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Former SMU receiver Der'Rikk Thompson speaks to current student-athletes like James Proche at SMU's Life After Ball seminar on Wednesday, April 11, 2018.

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UNIVERSITY PARK - After a two-hour spring practice, SMU football players congregate in the third floor of Gerald J. Ford Stadium for dinner, like after any other practice. Only today, there are a few slight differences as the student-athletes eat their spaghetti and chicken.

Spread out across the 14 tables are placards with the names and professions of a group of older visitors, there to speak with the Mustangs for the second Life After Ball seminar of the spring.

It's an initiative that head coach Sonny Dykes is carrying over from his time in charge at Cal, spearheaded by former SMU quarterback and current director of former player relations Ramon Flanigan. It's aimed at preparing the college students with real-world skills and a professional network to procure a job after SMU.

"We tell our guys this all the time, about 4-5 percent of them will play in the NFL. That's just the stats and the stats don't lie," Dykes says. "Ninety-five percent of them are gonna have to go get a job when they're done playing football. So we want to provide them with the best opportunity they can to maximize their education."

Of the 36 guests that have come to meet with the team, 24 are former SMU football players. On one side of the Hall of Champions sits the last first-round pick out of SMU, Reggie Dupard, speaking about his company Fit & Faithful Living.

Across the room is former receiver Der'Rikk Thompson, a little over three years removed from the end of his collegiate days and speaking to current Mustangs like James Proche and Judah Bell about his job as a project manager at Istation, an e-learning program based less than two miles from SMU's campus.

Flanigan wants this spectrum from former NFL players to recent graduates to remind the student-athletes that everyone needs these job skills, even if they will go pro in football first. When Dykes announced the program in early February, several former players reached out to Flanigan wanting to give back to their alma mater.

"That was one of the goals, for these guys to see people who played here, used their SMU networks and became successful," explains Flanigan, whose next priority is to create a four-year curriculum to teach players skills like résumé building. "For the players, it makes real life a reality for them."

The alumni and players talk for an hour, some players moving from table to table to learn more about fields ranging from real estate to coaching. Business cards are handed out and hands are shaken as the players drift away to do homework or play video games as college kids are wont to do.

The program is already bearing fruit. In the first session, safety Mikial Onu spent the full hour with Buddy Ozanne of Probitry Advisors, Inc. At Flanigan's direction, Onu sent Ozanne a handwritten thank you note.

A few days later, Flanigan addressed the team and asked who had followed up with the people they met at Life After Ball. Onu raised his hand, and Flanigan asked quarterback Rafe Peavey to come up and read Ozanne's response to the safety.

When Peavey got to the end of email, it was revealed that Onu had a summer internship at the wealth services business specifically tailored around his football schedule, news that drew an ovation from the team.

"When I was here, I didn't do a very good of networking and connecting with people that could have helped me after my career was over," Flanigan says. "[The current players] see people that love SMU, that want to help them and want to mentor them and impact their lives."