

PREMIUM MEMPHIS TIGERS FOOTBALL

Son of late Tigers great promised his Dad to get degree. Sunday, he keeps his word.

By [Frank Bonner II](#), Daily Memphian

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Fulfilling his promise to his later father Danton, Will Barto will graduate from the University of Memphis on Sunday. (Courtesy Barto family)

Three years ago, Will Barto's life changed forever.

When he spoke then with his father, Danton Barto, who was hospitalized because of COVID-19, Will never imagined it would be their final conversation.

Shortly after, Danton went on a ventilator. Less than two weeks later, on Aug. 23, 2021, he passed away.

Frisco Bowl snapshot: Memphis Tigers vs. West Virginia Mountaineers

Danton Barto, the Memphis Tigers' football leader in career tackles, was 50 years old.

Will Barto made a promise during their final talk. He, at 22 years old, pledged to Danton that he would earn a college degree in preparation for a football coaching career.

"I was like, 'Hey, I really want to go back to school, and this is kind of what I want to pursue,'" Will recalled. "And he just told me, he said, 'I want you to do what makes you happy and I want you to pursue your goals the way I pursued mine.'

"At the time, we obviously didn't think he would pass. We thought he would make it."

Will kept his word and will officially graduate from the University of Memphis with a degree in physical education and teaching during Sunday's winter commencement ceremony at FedExForum.



Danton Barto (59) was the Memphis Tigers' leader in career tackles. (Courtesy University of Memphis Athletics)

He'll become an alum of the same university where his father played linebacker from 1990-93. A member of the M Club Hall of Fame, Danton Barto had his Tigers jersey number, 59, honored during a Nov. 19, 2022, game against North Alabama, that Memphis fittingly won 59-0.

"He was not going to break that promise to his dad," said Rachel Barto, Will's mom and Danton's ex-wife. "That would have crushed his spirit and crushed his soul. His dad was his best friend. He (Will) would have done anything, and he did."

Since last year, Will has juggled going to school while being the defensive coordinator at Cordova High. John Downtin, Danton's best friend since Will was a child, hired him after being named Cordova's head coach last February.

“I fell in love with coaching football even more,” said Will, a Briarcrest Christian School graduate. “To that point, I had not really had that much experience coaching football. I got into that, and this is when I finally knew, like, ‘Hey, this is my passion. This is what I want to do.’

“It’s turned from just a hobby for me at the start to, now, it’s like I can’t even go more than three or four days without even looking at football.”

How a tiny Texas bowl came up big with the No. 25 Memphis Tigers

Will’s initial interest in coaching was sparked during his father’s coaching journey.

After becoming one of the best defensive players in Memphis football history and playing in the Canadian Football League, including the 1995 season with the hometown Memphis Mad Dogs, and the Arena Football League, Danton embarked on his coaching career.

Will was a toddler when in 2001 Danton became defensive coordinator of the AFL2’s Memphis Xplorers. He was named the head coach the following year and led the Xplorers to a 2005 championship on the way to earning Coach of the Year honors.

Barto coached in various capacities for nearly two decades, including stints as head coach of the AFL’s Las Vegas Gladiators in 2007 and the Kansas City Command from 2011-12. He even served as a scout for the NFL’s St. Louis Rams, now located in Los Angeles.

“I was there at his first game (with the Explorers), and I’ve been there his entire journey,” said Will, who played linebacker at Eastern Illinois University for one season after high school. “And one thing I always wanted to do was be able to coach football.

“Honestly, you need a degree to coach football. ... That’s, like, one of the steps needed, is to get my degree, and one thing he wanted to see me do was graduate. Especially from the University of Memphis, (in the city) he had called home for 30 years.”

Before his father died, Will was working small jobs here and there. Now, he's working toward a career in college football. He's currently interviewing at a few colleges for graduate assistant positions.

"My dad was my hero in everything he did," Will said. "That's the reason I honestly got into playing football and wanted to get into coaching football, was to be like him. And finally, I found a love for it."

Staying the course

Will didn't enroll in school at Memphis immediately after Danton died. He needed time to process what had just happened.

"It was so unexpected," Will said of Danton's death. "It happened, honestly, so quickly. It was tough. I struggled for a couple months with it, obviously.

"Looking back, I kind of went into a little haze there for a couple of months and I kind of woke up one day and was like, 'OK, it's time to get started.'"

Will began at Memphis during the spring semester in January 2022. His goal was to graduate in three years, which meant a hefty workload. He took 18 credit hours in the fall of 2023 and 18 this spring while working full-time at Cordova.

Whenever he felt overextended, Will leaned on his relationship with God. He prayed often and read the Bible.



"My dad was my hero in everything he did," Will Barto (left) said of his father Danton, who played for the Memphis Tigers 1990-1993. Danton died of COVID in August 2021. (Courtesy Barto family)

Tigers Podcast: Frisco, basketball's final nonconference stretch

And then there was Danton.

“I would, honestly, just think back to my dad,” Will said. “I would kind of talk to him through prayer and just be like, ‘Please help me with this one. I need some help with this and this.’ Especially when I was tired and I wanted to go to bed, I would be like, ‘Look, I made this promise. This is what I’m sticking to. I’ve got to keep working my tail off to do this for him.’”

Will spent many late nights on the phone with his mother too. She and his grandmother have been with him every step of the way. Each time Will called, no matter how late, Rachel always picked up.

“Any time that he had a hard class or whatever, he always said what Danton would do,” Rachel said. “Danton was a believer that you have to put in the hard work. Hard work always paid off. Danton was nitty gritty. He was that kind. He was not going to let anything stop him, that’s for sure. Will always saw that, and he raised Will by those standards.”

The road toward his degree also guided Will through his grieving process.

“It’s been very therapeutic in helping me deal with that pain and that struggle I had when he passed,” Will said. “It’s helped me a lot. It really has.

“To kind of look at the pictures of him coaching when he was young, and look at me, and kind of experience what he experienced and be able to live out that promise ...”

Bittersweet moment

Three years after Will’s life-altering experience of losing his dad, he’ll get to celebrate a major life milestone while honoring one of the most important promises he’s ever made.

“I’ll probably be pinching myself that day, all day. Like, ‘Is this real?’” Will said.



Will Barto, right, became interested in coaching football while growing up with his father Danton's journey in that field. (Courtesy Barto family)

“It’s kind of been the goal the whole time. I had it marked. The past three years I had a plan that I was going to graduate in three years, and that’s been the goal. ... It’s going to take a few minutes, I’m sure, to realize what just happened. It’s just awesome. It’s going to be an awesome feeling. I’m excited and I’m proud to be a Tiger.”

Will’s family, including Rachel and his grandmother, will be cheering him on Sunday as they have been through the entire process. It will be a joyous moment, but the toughest part will be the absence of Danton — the main reason Will went on this journey in the first place.

Ryan Silverfield ‘very pleased’ with Tigers’ signing day.

“I want Danton there so bad and obviously he can’t be,” Rachel said. “Danton is always going to be a part of Will. He’s our Barto. It’s bittersweet, very bittersweet. But I’m so proud at the same time. ... My heart is just bursting right now.

“(Will is) a Barto. Bartos don’t quit. They’re going to get it done, and that’s exactly what he’s done.”

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Frank Bonner is the Memphis Tigers football beat writer. He is originally from Indiana but arrived in Memphis after spending two years in Tulsa, covering Oklahoma State football and basketball. He covered high school sports in Columbus, Indiana for two years before getting his Master's degree in Sports Journalism at IUPUI. He earned his Bachelor's degree in journalism from Indiana University.