when every big school in the country doubted he would make grades and be eligible. When he did, those schools all came back begging him to choose them. He chose to be a Knight.

In his first game at UCF in 1995, Daunte completed his first 12 passes and the memorable moments never stopped. At 6-4 and 250 pounds, he played quarterback but ran faster than running backs and was tougher than linebackers. He had a rifle for an arm and was the most accurate passer in the country throughout his career.

He was the face of a UCF team that was making its transition into the highest level of competition in college football and led the charge of so many Knights' road games in big stadiums against more famous brands.

In 1997, Daunte led UCF into Memorial Stadium in Lincoln, Nebraska, against legendary coach Tom Osborne and the Cornhuskers. Nebraska had won the national title in 1994 and 1995. They were ranked 6th in country that Saturday afternoon. Daunte Culpepper was the best player on the field and every Nebraska player and fan knew it before the first quarter ended. His 10-yard touchdown run gave UCF a 7-0 lead and the

Knights led 17-14 at the half against a Nebraska team led by quarterback Scott Frost — yes, the same Scott Frost who would serve as UCF's football head coach from 2015-17.

The Knights lost that game, 38-24, but a sold out stadium of almost 80,000 gave a standing ovation to Daunte and the Knights for their performance that day. It wasn't the first time Daunte won over fans of the opposing team to cheer for him. He was that electrifying to watch.

Today, his name is still all over the UCF record book. He remains the UCF record holder for touchdown passes, passing yards, 300-yard games and completion percentage. He still sits in the top 10 of almost every other passing or running category.

While UCF had numerous players drafted into the NFL before Daunte, his first-round selection of the Minnesota Vikings in 1999 became the biggest draft moment for the program. In total, Daunte played 11 seasons in the NFL.

He has come back for an occasional golf tournament or an alumni event. But as we have watched and cheered the growth of the UCF program reach heights many thought was not possible years ago, it seems that Daunte Culpepper should be more visible.

All players eventually stop playing. They start a family and raise children and venture into things away from the football field. They sometimes come back to rekindle the memories and meet up with old teammates and share stories about the past. They remind us of what once was and what now has become.

Daunte Culpepper is the greatest athlete I have ever seen at UCF in my 27 years. I have watched others come and play the quarterback position and play it well. Daunte was just different. He was special. He was one of those players who come along every 25 years — or at least you hope they do.

He gave us so many highlights and played such a big part as one of the pioneers of the UCF football program. Part of what makes Knight Nation so special is how we treat our own. As a new season filled with so much excitement is about to begin, it's time to for Daunte Culpepper to come home again to a place he helped build and be part of the celebration.

Marc Daniels is the radio play-by-play voice for [UCF Athletics](#) and serves as director of broadcasting for the Knights. He can be reached at mdaniels@athletics.ucf.edu.

