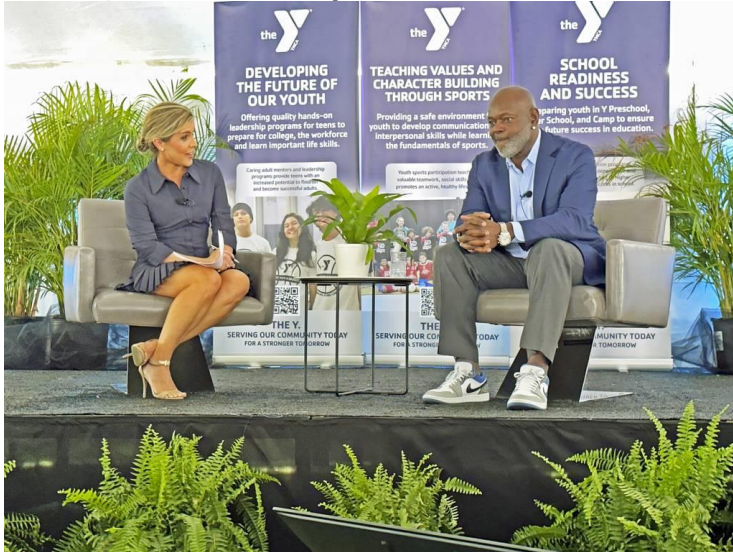


Retired NFL player Emmitt Smith leads YMCA's Inspiration Breakfast

By Gary Curreri

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Three-time Dallas Cowboys Super Bowl champion Emmitt Smith, right, talks with journalist and moderator Paige Kornblue at the Peter Blum Family YMCA in Boca Raton's Inspiration Breakfast. The event drew 650 people and raised nearly \$400,000 for the organization. (Gary Curreri/Contributo)

Perhaps the biggest win for Emmitt Smith, a three-time Super Bowl champion and the National Football League's all-time leading rusher, came on March 1 at the Peter Blum Family YMCA in Boca Raton's Inspiration Breakfast.

“The Y takes kids who might not have a place to go to a place of safety and a place of comfort with people that hear,” Smith said. “The Salvation Army lost its football program when I was growing up, so I had to go to a different place, but I learned how to swim. I learned how to play other sports and had an outlet that kept me off the street...being in an environment that can foster education, camaraderie, a sense of belonging, a sense of caring, and a sense of pride can give you a lot of foundational things that can help you grow.”

The 53-year-old Smith, who won four rushing titles and both the league (1993) and Super Bowl (XXVII) MVP awards, was the keynote and motivational speaker during a breakfast that attracted a record over 650 people and netted the organization nearly \$350,000, according to Jason Hagensick, president and CEO of the [YMCA of South Palm Beach County](#). West Boca High School cheerleaders and members of the school's marching band helped set the stage.



Retired NFL player Emmitt Smith was the keynote speaker. (Gary Curreri/Contributor)

“It is hard to find somebody that doesn’t have a Y story,” said Hagensick, who grew up in South Texas and still remains a Dallas Cowboys fan. “Emmitt doesn’t have a Y story, but he does have a story about mentorship and coaching. He has a story about people taking an interest in him when he was a very young man and a very young athlete.

“I would say that is the secret sauce,” he said, “whether it is at the YMCA, a Salvation Army, or a Boys & Girls Club...any organization that cares about kids is an incredible organization.”

During his 12-year career, Smith rushed for 18,355 yards, breaking the record formerly held by Walter Payton. He also holds the record for career rushing touchdowns with 164. Smith is the only running back to ever win a Super Bowl championship, the NFL Most Valuable Player award, the NFL rushing crown and the Super Bowl (XXVII) Most Valuable Player award all in the same season (1993).

“The Y teaches a lot of values,” Smith said. “These are some of the fundamentals where the young kids get to collaborate with different people. I started at the Salvation Army, and they were spiritually based with athletic teachings and the Y is no different as far as I am concerned.



The Terrific Turtles from the YMCA kickoff the Inspiration Breakfast in song. (Gary Curreri/Contributor)

“That was a place where they don’t see color; all they see is fun and an opportunity to get to know one another,” he said. “You develop friendships, and you have people that care about the fundamentals like education and different types of programs that help these soon-to-be young men and young women grow up to be true young men and young women and have a foundation that they can always point to.”

Smith talked about a variety of topics in a media gathering before answering questions from moderator and journalist Paige Kornblue, who is on the Inspiration Breakfast committee and a long-time supporter of the YMCA.

Smith discussed his Season 3 win on “Dancing With the Stars,” playing for the Cowboys, his rushing record, comparing players from today to yesterday, Tom Brady playing for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the TikTok generation.

“You don’t want to stay the same because if you stay the same, you regress,” he said. “In order to progress, you have to be willing to change and open to change with the possibilities that are out there.

“Yes, I have continued to evolve and will continue to evolve,” Smith said. “I haven’t forgotten the fundamentals of where I have come from and the people who have shaped me into who I am, and I am still in contact with most of them. If you were my friend before I became Emmitt Smith ‘this guy’ you are still my friend today, and they showed up at my father’s funeral (a week before the event).”

Hagensick, who is in his seventh year with the organization, said the breakfast committee consisted of over 40 volunteers who are “very engaged.” He said character values are important in the selection of speakers.



Jason Hagensick, president and CEO of the YMCA of South Palm Beach County, delivers his opening remarks. (Gary Curreri/Contributor)

“They make this extremely fun,” he said. “Any other YMCA who calls and asks what are you doing in Boca Raton, I tell them we have an incredible volunteer leadership led by

Alex Price. The next one is going to be incredible. The last one was incredible. Forty people could be a headache, but here, they get excited, they get pumped and energized, and what is not to love when you look around?”

The first fundraising event at the YMCA over 21 years ago had 17 people in attendance and at the time was called the Champions Ball. Hagensick said the money raised starting around 6 1/2 years ago was around \$75,000, which goes to support YMCA activities like preschool, after school, summer camps and water safety training, among others.

“This event continues to evolve,” Hagensick said. “People come because they want to support the YMCA, which is really the goal. It doesn’t matter what speaker we have. It is certainly beneficial, and we owe it to the committee, we owe it to the sponsors, and we have to have a speaker, who is inspirational and intelligent and tells great stories, but the truth is 650 people are joining us this morning because they want to support the YMCA and the community. Emmitt Smith is the bonus.



Autographed footballs were handed out during a live auction that raised \$100,000. (Gary Curreri/Contributor)

Price, who spent the past four years serving as the chairman of the event, was downright giddy to have Smith as the guest speaker. He grew up in the same hometown of Escambia where Smith grew up near Pensacola and watched Smith as young boys play on the same youth football fields as he did.

“We always knew he would be someone special and he would make it out of our small hometown,” said Price, national director of community investment for the Boca Raton-based Office Depot Corporation. “This is really everything coming full circle and we wanted to create the ultimate pep rally.

“We always want an all-time great, but it goes far beyond that and is someone of the utmost character who embodies the values of the Y,” he said.

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