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FINDING PURPOSE AT THE END OF A LEASH

FORMER CNU ATHLETE AND NAVY SEAL CHALLENGES STUDENTS TO TURN ADVERSITY INTO DISCOVERY.

by [Kelley McGee](#) | November 20, 2024

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Chris Cappa knows what it means to battle—both on and off the field.

As an outside linebacker at Christopher Newport, he stared down plenty of challenges on the gridiron. As a devoted son, he made the difficult decision in his junior year to leave college because his family needed help “putting food on the table.” And later, as a Navy SEAL, he navigated life and death situations in unfamiliar corners of the world—for a time with a four-legged partner by his side, a Belgian Malinois named Miki.

It’s a journey Cappa describes as a winding road, with a few hard choices and missteps along the way. But he believes most life experiences, no matter how difficult, are lessons in growth and resilience. And that was the message Cappa shared recently with Christopher Newport’s football team during a pre-game pep talk. He encouraged the players to embrace the challenges life throws their way, and uncover the opportunities for growth. Life may not always follow the playbook, Cappa told them, but with enough

perseverance they can find their way—and their purpose.

“I came to campus in 2006 from a single parent household. Up until I arrived, I had to do most things on my own. But the football coaches and staff here were so welcoming. They helped me get my classes and financial aid squared away. They helped me develop as a player, but they cared just as much about me and my academics. That meant a lot to me at that time in my life,” Cappa told the room full of players.

“I carried with me that sense of teamwork and caring as I moved through the Navy and into the SEAL community. There, it was always about the mission, the team, and your brother next to you. It was about being selfless, because as a SEAL, we were there to defend the country and freedom at the highest possible level. I carried with me some important lessons I learned on the football field with Coach Kelchner and Coach Lustig and Coach Wood: look out for your teammates, be selfless, and take accountability for your actions. These are all values I know Coach Crowley and his staff carry on today in the CNU football culture. These were the pillars I built my success upon. I learned all this at CNU.”



When Cappa reached out about speaking to the team, it was a “no-brainer,” said Crowley, also a former teammate of Cappa.

From CNU Football to Navy Leadership: A Journey ...



“One of the most rewarding parts about coaching at your alma mater is being able to check in with old friends, and constantly be surprised at the successes they are having,” he said.

“Furthermore, building connections between past players and our current team is always something we try to do as a program. Chris’ story is inspiring, and I knew it would resonate with our players.”

And it did.

“As a fifth-year senior, I’ll be stepping into the challenges of the real world in just a few weeks,” said Amaan Miller ’24. “Hearing how Chris discovered his purpose only after joining the Navy SEALs gives me hope, as I believe there’s something out there for me that I have yet to find. His journey reminded me that everyone’s timeline is different and that some paths take time to unfold. It’s a powerful reminder to stay committed to hard work and stick to your values—good things will come in their own time.”

“I was grateful to be able to hear what Chris had to say. It was an honor to be in the presence of a Navy SEAL and I’m blessed CNU football gives me the opportunity to make these connections,” said Maddox Lee ’27.

Cappa wore his Captains jersey proudly during his visit to CNU, but these days you’re more likely to find him in a T-shirt bearing the logo of a cause close to his heart: the Warrior Dog Foundation.

Cappa works with foundation founder and former Navy SEAL Mike Ritland to rehabilitate and find permanent homes for retired military K-9s, often by reuniting them with their former handlers after the dogs and soldiers are retired. Supporting these K-9 heroes is deeply personal to Cappa. He experienced firsthand the extraordinary

loyalty and courage of these dogs during perilous missions with Miki. Cappa has adopted Miki, and in the process, found a new purpose in helping other warrior K-9's receive the care and respect they deserve in retirement.

"After I got out, Miki was transferred to another handler and did two more deployments—five in all. He was a force multiplier wherever he went, a true warrior. But like many of these special animals, they don't always transition well into civilian life. They get PTSD and anxiety. Because they are viewed as 'assets' by the military, they face potential euthanization after service. Because I'm a trained handler, I've been able to work with him and he will be with me for the rest of his life. These dogs don't have the Veterans Administration, they need organizations like the Warrior Dog Foundation to help them get the retirement they deserve."

Cappa is also enjoying his own retirement from service. Now married with two young children, he can be found on any given Saturday in the stands at ToweBank Stadium, cheering on his former team. Recently he was invited as an honored guest to the President's Box to watch the Captains take on William Paterson University. Cappa was also invited to the 50-yard line —with Miki at his side—to participate in the traditional coin toss.

"CNU feels like home," Cappa said. "I'm grateful for everything this school has done, and I try to let current students know, 'This is a special place. Use the opportunities you have here to grow and learn.'"
