



Hampden-Sydney's Kirk Rohle to receive NCAA Award of Valor for his heroic act

By Kayci Woodley

Former Division III football student-athletes Kirk Rohle and Ben Rogers have been best friends since age 8. The two met at a youth football camp and grew up across the street from one another in Mechanicsville, Virginia. Their friendship evolved on the football field at Hanover High School and a brotherhood formed at the collegiate level, when both chose to play for Hampden-Sydney College near Farmville.

Rohle, a running back, followed offensive lineman Rogers for years as he cleared paths and created gaps for Rohle to dart through. On Jan. 25, 2012, Rohle darted faster than ever—and this time it was Rohle who made sure Rogers knew where to go.

For his act of heroism, Rohle will be honored Jan. 18 with the NCAA's Award of Valor as part of the annual NCAA Honors Celebration.

Middle of the night

"Fire, fire, fire!" Rohle's roommate screamed as he roused others on the second floor of the house. At 4 a.m. Rohle couldn't quite register the situation until smoke rolled into the room.

In nothing but boxer shorts, Rohle and six other roommates funneled down the stairs and outside as the flames engulfed their home.

A quick head count revealed that only eight of the nine housemates were out. Rogers wasn't one of them.

"I realized all of the sudden that Benjamin wasn't with us," Rohle said. "I just went right back in. It didn't click to me the consequences of a fire. When you care about someone, that's your first instinct and you just go with it."

Back in what was left of the house, Rohle couldn't see his own hand, let alone walls or objects. Struggling to breathe and using

muscle memory to feel his way around, he shouted for Benjamin. Rohle's cries were drowned instantly by snaps and cracks of the woodwork, but somehow Benjamin heard those cries and followed Rohle's voice to the outside. The two actually passed one another on the first floor as Rogers made his way out.

"It was an oven in there," Rohle said.

"I don't know how he heard me, and the smoke was so thick we must've walked right past each other without even knowing."

For about two minutes, Rohle continued to sprint throughout the house, unaware that Rogers was safely out. But when he saw the floor of his room cave in, Rohle accepted defeat and shifted his focus from finding his friend to finding a way out.

Disoriented and seeing nothing but orange, Rohle knew something was wrong when he began to feel wet. Not like sweat, but a wet feeling as the heat started to literally melt away his skin.

Then he felt the tile. There was only one tile surface in the house. Although a bare foot to the burning hot tile would later need extreme treatment, Rohle knew he was almost out.

"I ended up with third-degree burns on my foot because the tile was so hot, but that saved my life," Rohle said. "I knew across the hallway would be a window. I sprinted across the room and hit a bunch of stuff but made it out."

Rohle was out, and panic set in for his housemates. Although he was conscious, Rohle had been burned on 47 percent of his body. Still, he called out and demanded that his teammates find Rogers inside the house. After two-and-a-half minutes of survival mode, the pain finally stung Rohle as his roommates picked him up.

The field that brought Rogers and Rohle together so many years ago served as a landing pad for the helicopter that would later transport Rohle to the VCU Medical Center.

In the 10 minutes it took emergency personnel to arrive, Rohle was able to talk with his younger brother, also a member of the Hampden-Sydney football team.

"I was screaming at the top of my lungs because the pain medicine wasn't doing enough for me," Rohle said. "Luckily my brother was there to keep me calm.

Everything around me seemed fake, and when the helicopter finally came I said either kill me or knock me out."

Road to recovery

Four days later, Rohle woke up in a hospital bed, convinced that Rogers, his fellow team captain, hadn't made it out. Rohle's parents tried telling him Benjamin was fine, but it wasn't until Rohle saw him in person that it became real. The tears flowed immediately.

"I couldn't believe it," Rohle said. "It was



Kirk Rohle was instrumental in Hampden-Sydney's success both as a running back and team captain for the Tigers. He rushed for over 1,093 yards in 2011, which was an Old Dominion Athletic Conference best.



Members of the Hampden-Sydney football team gather for a prayer just days after the fire. The group huddled in the end zone where Rohle scored his last touchdown of 2011.

just such a relief, and I couldn't even move because I was in a stationary body cast and had a tube shoved down my throat, but the tears alone showed my emotion."

Rohle was bedridden for four weeks and underwent eight surgeries during his stay at the hospital. Rogers made the 90-minute drive twice a week and on weekends to spend time with his friend.

When Rohle was in the intensive care unit, hospital officials had to open a larger waiting room to fit all his visitors. The first day, nearly 50 former or current Hampden-Sydney football players were there to show support. Many donated items to those who lost everything in the fire. Frank Beamer, Virginia Tech's head football coach, gave Rohle a call to wish him well.

Hampden-Sydney head football coach Marty Favret reminds himself every day of Rohle's courageous act by wearing the "Band of Brothers" bracelet. More than 1,000 bands were sold to raise money for players who lost their 2009 ODAC championship rings in the fire. The number "9" was printed on the bands to represent Rohle's jersey number and the number of Hampden-Sydney football players who lived in the house.

"I told my seniors at the beginning of the season you don't just earn that type of brotherhood; it comes through time," Favret said. "It's not just something that's started in one season; it's a lifetime friendship. There's a reminder every day that they were terrific young men on and off the field, and they're really the model kids that we're trying to create at Hampden-Sydney."

Rohle and Rogers were part of a perfect

10-0 record that resulted in the program's sixth ODAC championship their sophomore season. Favret watched the two lead and grow together, Rogers with a more vocal leadership style and Rohle with a calm, collected approach.

In Rohle's junior year, he suffered a broken leg, missing the last seven games of the 2010 season. But he bounced back and produced a 1,000-yard rushing senior season and led the Tigers to another ODAC championship and third consecutive NCAA postseason appearance.

While doctors were puzzled and pleasantly surprised by Rohle's speedy recovery from injuries sustained in the fire, it wasn't surprising to those close to Rohle.

"Kirk is a stubborn guy in a good way, but he bounced back after the broken leg and got himself in shape for senior year," Favret said.



After being hospitalized for a month and a half, Kirk Rohle (at left, with Ben Rogers) returned to campus in mid-March and graduated in the summer of 2012.

"So it was typical Kirk to set a goal for himself and go after it in terms of getting out of the hospital."

Rohle recovered nearly four months faster than doctors had estimated and was able to take three classes while in the hospital. Receiving in-home care for two weeks after leaving the hospital, Rohle returned to campus in mid-March and graduated this past summer.

His foot that touched the tile healed faster than any other part of his body. He has no issues today with his skin. Scars are visible on his back, arms, and outer leg areas, but Rohle enjoys sharing his story when asked.

One way was when Virginia Commonwealth University conducted a fire-awareness week. As someone who once ignored fire safety rules and viewed them as just another restriction, Rohle now relates well with college students and explains the reasoning behind the guidelines.

"The rules are there to try and save your life," Rohle said. "There's a reason why you have a fire drill, so that when you're in a situation like I was you know what to do when you're blinded."

As an account manager at Loveland Distributing Co. in Richmond, Rohle tells his story to clients, and he has enjoyed interesting discussions with many of them who have also experienced structural or personal damage from fires.

Would he do it again?

"I would do that for anybody," Rohle said. "It was an opportunity where I could help someone. I know I'd do it again. I might throw on some boots before next time, though."