

Double D delight in Grafton

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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<http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/052313/driverSM.png> **Packers legend Donald Driver overwhelmed by reception from John Long Middle School students, teachers who earned visit with Goodwill collection effort**

Donald Driver caught 61 touchdown passes in his illustrious career, but the Green Bay Packers standout never scored more points than he did Tuesday morning at John Long Middle School in Grafton.

After making his way through a wildly cheering crowd of students and staff members at an assembly to celebrate the school's victory in a Goodwill Industries donation contest, Driver was quick to return the favor.



"This is the best welcome I have ever received," said Driver, flashing his trademark smile as he addressed the crowd. "I have never seen anything like this."

The Packers' all-time receiving leader, who retired after the 2012 season, was expected to spend a half-hour or so at John Long as the school's reward for winning the Pack'er Up Donation Challenge to benefit Goodwill Industries of Southeastern Wisconsin.

Instead, Driver's visit lasted well over an hour, as he stayed to pose for pictures, sign autographs and congratulate scores of adoring fans, many of whom donned Packers jerseys.

During the April contest, the Grafton school donated 78,022 items to the agency, including gently used clothes, toys, games, housewares and other items for needy families. That total was nearly double the second-place effort in the competition, which attracted more than 860 elementary and middle schools.

For the grand prize, John Long received a personal appearance from Driver, who serves as a Goodwill spokesperson, as well as 12 autographed copies of his popular children's book and a Packers helmet he signed.

"You collected 78,000 items. I don't know how you could do it," Driver told the crowd during an all-school assembly attended by more than 470 students, teachers and staff.

Driver said he was wowed by the school's donation effort as well as his reception, which included spectators along Highway 60 and outside Grafton schools who held welcome banners,

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waved and cheered as his limousine passed on its way to John Long. Immediately after entering the gymnasium, he scampered into the bleachers to exchange high fives and hugs with students.

During the assembly, Driver thanked the students, noting that their achievement reflected a special measure of concern for others less fortunate than themselves.

“It doesn’t stop now. This is just the beginning,” he said. “It’s not all about receiving. It’s about giving.”

The program included an extended question-and-answer period, during which 30 eighth-grade students queried Driver on topics ranging from his childhood to playing-day thrills to motivation for helping others. He was also asked about teaming with Peta Murgatroyd to win television’s “Dancing With the Stars” last year.

Driver responded with an impromptu demonstration of dance moves, enlisting unsuspecting teacher Elisabeth Schalk as his partner. Schalk and fellow teacher Beth Anzia organized the school’s collection campaign with the help of principal Greg Kabara and other staff members.

Driver concluded the program by telling his John Long fans, “It is truly an honor to be here today and see what you have done.”

Kabara was impressed with the Packer legend’s visit, noting it will be long remembered by everyone. After taking the top prize in its first Pack’er Up Challenge attempt, he said, the school had only six days to prepare for Driver’s arrival, including organizing a program and making decorations.

“Everything went so well. It was just a great experience,” Kabara said.

“Our school did a terrific job, but it was also the community that supported the collection drive. We can’t thank them enough.”

Schalk attributed the success to motivated students.

“You can always tell kids, ‘You can do anything if you put your mind to it,’ but this really showed it,” she said. “We had 476 students say, ‘Yes we can.’”

In winning the contest, John Long beat out many larger schools in bigger communities, said Pat Boelter, Goodwill chief marketing officer.

“John Long School just worked harder than everyone else,” Boelter said. “And the assembly is one of the best I’ve seen.”

Having one of Wisconsin’s most popular sports celebrities in their gym was the biggest thrill of the school year for most of the students. But several eighth-graders said they were even more taken by the way Driver conducted himself.

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“He was really down to earth. It felt like he was one of us,” Chad Dickmann said.

For student Abigail Valerius, the Pack'er Up Challenge wasn't just about rubbing shoulders with a Super Bowl champion.

“We worked so hard to win this because we wanted to help people,” she said. “Everyone who gave something is a winner.”

Image Information: GREEN BAY PACKERS star Donald Driver joined a throng of cheering students at John Long Middle School in Grafton Tuesday for a group photo. Students earned the visit from Driver by winning Goodwill of Southeastern Wisconsin's Pack'er Up Donation Challenge. Photo by Sam Arendt