

## HIGH SCHOOL

# Behind School of the Future's comeback, a quarterback who has overcome much bigger obstacles

Davon Dillard led the Firebirds to victory in the closing minutes. Off the field, he has endured through family tragedy and more.



Heather Khalifa / Staff  
Photographer

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Published Nov. 2, 2023, 4:52  
p.m. ET

School of the Future quarterback Davon Dillard gets ready for practice in West Philadelphia on Wednesday. There was a time when Davon Dillard would retreat inward whenever all eyes were on him. The autoimmune condition that causes portions of his skin to lose pigment has drawn glances since it began when he was a toddler.

For years, Dillard, now a senior quarterback at School of the Future, would cover his face with a hoodie, dip his head, or just stay indoors.

Last week, however, there was nowhere to hide when Dillard orchestrated a late, game-winning drive that sent the Firebirds (6-3, 4-1) to the Class 4A Public League championship game. They'll play Bartram (4-3, 1-3) at noon Saturday at the South Philadelphia Supersite.

"Be brave, be confident, be calm," Dillard told himself when the drive began at Future's 10-yard line with 1 minute, 27 seconds left and Boys' Latin ahead, 8-6.

Perhaps this was more than just a game-winning drive by a quarterback still new to the position.

For a young man who has endured bullying, mourned the death of his father, and felt as if he had to hide from the world, this might have been the proof he needed to truly realize the courage of his character.

"This made me believe in myself even more," said Dillard, standing outside the school's West Philly campus. "I'm so proud of my team and everything we've overcome this year.

"They gave me more confidence than I ever gave myself. They told me to believe in myself. They gave me hope."



Quarterback Davon Dillard and School of the Future will play in the Public League Class 4A final on Saturday against Bartram.

### **Be brave**

Vitiligo, according to the [National Institutes of Health](#), is an autoimmune condition that occurs when skin cells that make pigment are attacked and destroyed by the immune system.

Dillard, 17, said he was about 3 years old when the condition began.

“Growing up as a child,” he said, “I always hated going on trains, buses, and just being in public.

Somebody would always say something about my skin. I would just always wind up putting my hoodie over my face, trying to hide myself.”

When he was 6 years old, Dillard said, his father, Donte, died of a heart attack at age 33.

It was at the same time that football first afforded some level of refuge.

Perhaps that’s why Dillard had such an emotional reaction in September after an opponent twice commented about his skin when Future played at Archbishop Carroll.

“I hated it,” he said. “I didn’t like the comment at all. I didn’t like it *at all*.”

“I did take it personal because I’ve been dealing with it my whole life,” he continued. “I did feel a little hurt. It took me back to days when I used to get bullied because of my skin. It took a while for me to leave the house, go places, and stop hiding myself.”

Dillard said he verbally confronted the opponent before teammates pulled him toward the sideline, where Dillard burst into tears and slammed his helmet on the turf.

“Nobody ever said anything like that to me on the football field, so it was the first time, playing the sport that I love, that someone was still coming at me about my skin,” he said. “I got to the sideline. I started yelling. I got angry. I started crying.

“I was so angry. I was so mad. I was so upset. I just had so much anger in me and I just wanted to let it all out, but I couldn’t.”

Dillard played the rest of the game against Carroll, but Future eventually lost, 22-6. Now, Dillard says he wishes he let his play do the talking.

"I have to realize that this is something I have to live with for the rest of my life, so I can't let negative comments or let anybody get me out of character just because of what they're saying," he said.

"I feel like if I would've been more mature I could've just went to the sidelines, kept my helmet on, and waited to get back in the game. I could've showed 'em better than I could've told 'em."



School of the Future's game-winning drive led by Davon Dillard last week "almost brought tears to my eyes," coach Dave Hand said.

### **Be confident**

Dillard said his older sister, Chavontay, now 23, typically helps in those situations.

When he was around 8, his sister spent a day with him around the city and encouraged him to wear shorts and a T-shirt instead of covering up.

"She told me, 'This is freedom,'" he said. "Feel free to walk around how you want. You don't have to pay a price just to live on this earth."

Gradually, Dillard says, he revealed himself to the world.

"Once I started experiencing people and places," he said, "it kind of made me realize I don't have to just sit at home because of my skin."

"Now before I walk out the house," he continued, "I take my hoodie off and let people see who I am. Even though I still get the comments, I let them see who I am now. It's a hard shell to get out of. You're not too comfortable around people. If I get around certain people, I might get back in that shell. But now I can let myself be who I am."

Football also has helped his confidence. Dillard played mostly running back until coaches saw him throwing before a practice last season.

The Firebirds' starting quarterback was injured, so coach Dave Hand was seeking reinforcements. Hand, now in his third season at Future, believed Dillard could play the position, but he knew it would take work. Several times a week, Dillard and Hand spent hours working on footwork, refining his throwing motion, and studying defenses. Earlier this season, Hand noticed the work paying off. Dillard also noticed that his teammates began to follow his lead.

“It feels pretty great because at first I didn’t really have the self-confidence,” Dillard said, “but much appreciation for my team, my coaches for helping me getting my mind straight.”

## **Be calm**

Late in that game last week, Dillard authored a drive that Hand said he hadn’t witnessed in his 25 years as a coach. Dillard completed passes to four receivers, including a critical completion to 6-foot-5 senior Immanuel Stamps on fourth-and-13 with 59 seconds remaining.

Junior receiver Mehki English eventually caught the 11-yard, game-winning touchdown pass with 29 seconds left. “It almost brought tears to my eyes to see that drive,” Hand said. “Even talking about it now, I still get chills. To know what that kid has been through and to see him happy and see all that emotion come out just makes it all worthwhile.”

Dillard’s sister sometimes cries tears of joy when she thinks about the little brother who wouldn’t show himself to the world and now is an excellent student with an aptitude for math and science who wants to become a mechanical engineer.

“I am super-proud of him,” Chavontay said in a phone interview. “He brings me joy. He brings me happy tears ... He’s a tough young man and a strong young man to go through what he’s been through with his skin condition and losing his father at young age and trying to find his own path, his own guidance through life.”

Dillard often dishes credit for his progress toward his teammates, coaches, and his sister.

When asked if he also appreciates his own strength and courage, he paused and then smiled.

“Actually, I do,” he said. “I just want to keep that courage and belief with me all day, especially now that I’m getting older. No one’s always going to be there with you to hold your hand when you’re going through something. When I believe in myself and I have courage, I believe I can do anything.”



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