



## PRESS RELEASE

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### **ILLINI'S WHITNEY MERCILUS IS THE TENTH HENDRICKS AWARD WINNER**

The Ted Hendricks Foundation is pleased to announce that the winner of the 2011 Ted Hendricks Defensive End of the Year Award is Whitney Mercilus of the University of Illinois.

This year's final ballot featured six very talented players, including Mercilus, Frank Alexander of Oklahoma, Andre Branch of Clemson, Vinny Curry of Marshall, Sam Montgomery of LSU and Nick Perry of USC. Mercilus won the final round of voting, garnering more than 50% of our selection committee's responses. Frank Alexander was second to Mercilus in the final vote.

Ted Hendricks had the following to say about the 10<sup>th</sup> recipient of his award:

"It's another great choice by our selection committee. Whitney Mercilus is our 2011 winner! Discipline and responsibility are his assets, but underneath it all, his innate football ability and work ethic have a lot to do with his success. He is another one that never takes a break when the ball is in play. Whitney, no doubt, was merciless on opposing QBs this fall!"

Mercilus is one of the most interesting characters we have seen, either as a candidate or as a winner of the Hendricks Award. The redshirt junior from Akron, Ohio has been playing American football seriously for just a few years. Prior to that, he was very active in soccer. The reason for that? Mercilus is a first-generation US-born citizen, whose parents immigrated to the United States in the 1980's from Haiti, where soccer predominates the sports landscape. It wasn't until he was in high school that he would finally trade in his shin guards for shoulder pads.

It didn't take long for Whitney to distinguish himself on the gridiron. By his senior season at Garfield High School, he had college coaches attending his games and several scholarship offers. In a recent interview with the Akron Beacon Journal, Mercilus' high school coach, Bob Sax, said he was not surprised by his former player's success. "He is a remarkable kid and driven for excellence. He always puts in the work needed to get better. He did the same thing here at Garfield"

As a redshirt freshman at Illinois, Mercilus used his raw athletic ability to find his way into 11 games. The following season, he employed that highly regarded work ethic and developed into a guy that coach Ron Zook would call his best defensive end. But no one would predict his 2011 success – not even Mercilus. And following a serious accident in the weight room this past spring, the chances were even more remote that he would be considered a top player in the NCAA ranks.

While trying to catch a weight being lifted by a teammate in the Spring of 2011, Mercilus caught the tip of his left index finger under 450 pounds of weight plates. He would lose that part of his finger and would also miss the Illini's Spring Game. Teammates were shocked about the way Mercilus would deal with the serious injury – very calmly and philosophically. Mercilus is lighthearted about the injury to this day, complaining that the worst part of it is that it's more difficult to use a keyboard and pick up coins!

Mercilus maintained his focus. After undergoing painful rehab for the finger, including skin grafts, he concentrated on pairing an improved level of technique with his solid work ethic. The results have been a breakout 2011 season. Mercilus is the NCAA (FBS) leader in sacks (14.5) and forced fumbles (9). He ranks tied for 6<sup>th</sup> in tackles for loss. The 9 forced fumbles tie him for the most by an Illini player in any season and are just one short of the NCAA record. The 14.5 sacks are just 1.5 short of the Illinois single-season record, established by Simeon Rice in 1994.

In addition to his impressive performance on the field this season, Whitney Mercilus is known by many of the children in and around the Champaign community. He is regularly involved with the Hometown Heroes program, making visits, serving as a guest speaker and assisting with various charitable donation drives. He's truly an exemplary student-athlete!

Our congratulations go out to Whitney Mercilus and his family!

Ted Hendricks  
Pro Football Hall of Fame '90

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