

Eagles fans show Carson Wentz at annual charity game they're 100 percent behind him

By Cody Benjamin | June 1, 2019



PHILADELPHIA -- Carson Wentz has been missing for 13 of the Philadelphia Eagles' last 37 games, including arguably the biggest one in franchise history.

That is nothing to shrug about in the NFL, where jobs are lost as quickly as they're earned. It's especially notable in the City of Brotherly Love, where one of football's most fervent fan bases is guaranteed just 16 days a year to satisfy their biggest craving.

But Wentz's 64 percent attendance rate since 2017 did not stop the Eagles from committing to him as their franchise quarterback this offseason, a decision confirmed by their farewell to Super Bowl LII hero Nick Foles and one that will assuredly cost the team well more than \$100 million when the ink dries on Wentz's inevitable long-term contract.

It's also not stopping Philadelphia, the community, from wholeheartedly championing him as its own.

Eagles fans have helped craft this story before, crowning Wentz and his aw-shucks Midwestern grit as Delaware Valley's long-awaited autumn hero as early as 2016, back when the reddish-haired star was just a North Dakota State phenom -- more beacon of young QB hope than actual record-breaking rookie.

But three years later, things have changed. The Eagles may have gotten to a Super Bowl in large part because of him, but they won it for the first time without him. And while a big payday may be on the

horizon, a second straight year with a season-ending injury ensured he'll enter 2019 still in search of his first playoff appearance.

That, however, doesn't account for a greater reality: This city is still all in on Carson Wentz.

Want proof? You got it on Friday night.

The first-place Philadelphia Phillies were out of town, but the swollen masses still shuffled in and out of Citizens Bank Park, where 15,000 fans and 29 different Eagles joined Wentz for the quarterback's second annual AO1 Foundation softball game.

Charity slow-pitch is typically a light and loose affair, and Wentz's version was no exception, even with more than \$50 million in 2019 Eagles salaries represented on the diamond. Jason Kelce, of Super Bowl parade fame, walked up to "Who Let The Dogs Out" and had teammates feed him a hot dog on a home run trot. Wentz entered as an emergency catcher after Lane Johnson stormed off following a throwing error. Tight ends Zach Ertz, Dallas Goedert and Richard Rodgers went back-to-back-to-back on bombs past the makeshift outfield fence to lift Wentz's Team Offense over Rodney McLeod's Team Defense, 17-16.

But beneath the family-friendly shenanigans (Kelce only once offered to pay \$20 for a fan's beer), players and fans alike used the gathering to serve up serious reaffirmation of Wentz, not only as the most popular figurehead of Philly's modern sports renaissance and the unquestioned leader of the Eagles locker room but, perhaps most of all, as a man worth rooting for.

The thousands in attendance contributed \$500,000 to bring the game's opening two-year haul to \$1.35 million.

Former Eagles like Torrey Smith showed up to offer support. So did current Eagles who weren't part of the game, like Alshon Jeffery and Malcolm Jenkins, who made time for a visit during an offseason in which he's been notably absent from early team activities. Even clear-cut crowd favorite DeSean Jackson, whose reintroduction after five years away from the Eagles drew a giddy roar, ultimately pointed back to the guy who'll be throwing him passes.

"Proud mom was humbled seeing my son being honored and embraced by the fans," Jackson's mother, Gayle, posted on Twitter, unprompted, after the game. "But don't overlook the purpose and passion of Carson Wentz and his foundation and impact they are making in the community. We applaud Carson Wentz."

Wentz's AO1 Foundation, designed to "uplift individuals and communities around the world by demonstrating God's love for His people," has wasted no time leaving an imprint. Founded before his meteoric on-field rise in 2017, it earned Wentz a humanitarian award on the eve of the Eagles' Super Bowl win thanks to the QB donating hundreds of thousands to area charities and personally visiting children with medical hardships. In 2018 alone, it funneled \$850,000 in proceeds from the inaugural softball game into three initiatives -- the Thy Kingdom Crumb food truck, which serves free meals to anybody and everybody in the Philly area; construction of a shelter and sports complex for the underprivileged in Haiti; and an outdoor kids camp with ties to Wentz's North Dakota heritage.



A year later, the Haiti facility is on track to serve 15,000 kids a year, the food truck will soon be accompanied by an ice cream truck, and Philly faithful can't help but take notice.

"I'm just amazed that an Eagle is doing so much," said Morgantown's Kim Murphy, a lifelong fan who has fond memories of Randall Cunningham but insists Wentz is now No. 1 in her book.

Without Wentz's MVP-caliber breakout, his prototypical size, his hints of Ben Roethlisberger and peak Donovan McNabb, maybe the QB's cheerleaders aren't as vocal. At the end of the day, most of these people learned about Wentz because, first and foremost, they like football and they like the Eagles. Like it or not, they are affected and influenced -- often willingly -- by what happens on Sundays at Lincoln Financial Field.

And yet, if there's such a thing as "good-guy bias," it is easily apparent and readily embraced for this particular good guy in Philly. Wentz just may be among the NFL's top up-and-coming stars at sports' most important position, but he's got an army behind him in large part because of his character under the helmet.

"I'm with him through thick and thin, man," said Noah Mascio, 27, of North Wales, attending the AO1 game for the first time with his older brother Ryan of Media.

"He's somebody that this city puts on a pedestal," Ryan said, "but his foundation and what it stands for really brings him down -- it brings him down to our level. You hear 'sports' and 'athletes' all the time, and you think mansions and paychecks, but that's not who he is. He bucks the trend."

That's the sweet irony of the situation. People, whether fans or teammates, come out in droves to show Wentz they love him and trust him.

(And, boy, do they trust. Asked if Wentz is the right guy to lead the Eagles back to the Super Bowl, Rachel Englehardt, of Horsham, replied without hesitation: "I know he is." At least half a dozen others gave the exact same answer: "One hundred percent.")

But one of the biggest reasons they admire Wentz so much is that he refuses to hype up himself. He takes seriously his foundation's core belief in "demonstrating God's love," which means exactly what it says, not "demonstrating Carson Wentz's awesomeness."

"God's love, for me, has radically changed my life," Wentz said before the game. "There's no greater love. You know, the word 'love' gets thrown around so loosely, but there's no greater love than God's love for us. He sent his own son, Jesus, to die on that cross for us -- things you just can't wrap your mind around, that type of love. And so it's really challenged me to just try and love others in that same way. And I'll always fall short, I'll always come up short, but that's just ultimately the example that I strive to live by ... Jesus as that servant leader and as that loving figure. So it's always challenging, but at the same time, there's nothing more rewarding than living for Christ."

Anyone familiar with Wentz's story knows this kind of overt reference to faith is not unusual for him. It's common knowledge now that "AO1," tattooed on his wrist and seen on thousands of shirts across the stadium Friday, signifies the QB's mission to live and play for God alone, an audience of one. The glaring difference between Wentz and someone simply promoting Christian values is how profoundly the superstar's upward focus has touched those around him, whether they're lining up with him at the Linc, meeting him in a hospital bed, or watching him on TV.

Thy Kingdom Crumb, AO1's vessel to feed people both physically and spiritually, was parked outside the Bank before Friday's game. Anyone who passed by its open windows, coated in Kelly green and emblazoned with the Lord's Prayer, was treated to a free meal -- BBQ pulled pork or shrimp po'boys -- along with a friendly reminder: "It's on us ... 'cause He loves you!"

More than 8,000 people have encountered a similar scene since the truck first hit the streets less than a year ago. Not a single one of them, Eagles fan or not, probably cared much that the man behind it has missed 13 games.