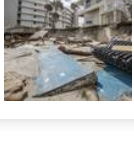


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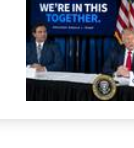
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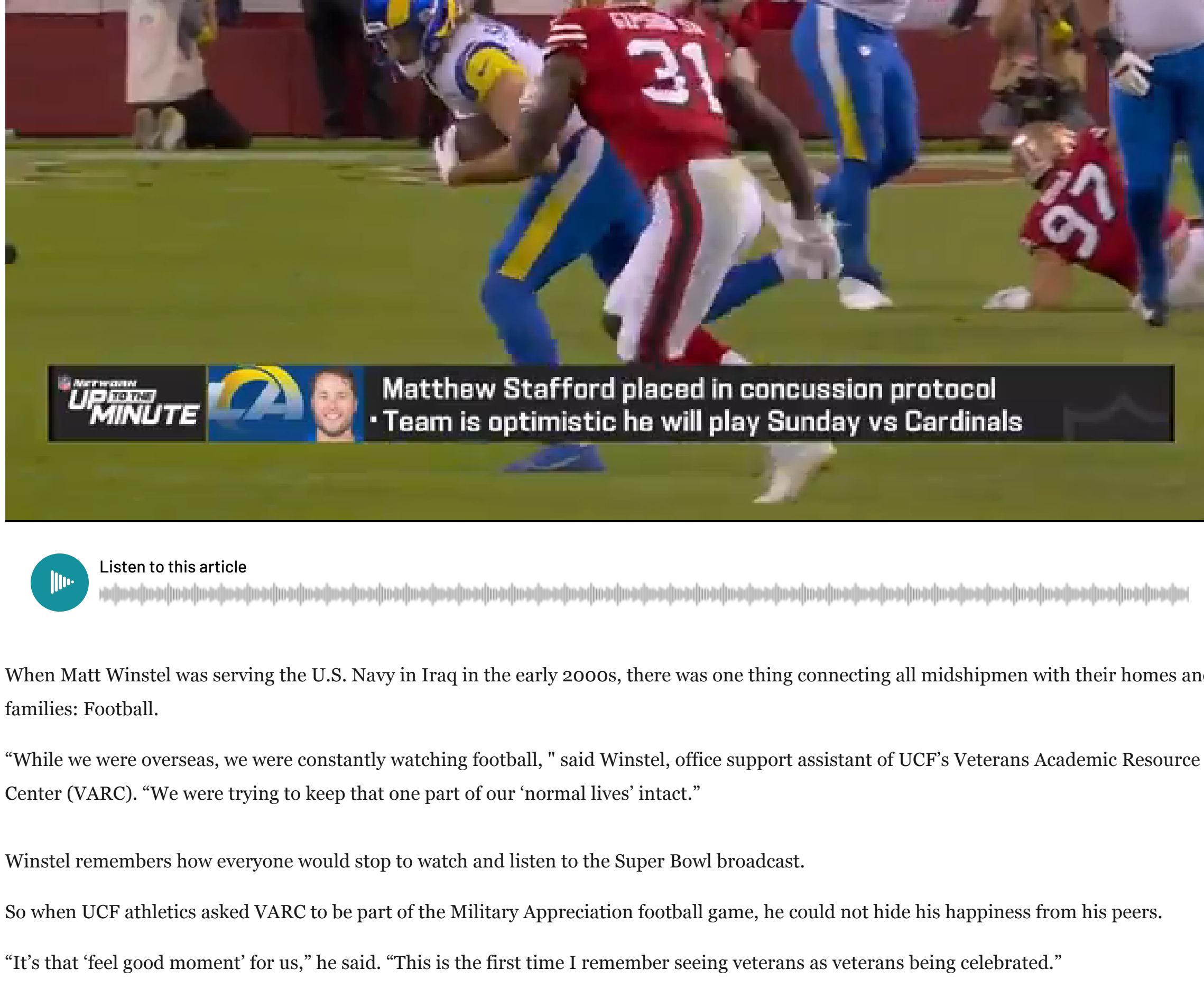
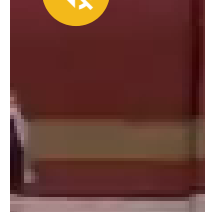
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UCF KNIGHTS

UCF football forges strong bond with military community after Appreciation Day

By Guillermo Hiray Leal Special To The Sentinel • Nov 24, 2021 at 6:00 pm



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When Matt Winstel was serving the U.S. Navy in Iraq in the early 2000s, there was one thing connecting all midshipmen with their homes and families: Football.

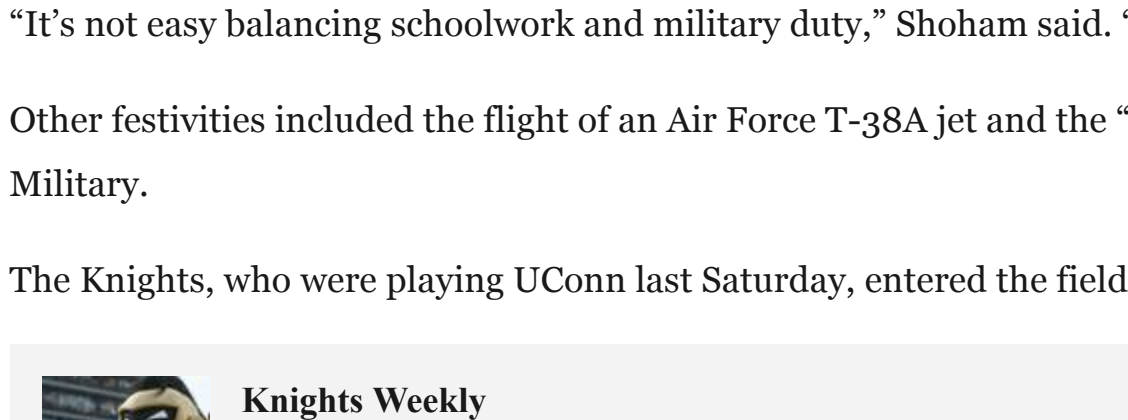
"While we were overseas, we were constantly watching football," said Winstel, office support assistant of UCF's Veterans Academic Resource Center (VARC). "We were trying to keep that one part of our 'normal lives' intact."

Winstel remembers how everyone would stop to watch and listen to the Super Bowl broadcast.

So when UCF athletics asked VARC to be part of the Military Appreciation football game, he could not hide his happiness from his peers.

"It's that 'feel good moment' for us," he said. "This is the first time I remember seeing veterans as veterans being celebrated."

Winstel carried the U.S. Army flag during the March to Victory, a pregame tradition where the marching band walks towards the stadium.



Alongside Winstel, members of the VARC carried to Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard and Marine Corps flags.

Kevin Shoham, a 23-year old UCF senior majoring in biomedical sciences, works for VARC and is a medic for the U.S. National Guard for the state of Florida. He is part of a community that involves approximately 1,400 veterans enrolled at UCF, according to UCF Today.

Shoham and his family entered the Bounce House carrying the American flag and waving it during the national anthem.

Shoham was pleased to see UCF recognize the military population because some veterans have issues adapting to life as students.

"It's not easy balancing schoolwork and military duty," Shoham said. "Things like Appreciation Day show everyone cares about us."

Other festivities included the flight of an Air Force T-38A jet and the "Star-Spangled Banner" being performed by an active member of the U.S. Military.

The Knights, who were playing UConn last Saturday, entered the field waving military flags alongside the UCF flag.

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Active officers also were in the Bounce House.

Sgt. Erik Wright of the Marine Corps attended the game as his platoon was invited to attend the Appreciation Game. The Knights won handily, 49-17.

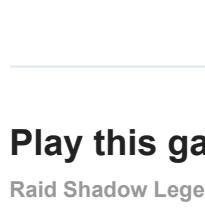
"It's always a warm feeling when someone salutes you," Wright said. "Here, people from all ages were able to do that and understood the importance of our job."

On the field, players wore helmets with a special design of the UCF logo painted red, white and blue to represent the American flag. All six U.S. Military branches' names were written in the helmets as well.

Winstel, who retired from the Navy in 2011, said Appreciation Day also is an opportunity for veterans to remember and recognize their own service, something they might have forgotten after returning from their service periods.

"That's an opportunity for those who set their time serving aside to think, 'Hey, I did something great,'" Winstel said. "That's a part of us that not many will have a shared experience, but UCF Football will help us share those stories."

This story is part of a partnership between the Orlando Sentinel and UCF's Nicholson School of Communication and Media.



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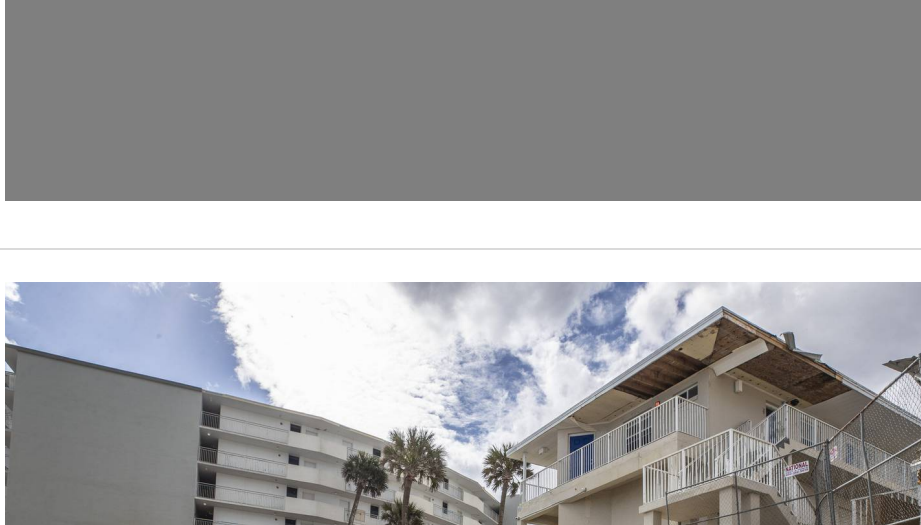
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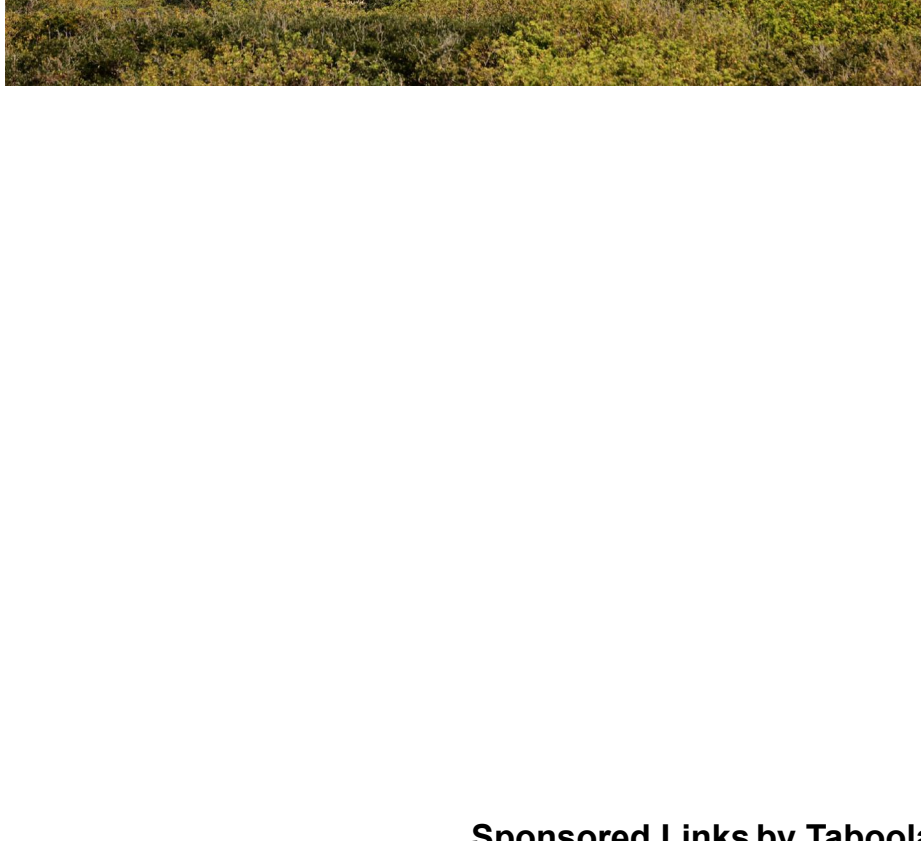
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