



Miami Hurricanes football players KC McDermott, Sunny Odogwu and Nick Linder spoke to elementary school students April 19 about the importance of staying active and eating healthily. **MARCUS LIM** - For the Miami Herald

HEALTH & FITNESS

UM football players, other athletes teach children about healthy eating and exercise

BY MARCUS LIM

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More than 25 Miami-Dade County elementary school students have been learning from University of Miami football players and other athletes about the importance of a healthy lifestyle.

The youngsters, part of UM's Translational Health in Nutrition and Kinesiology (THINK) program, visited the university on April 19. Players Kc McDermott, Nick Linder and Sunny Odogwu, all on the Hurricanes offensive line, spoke to the children about playing outside and on paying attention to their nutrition — to be the best versions of themselves.

“Playing sports is the best thing for children, it’s the way to be active,” McDermott told the students. “Don’t just stay at home playing Xbox, go outside and shoot some hoops, throw the baseball, do fishing. Be active.”

The students, many children of color who attend Colonial Drive and Henry S. West Laboratory schools, were especially interested in Odogwu, who told them about his experiences growing up in Nigeria.

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“My upbringing is totally different; I had no choice but to stay outside every day,” Odogwu said. “Staying active is the most important thing. As a child I didn’t have shoes, technology, I ran barefoot ... All those things, teaches me everything in life to work hard and to get where I have to get to.”

Odogwu, a right tackle, won the children’s attention through his funny and light-hearted nature, but gave them messages of inspiration.

“Coming to America has helped me advance a life past everybody I grew up with,” he said. “I knew I was different when I was growing up, no one could convince me that I was different, no matter what anyone said. You all can be Usain Bolt, Lionel Messi or Michael Jordan.”

The THINK program has taught the students, in third to sixth grades, the importance of nutrition and excellence, but hearing about it from the athletes helped them understand it better.

“It was so cool to see the football players, most people don’t listen in class, but when someone famous speaks then everyone listens,” said Morales, a 9-year-old from Colonial Drive Elementary School.

Graduate and undergraduate students run the THINK program, partners which are predominantly African American.

UM’s Kinesiology and Sport Sciences Department.

The program started with a \$100,000 grant from an anonymous donor to help minority schools improve their health and fitness. Perry and her team would visit both schools three times a week for two hours, giving a lesson, an experiment and games to keep the children active.

“We see a lower level of physical activity participation and higher rates of obesity and obesity-related problems in the minority students,” Perry said. “It is important to us to go into minority schools to make sure that they know the importance of living a healthy, active, lifestyle.”

Though the program is listed as a clinical trial, Perry said that it isn’t, adding that the National Institute of Health usually funds trials.


The THINK program is just to improve physical conditions and nutritional awareness for minorities, she said.

“This is a grant. We want to see if this can be done widespread in all afterschool programs,” Perry said. “I consider this a pilot grant to see if this can be used if this can be incorporated in a much larger population of after-school programs.”

A game popular with the kids is running with a parachute attached to their backs. The science is to build strength and power. To the kids, it’s a fun game where they can compete against each other.

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“I love kids, and I am all about disease prevention. Teaching them at a young age where they are little sponges now, you can teach them about nutrition and proper movements that they don’t learn at school,” clinical coordinator Emily White-Flanagan said. “To give them the foundation to move forward in life with these building blocks of proper nutrition and proper exercise is incredibly important.”



Nick Linder, center for the Hurricanes football team, told students on April 19 they have to not only take care of their bodies but take care of their grades, too, to be the best versions of themselves. **MARCUS LIM** - For the Miami Herald

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