

MATT FORTÉ

WITH *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR DAVID L. THOMAS

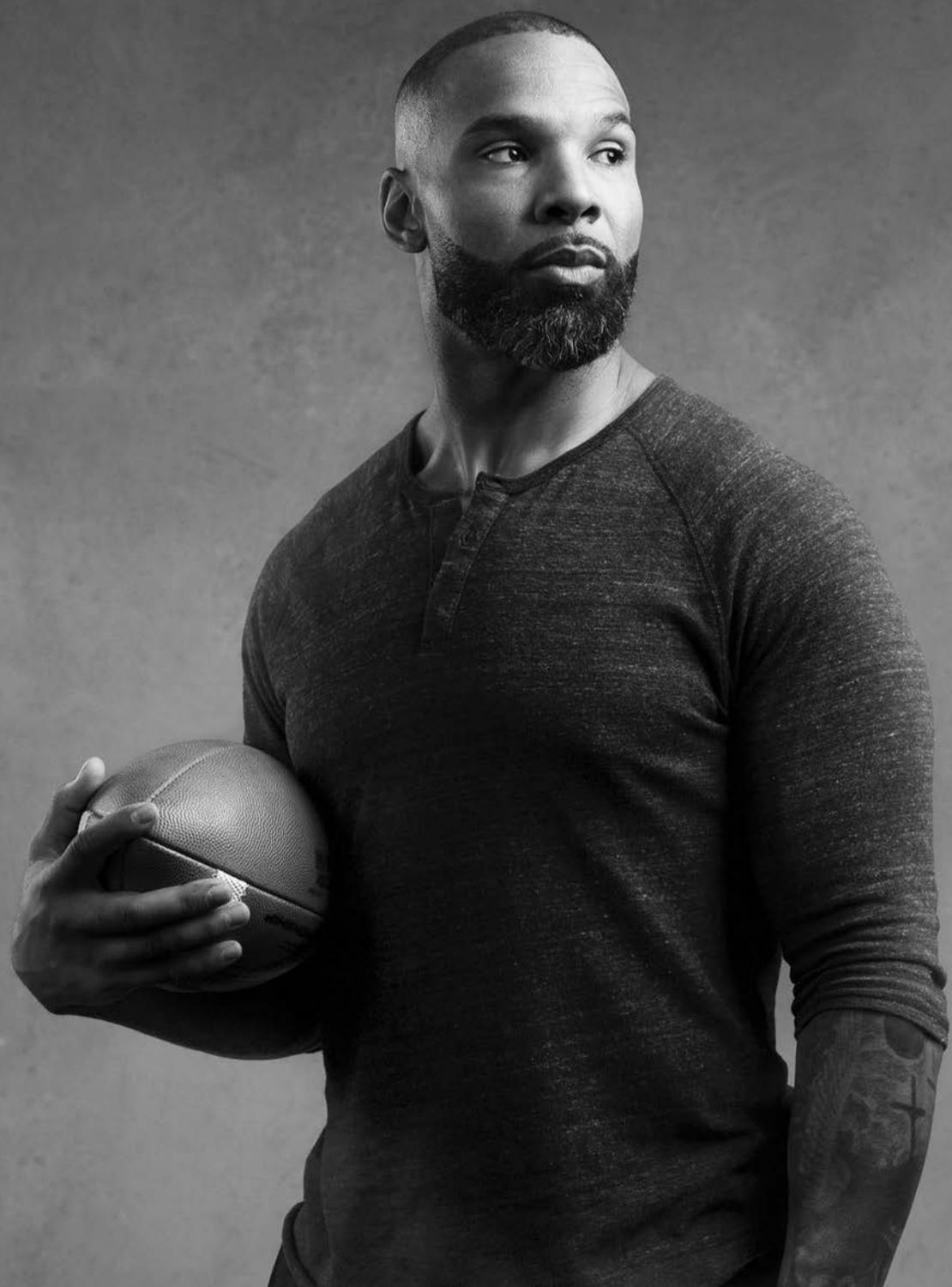
A MEMOIR

STAY IN THE GAME

MAKING THE MOST OF EVERY SEASON

FOREWORD BY
LOVIE SMITH

STAY IN THE GAME



MATT FORTÉ

WITH *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR DAVID L. THOMAS

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Stay in the Game: Making the Most of Every Season

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Contents

Foreword by Lovie Smith	vii
Prologue	xiii
1 Growing Up a Forté	1
2 Sense of Purpose	11
3 Following My Passion	21
4 All It Takes Is One	31
5 Starting All Over	41
6 The Katrina Season	53
7 A Season of Transitions	63
8 Uncommon Work, Uncommon Results	73
9 Answering the Questions	81
10 A New Beginning	95
11 Welcome to the NFL	107
12 Thrown for a Loss	123
13 One Step from a Super Bowl	133
14 Taking Care of Business	149
15 Big Decisions	161
16 The Season Everything Changed	171
17 Culture Matters	179
18 A Feeling of Finality	185
19 New York. New York?	195
20 “Is It Worth It?”	203
21 The End of a Season	211
22 Still in the Game	217
Epilogue	229
Acknowledgments	237
About the Authors	238

Foreword

I'll never forget the first time I met Matt Forté in person. First impressions matter.

I was entering my fifth season as head coach of the Chicago Bears and nearing my third decade as a coach. We had selected Matt in the second round of the 2008 NFL draft, and he and the other rookies were reporting to their first meeting at Halas Hall, the Bears' headquarters.

Matt walked in wearing a suit. I had never seen a new player report to a team in coat and tie, and I never saw it again through the rest of my coaching career. Every other player showed up in sweatpants, sweatshirts, shorts, or T-shirts. Matt was different. He was there to play football, just like his peers, but he also was on a business trip. He viewed his first official day with the Bears as the most important job interview of his life, and he treated it as such.

That day, Matt set the tone—not only for the first day of his rookie season but also for his entire career. Matt was a professional in every sense of the word.

Now that I'm retired from football, I enjoy looking back on the

big games and moments that occurred during my five decades in the sport. But I most relish the opportunity to reflect on the relationships I developed through football, especially with the hundreds of players I was blessed to coach. In a tough sport like football, in a job packed with pressure to win, a coach can't afford to play favorites. But every coach has his favorite players. Mine were those who went about the sport and business of football the right way, and who I knew would give everything they had to the coaching staff and their teammates, 24/7.

Matt Forté was one of my favorite players.

Matt asking me to write the foreword for his book is one of the great honors I have received from one of my former players. I had to chuckle as I thought about the stories I could tell about Matt, because compared to the stories I could tell about other players I coached, some might say my stories about Matt were boring. And that's a compliment to Matt!

The best surprise for an NFL head coach is to not have any surprises. We want our players to be who we believe they are, in every circumstance, and that's precisely who Matt is.

We drafted Matt with the forty-fourth overall pick. Our top need entering the 2008 draft was an offensive lineman, and we filled that need by selecting Chris Williams in the first round. We had also identified "running back" as another crucial need. During our draft preparation, running backs coach Tim Spencer told me that Matt was the running back we wanted. Other running backs were ranked higher than Matt, I guess in part because he came from Tulane University, which was not a powerhouse football program.

But when we watched Matt's film from Tulane, he clearly had all the skills necessary to be a top back in the NFL. He had the speed to go the distance, could catch the ball well, and was a good blocker. In Chicago, a running back has to be big enough and tough enough to

FOREWORD

run between the tackles and play in bad weather. Matt checked those boxes too. And he was intelligent.

Though the draft was deep at running back, we didn't know if Matt would last until our pick early in the second round. Five running backs were taken in the first round, but Matt was still on the board when our turn came again. We were delighted to select him.

Matt arrived in Chicago wearing a nice suit and a chip on his shoulder. I'm sure he felt disrespected after seeing five other backs drafted ahead of him. Our team and Bears fans benefited from Matt's drive to prove the other teams wrong.

Everything we saw in Matt on film showed up on the practice field. All we had learned about him off the field was also evident. He immediately showed himself to be coachable and a student of the game. He quickly picked up our offense—not an easy task for a rookie running back. He was never late for a meeting. He respected and listened to our veteran leaders.

Rookie running backs taken high in the draft usually arrive with enough talent to start for their team. But many don't start right away, because it takes time to learn everything about a complex NFL offense. That was not the case with Matt, and I was able to call him into my office before the first game of the regular season and tell him that he would begin the season as our starting running back.

Matt took great pride in not just starting but in being an every-down back. Even good, veteran NFL running backs encounter issues with catching the ball and pass protection. Again, not Matt. Because of his intelligence, work ethic, determination, and the natural gifts the Lord blessed him with, he was as good a receiver out of the backfield as he was a running back taking a handoff from the quarterback. He also had our coaching staff's complete trust to stay on the field for pass protection.

I was Matt's head coach for his first five years in the league. We

had veteran leadership in our locker room and a strong faith presence, which allowed Matt to come in as a rookie and simply fit in. But being the starting running back for the Bears—the same role on the same franchise that Walter Payton fulfilled as well as any back in NFL history—also carried public responsibilities. The TV reporters’ microphones and print media’s recorders were part of the landscape around Matt’s locker. Let me tell you, there are some players in the league that coaches don’t want speaking into a microphone. Or who at least need to be coached up on how to speak to the media. Again, not Matt. Even though he’s a rather quiet guy, Matt understood the importance of representing our team—and our city—to the media. As head coach, I *wanted* Matt to speak on behalf of our team. He boosted our brand.

Matt also embraced the city of Chicago and the opportunity to be a role model. I grew up playing football in Texas, and I’m proud of my East Texas roots. But there is no greater city than Chicago. The Bears mean everything in Chicago. To his credit, Matt, a southern Louisiana boy, moved to Chicago and became a leader in our community. He still lives there, and he has only expanded his involvement, post-retirement, in making some of the city’s roughest areas safer and better places to live, work, and play. I have three sons who grew up following the teams I coached. I wanted them to see Matt, hear Matt, and be around Matt. I have twelve grandchildren now. Matt is the type of role model I hope they will find too.

Finally, my favorite aspect of my relationship with Matt is that I can call him a brother in Christ. The NFL life appears glamorous to outsiders, but I assure you it is far from that. Once a player becomes publicly recognizable, temptations are everywhere. In Matt’s case, he had the added attention that comes with being a young, attractive running back for the Chicago Bears. I appreciate how Matt is open in this book about his faith and the struggles that came with his celebrity. His honesty is refreshing in today’s image-protecting

FOREWORD

culture, and I know he shares his experiences and mistakes so that others can learn from them. Matt learned and grew as a man. And he never allowed anything to affect who he wanted to be as a football player and teammate.

From the first time I met him—standing out because of his suit—Matt Forté has always taken care of business.

Lovie Smith
Chicago Bears head coach, 2004–2012

Prologue

Ball cradled in my right arm, I turn the corner, dipping my left shoulder ever so slightly to create momentum as I step out of my cut. Squaring my shoulders, I reach full speed by my second step. I lock my eyes on the defender heading toward me. With my speed, I think he'll either miss the tackle or I'll break through his arms and stay on my feet. Either way, I'm not slowing down.

The next thing I know, I'm flat on my back, looking up at the hot Louisiana sun. I remain on the ground, taking inventory of my body parts as the feeling slowly returns to my extremities.

That hurt a little bit.

Water begins pooling in my eyes. Then tears start sliding down my cheeks. I look to the side as the large shadow of a man eclipses the sun.

It's my dad, one of my coaches.

He stoops over until he's close to my face mask, and he says matter-of-factly, "That's football, Son."

I'm seven years old, at my first football practice, and that was my very first carry—my introduction to the sport I had begged to play, even though my dad, a man with eight-inch scars on the insides of

both knees from his own playing days, had told me I should wait a year.

And now he's telling me, "That's football, Son."

The human brain is an amazing creation—able to process a rush of thoughts in mere seconds, and able to rationalize even at a young age. At that moment, I realize not only that football is a physical sport but also how I need to respond to having been planted into the grass of a city park practice field.

With those tears still finding their way down my face, I look squarely up at my dad, bite hard on my mouthpiece, and grunt my reply.

"I wanna go again."

I roll over to my right—realizing for the first time that I hadn't fumbled!—spring to my feet, and head straight to the front of the line of kids waiting their turn to carry the ball in the drill.

The coaches tell the same defender to step in to take me on again.

It's him or me, I tell myself. *And it's not gonna be me.*

When the coach blows his whistle, I take the same first step, make the same turn to the left, and accelerate to full speed. I see the same would-be-tackler heading straight toward me with the same bad intentions. But this time I have the benefit of a lesson learned. Instead of running high—standing too tall and making myself a target—I lower my left shoulder, determined to *deliver* the hit rather than absorb it.

You don't need to have played football to understand what happened next. Athletes in other sports will know what I mean. It's like a golfer or a baseball player who strikes the ball so purely, so perfectly, that they don't feel the contact. Instead, it's as if the ball *jumps* off the clubface or bat, the uninterrupted motion through impact making their swing look effortless. That's the best way I can describe my second career carry in football. I hear the *pop!* when our shoulder pads collide, but I run right through the defender

PROLOGUE

like he was never there and continue sprinting into the wide-open field ahead of me.

As I turn and jog back to the rest of the team, I'm not thinking about the teammate I left on the ground behind me. I wasn't seeking revenge against him. I'm not looking to see what my coaches and teammates have to say about my run. I wasn't trying to redeem myself.

Instead, I'm thinking, *I know I can do this if I do it the right way.*

That thought, that feeling, is immensely gratifying. I have discovered the spark—the fuel—for my desire to play football, for the confidence that I can play this game, especially as a running back. If “that’s football,” as my dad told me, I love it and I want to keep playing.

After that first practice, I loaded my gear into my dad’s car and hopped into the passenger seat. Before he could say anything or ask me a question, I wanted to make a statement, with full conviction in my heart and in my voice: “I’m going to be a professional football player when I grow up.”

I can still hear my dad’s voice whenever I think of that defining moment in my young life.

“That’s football, Son.”

Football is a tough sport. Football players are tough because the game demands it of us. We must choose to be tough to stay in the game, because football is tough by design.

The average length of an NFL career is 3.3 seasons. For running backs—my position—the average is only 2.67. That’s why many who have played at football’s highest level say that NFL stands for “Not For Long.”

By playing ten seasons in the pros, I crushed the odds.

The mindset that allowed me to not just *play* all those seasons

but also stay on the field as an every-down back for the better part of my career, started when I was seven years old, in a city park in Slidell, Louisiana. The day I received the jarring introduction to the sport I would play for the next twenty-five years, my dad told me precisely what I needed to hear. He didn't try to console me when I got knocked down. He didn't try to stroke my ego when I had success. He wasn't even trying to challenge me. True to his nature, my dad told me the plain truth. He has always had the ability to communicate a lot of truth in very few words. And the message packed inside those three little words he spoke as he leaned over me that day was, *You say you want to play football. I support you. But you need to know that this is what you signed up for.*

My dad looked a little surprised when I told him I was ready to give it another try. I might have seen a little pride on his face too—as if he was happy to discover that his youngest son had some dog in him.

From that day forward, I never doubted football would be tough. Or that I would need to be tougher than the sport.

Every down.

Every game.

Every season.

GROWING UP A FORTÉ

“Play for the name on the front of your jersey” is a common way of telling athletes to prioritize the team over individual accomplishments. I played football with a team-first mindset while proudly wearing the jerseys of the Slidell High Tigers, the Tulane Green Wave, the Chicago Bears, and the New York Jets.

I also understood the responsibility that came with having *FORTE* stitched across the back of my shoulders. The generations of Fortés who came before me saw to it that our family name would stand for characteristics like integrity, hard work, excellence, and always giving your best regardless of circumstances.

More than anyone else, my parents, Gene and Gilda Forté, made me both the athlete and man I’ve become. I am eternally grateful for how they raised me, inconspicuously making sacrifices for my brother, Bryan, and me, bringing us up with a foundation of faith,

teaching us the value of hard work, and instilling discipline into our character.

I was born in Lake Charles, Louisiana, on December 10, 1985. Lake Charles is less than an hour's drive from the Louisiana Gulf Coast, where my dad found work in the oil industry after graduating from Tulane. Dad was a standout football player at Texas High School in Texarkana, Texas, and he received scholarship offers from the University of Texas and Texas A&M, among others. But on a visit to Tulane, he fell in love with the food of New Orleans and chose to play for the Green Wave.

Dad was a big guy—six foot three and 250 pounds as a defensive tackle in the mid-1970s—and he earned the nickname “Mean Gene” for how ferocious he was on opposing ball carriers. His Tulane teams had what they called a Big Hit Stick. Whenever the coaches noticed a tackle or a block on the game film that they deemed worthy of recognition, they awarded the player who had delivered the blow an opportunity to write his name on the Big Hit Stick. One season, despite missing most of the season with an injury, my dad signed his name to the stick more times than anyone else. I said he picked up his nickname because of how much he loved to hit people, but it wasn't always a player from the other team. Once, leading up to a game against Boston College, my dad got tired of hearing members of the media talk about how big and physical their opponent's offensive line was. During pregame warm-ups, he was so amped up to play that he hit one of his team's running backs and knocked him to the ground. Dad wrote his name on the Big Hit Stick after that game, but *not* for the hit on his teammate.

If not for repeated injuries, Dad could have played professionally. During his senior season, he was projected as a middle-round NFL draft pick before another knee injury ended his career.

As a youngster, when we visited my paternal grandparents in Texarkana, I was fascinated by an award my dad had won during

his senior season at Tulane. To this day, I can close my eyes and visualize walking into my grandparents' home. From the front door to the right were two bedrooms and a bathroom. To the left was the kitchen, the dining area, an addition my grandfather built himself, and the main room. Against one wall in the main room, a large green-and-gold trophy with a TU logo sat on a mantel. I remember asking my dad what the trophy stood for, and he told me, "That's my captain's trophy that I got from Tulane."

I would stand beneath the mantel and stare up at that trophy. It looked humongous, and I remember thinking, *I want to be a big guy, I want to be strong, and I want to earn a trophy like Dad did.*

After Tulane, Dad started working at the Port of Lake Charles, unloading cargo from ships laden with shipping containers filled with pallets of rice, corn, and flour. He and his coworkers worked in pairs, lifting and throwing 110-pound sacks from those pallets for hours each day. Dad would come home covered in flour and tell Bryan and me about outworking his crew members throwing those heavy bags. Hearing him talk about how hard he worked only expanded my desire to be as strong as he was and to work as hard as he worked.

In his early days at the port, Dad worked with a couple of brothers, and they would invite him over to their house to eat. Their mother could cook up some tasty meals, and for a guy who chose his college based on food, his coworkers' home soon became a popular hangout spot. On one such visit, my dad was sitting on the couch when the guys' sister walked in and immediately captured his attention.

When she left the room, my dad asked the brothers, "Who's that?!"

"That's our sister Gilda." She was living in California with another sister and had come home to visit.

"Y'all didn't tell me you had another sister!" Dad said.

Before leaving that night, my dad tried to get Gilda's phone

number, but she didn't seem interested and suggested that he get the number from her sister.

My dad got the number, and later, on a visit to Texarkana, he decided to give Gilda a call.

When my mom picked up the phone, my dad said, "Hey, this is Gene."

"Who?"

Dad's heart sank.

"You know, Gene. I met you at your parents' house."

Mom's response was along the lines of, "Oh, okay, whatever," so my dad had some work to do to gain her favor. Thankfully, he succeeded.

When my mom tells the story, she says the first thing she noticed was that my dad had one of his size 14 feet sticking straight up with the heel on the ground and the other foot resting on top of it. So her first impression was, *Who's the guy with the giant feet?*

I still get a kick out of hearing my parents tell their versions of their how-we-met story.

Thanks for persevering, Dad!

A Family That Played Together

In addition to working at the port, Dad also worked offshore on a platform for Shell Oil, spending a week or two at a time doing everything from working in the kitchen to driving a forklift to working on the crew boat.

Shortly before I turned six, Dad received a promotion to Shell's offices in One Shell Square (now the Hancock Whitney Center), a fifty-one-story skyscraper in New Orleans and the tallest building in Louisiana. Dad's new job was working in logistics and safety for the offshore platform. With the job change, our family moved to Slidell, northeast of New Orleans across Lake Pontchartrain. Dad woke up at 4:30 every morning to make the commute into the city.

Dad's "Mean Gene" nickname did not fit him outside of football. He is a humble, non-flashy guy who doesn't care about materialistic things. He is loyal and focused, and when he commits to something, he goes full force to get it done, even when it means extending himself beyond his comfort zone. Because of his focus, he can come across as intense when needed.

When Dad noticed Bryan or me getting off track on something like schoolwork, he leveraged that intensity to make sure we understood the importance and urgency of getting back on track. But he was intense like that because he was looking down the road for us, knowing that what he was pushing us to do would one day benefit us. He didn't need a lot of words to communicate because the words he chose were full of impact.

Mom is more laid-back than my dad. She has a gentle, quiet spirit. Dad handled most of the discipline at home, but Mom had a motherly way of letting us know we weren't doing right. More than telling us what we shouldn't do, she preferred to guide us to a better way of doing things. The exception to that gentle, quiet spirit came when Bryan and I didn't get our schoolwork done or got into fights. In those instances, she firmly took care of business.

The fights with Bryan, who is two years older than I am, were not anything more than the typical brother fights, but she hated them. "He's your only brother!" she would say. "You don't have anybody else, and y'all are arguing and fighting over this little thing."

Among Mom's go-to punishments was making us kneel in the corner and press our noses against the wall. That and hugs. Long hugs. She made us hug for extended lengths of time. During a forced hug, I would think, *This is my brother! I ain't going to hug this dude!* But, same as our dad, when Mom meant business, she didn't have to say much to get her point across.

Mom, who was also a very good athlete growing up, balanced our dad when it came to parenting us in sports. Especially because Bryan

and I played the same sports my dad had played, he could really coach us up, whether in the yard or when he was coaching our teams. I think Mom advised Dad to tell us something only once that we needed to do on the field and then give us the opportunity to put his instructions into practice. As a result, even in my youth I developed into an athlete who would allow himself to make a mistake—*once*—as long as I learned from it. Then I kept those lessons learned in the forefront of my mind because I considered it careless to repeat a mistake.

Mom had eleven siblings. Dad was the youngest of three—and the only boy—in his family. Bryan is my only sibling, and I assumed my parents chose to have only two kids for financial reasons. Dad wanted to support our family in a way that enabled our mom not to work outside the home, so she could spend time with Bryan and me. Working offshore and at the port didn't net Dad a lot of money as the sole breadwinner, but it was enough to provide for us. Growing up, we never lacked for any cleats, uniforms, or equipment in the sports we played. He bought us used equipment—even my first bicycle came from a pawn shop—but we had what we needed.

Mom had her hands full staying home with two rambunctious boys, but she was up to the task. She had played basketball and softball in school, and while Dad was at work, she loved taking Bryan and me outside to play whatever sport was in season. During baseball season, she put on a glove and played catch with us. We didn't need to take anything off our fastballs when we were pitching to Mom. In basketball, she could shoot well and play defense against us out in the driveway. When it was football season, she threw passes to us. She also knew what a Cover 2 defense was and could spot an uncalled holding penalty from the stands. Because of her sports knowledge, she turned our outdoor games into coaching sessions.

“Let's work on fielding ground balls today,” she might say to us. “At your last game, your dad was saying that sometimes you try to field the ball off to the side instead of getting in front of it.”

We didn't just have fun practicing sports with our mom; we also improved as athletes from all those hours outside with her.

For most boys, their first momentous sports achievement comes when they beat their father in a sport for the first time. But for Bryan and me, our first milestone was defeating our mom. Only then could we advance to the next level of trying to beat Dad. One common thread with us Fortés is that we don't let our kids win just to let them win. I learned that from my parents, and I'm the same way with my own kids. And they are not going to beat me for a long time!

I'm sure my mom had dreams and aspirations that she sacrificed to stay home with Bryan and me. In fact, after we were both out of the house—and out of her hair—she took a job selling jewelry at JCPenney. Although she didn't have a formal job while I was growing up, I saw her work ethic around the house. She kept our home clean, and she always cooked for us. She also drove us to practices and games and never complained about building her calendar around our schedules.

Pouring the Foundation

Dad found ways to teach Bryan and me lessons even through seemingly mundane tasks.

Our home sat among some tall pine trees. Pine trees are evergreens, so they don't drop leaves in the fall; but all that means is they are constantly shedding old pine needles to make room for new ones. Some people like the look of brown pine needles spread across their yards. But my dad would always clear away the needles. I don't know if he didn't like the look or was just trying to stay busy, but he would often rake the fallen needles into piles in our front and side yards. Occasionally he would tell Bryan and me that he needed to go somewhere for a couple of hours, and he wanted all the piles picked up by the time he got home. My brother and I removed needles from our yard so often that we developed a sweet system to save time. At

first, one of us would hold a trash bag open while the other scooped needles into the bag. But then we figured out that we could cut our time in half by each filling our own bag. So we split up, placing a bag between our heels and using our hands to scoop the pine needles into the bag. He and I might have complained a little while we worked, but we got the job done because Dad said he wanted a clean yard. Even as we grew older, cutting the grass and other chores were just part of living in the Forté house. In case you've never visited southern Louisiana, the summers are long, hot, and humid; so we not only learned what it meant to work hard but also how to work hard in difficult conditions. Despite the heat and humidity, Bryan and I could be counted on to finish our work because we saw the sacrifices our parents made for us. Dad spent almost every day with us doing some type of sport after he returned home from work, whether coaching our teams, throwing us passes in the yard, shooting hoops in the driveway, or sitting on a bucket in the strip of land between our house and our neighbor's house to catch while we practiced pitching for baseball season. He often waited to have dinner until after a practice ended. So we wanted to do what we could to make things easier for him, considering how hard he worked during the week and how much time he devoted to our sports.

Dad often told us that effort doesn't require talent. After Bryan and I started playing organized sports, we learned—and heard over and over again—the coach's cliché that hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard. Dad lived by that motto. He possessed a set of gifts and skills, but he also worked hard to allow his two sons to excel.

More than anything else our parents did for us, they modeled the importance of faith. My mom grew up Catholic, and my dad's father pastored a Baptist church in the small town of Hooks, Texas, near Texarkana. Bryan and I attended a Catholic Sunday school and the Sunday service at a Methodist church, up until the time of

GROWING UP A FORTÉ

our Catholic confirmation and First Communion. After that, we attended only the Methodist church.

Looking back, I consider my younger years of faith a season of life when my roots were shallow. Religion was more of a routine for me, and faith was an add-on to my life rather than the core. But from the Catholic emphasis on routines, the importance of consistently attending church carried me through high school and into college, where the roots of my faith began to grow deeper. I needed time to learn that being a Christian was not about checking off boxes for tasks completed, that Christianity was all about having a relationship with God. But I'm grateful for the faith foundation that was laid for me in growing up a Forté.