

# The NFL Player Who's Not Ashamed to Call Christ His Leader

The Carolina Panthers head to Super Bowl 2016 hoping to raise the Lombardi Trophy for the first time in franchise history.

They'll be led by electrifying quarterback Cam Newton, whose big passes and quick footwork have made for one of the highest scoring offenses in the NFL.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the ball, the team's defensive captain is making strides of his own off the field.

Cherry Starr, the wife of iconic NFL quarterback Bart Starr, informed the team their linebacker, Thomas Davis, is the 2016 winner of the prestigious Bart Starr Award, exemplifying outstanding character and leadership at home, on the field and in the community.

Cherry Starr congratulated Davis by saying, "You have to be a pretty special person to receive this award."

Davis is thrilled with the honor.

"It goes back to doing things the right way," he said. "You know, being a good father, being a good, productive citizen, knowing that I have kids at home that are watching my every move. I have young kids in our community that are watching everything we do and they're trying to imitate us. So that's something I try to live my life by."

Davis, who was among 10 nominees, was voted in as the award's 29th recipient by his peers, both NFL opponents and teammates.

His teammate, Pro Bowl cornerback Josh Norman, says, "He's that leader you want in the locker room. I think for all 32

teams, I can say that if they had a Thomas Davis in there it would be a different team.”

Pro Bowl linebacker Luke Kuechly added: “He impacts everyone’s life in different ways. He’s got camps. He’s got back-to-school drives. He feeds people around Thanksgiving and the holidays. His on-field stuff is great, but off the field is when you really get to see Thomas Davis.”

Davis values the support from his peers, who know the man he is, saying, “You know we don’t go out and do the work in the community to gain recognition. We go out and do it because we care about the families and want to make a difference.”

“And people understand when it’s genuine and you’re doing something from the heart,” he continued. “So many moms struggling to raise their kids right now, you know. I watched my mom cry, sometimes struggling to raise me and my sister, and living that, you know that there are people going through it so you want to reach out.”

It’s been a season of reaching new heights. The Panthers enter the Super Bowl with rising expectations as the top-seeded team in the NFC. At the core of their defensive success is Davis, earning his first Pro Bowl appearance while also becoming the franchise’s all-time leading tackler.

Davis reflected on his remarkable season, saying, “I couldn’t have written a better script for things to go the way they have in my career. You know, all of the things I had to endure – coming off three ACL tears, not really understanding or knowing if my NFL career would be able to continue.”

With three tears over three seasons all in the right knee, Davis is the only NFL player to successfully return after three ACL injuries.

Davis recalled, “Not really knowing if the team would be willing to stick by me. A depressing time in my life. If I

didn't lean on the Lord, I never would have made it through it. All the times I've had to cry on my wife's shoulder and we prayed together and asked God to give me the strength to continue to fight through it. It turns into motivation. It turns into drive."

The guy the players call TD, Thomas Davis, is clearly the heart and soul of the Super Bowl-bound Panthers' defense. But the Panthers' captain has his own leader.

When asked, who he follows, Davis simply and emphatically said, "Christ. Without a doubt, you know, trying to strive for perfection, trying to do things the right way on a daily basis, all the while following Christ."

"Jesus Christ has changed my life in so many ways," he said. "To send my wife, Kelly, my way – I would look at that as the biggest thing that has allowed me to become the person that I am. We started to grow in our faith together."

Together, Thomas and Kelly tackle hopelessness through their Defending Dreams Foundation, leading the charge to defend the dreams that children hold dear, and helping to make those dreams become a reality.

Davis explained what compels him to give.

"It all starts by taking that first step," he said. "And in order to accomplish anything in life you have to step out. It's not going to happen by you sitting back dreaming. If you dream it, you have to live it. And if you're going to live it, you have to believe in what you're doing."