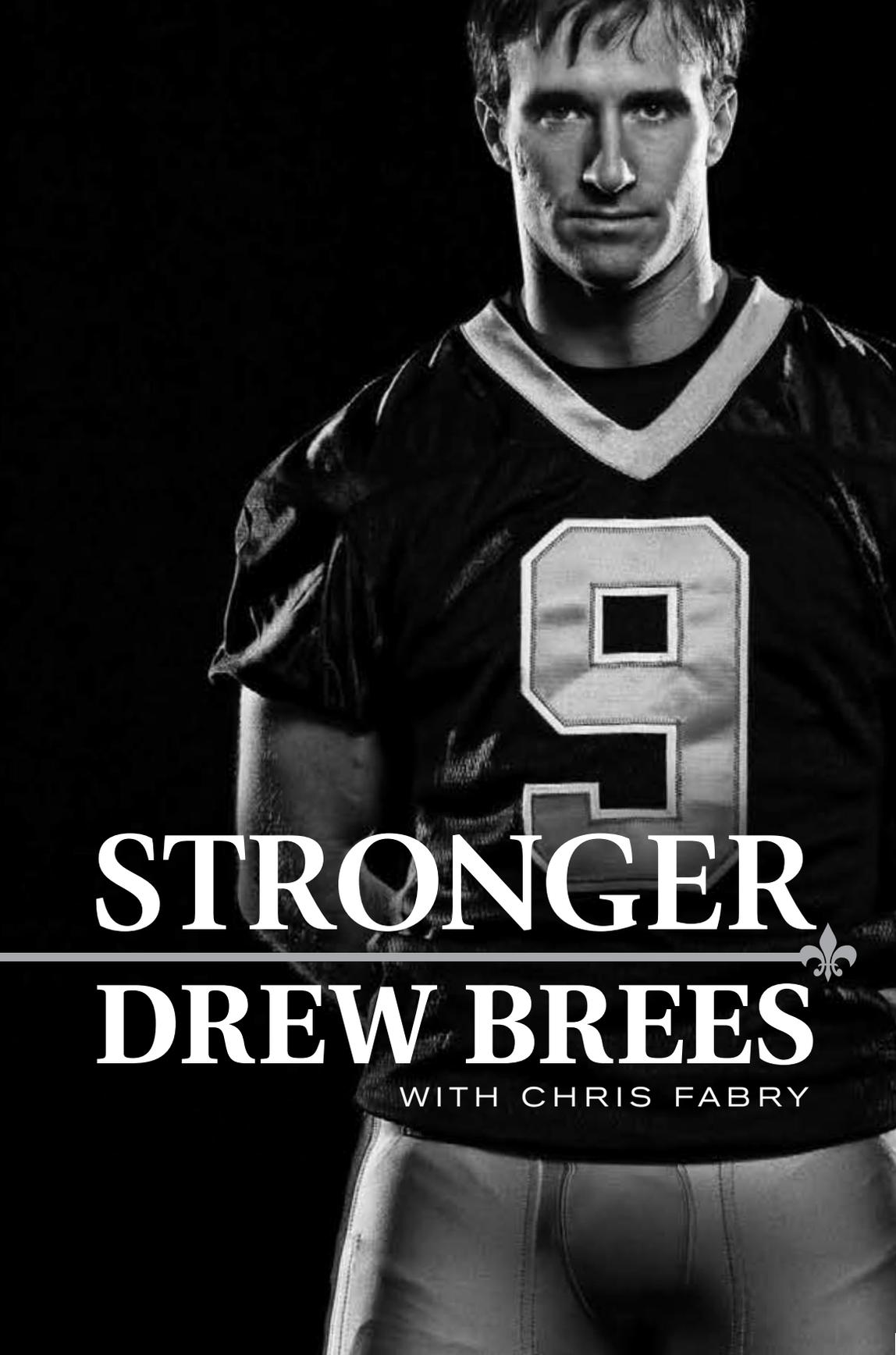


# Coming Back

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**STRONGER**

**DREW BREEES**

WITH CHRIS FABRY

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*To my wife, Brittany, my little boy, Baylen, and our children  
yet to come. You have brought more joy into my life than  
I ever thought possible. You are my inspiration.*

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# FOREWORD

IN THE NFL, there are a lot of good quarterbacks. And very few that can be considered *great*. But what defines greatness in that position? Are the great quarterbacks those who have won Super Bowl championships? Is greatness reserved for the quarterbacks who have broken passing records or have been to multiple Pro Bowls? In my opinion, a truly great quarterback is one who plays at a very high level on the field—and off the field as well. A guy who plays like a champion, not only on Sundays, but also on every other day of the week.

I met Drew Brees at the beginning of the 2003 season, when he was the starting quarterback for San Diego. His Chargers were coming to play the Jacksonville Jaguars, and both teams were 0–4. I didn't know much about Drew at the time other than the successful career he'd had at Purdue. He clearly was talented, yet he and his team were struggling. Many critics wondered if Drew Brees was good enough to

be successful in this league. Some thought he was too short. Some considered him a bust. Little did they know. . . .

Seven years later, it's clear: Drew has silenced his critics. He is at the top of his game and without a doubt one of the best quarterbacks in the NFL today. The guy who fought to hold on to his job in San Diego now holds the Lombardi Trophy as a champion. I was fortunate to share that experience with him, and I can honestly say that Drew Brees is a champion in every sense of the word. I have never been around anybody more focused, more competitive, and more driven to succeed than Drew.

That passion is by no means limited to the football field. His commitment to his family, his friends, and the kids and communities he supports is positively unmatched. Drew is a man on a mission. For him there are no wasted days, no wasted hours, no wasted minutes. I am continually impressed by how willing Drew is to sacrifice his time and energy to help those around him succeed—both on and off the field.

He'd cringe to hear me say this, but in many ways, Drew is a modern-day hero. It's difficult to describe what he has meant to the city of New Orleans. I guess the best way to say it is that, in many ways, he has brought hope to this city. He gave fans hope in the form of a Super Bowl championship. And with the work he and his wife, Brittany, have done through their foundation, he has given the city hope for better neighborhoods and has provided programs that give kids, families, and previously shattered communities the hope of a brighter future.

Simply put, Drew is making a difference. The Bible is clear that God has a purpose for each of our lives, and I wholeheartedly believe that God has brought Drew to New Orleans for a specific purpose—a purpose that goes far beyond winning football games. God is using Drew in a powerful way to make a difference in the lives of so many people in New

Orleans. While the city has come a long way since 2005, most would agree that there is still much more that needs to be done. While many have given up, Drew has not. He never quits on the field, and he will never quit working to help this community that has so openly embraced him.

It is a privilege to have Drew as a friend, and I consider myself extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity to play alongside him and to be a part of what he has accomplished—in his career, on this team, and for New Orleans. Drew Brees is truly a *great* quarterback.

*Mark Brunell*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

FIRST OF ALL, writing a book is an interesting process. The time and effort required to put together a memoir like this was extensive. I really had no idea what I was getting myself into when I took on this challenge, but it has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I hope that those who read this book are motivated and inspired by the experiences that are shared and the lessons learned. I talk about many things I have not talked much about before, at least not in this great of detail all at once. Writing this book was an emotionally freeing experience and truly a labor of love. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it.

I would first like to thank Chris Fabry for all his help in writing this book. We did not have a lot of time to put this collaboration together, but our ability to trust each other and communicate helped us through it all. I would also like to thank the staff at Tyndale House Publishers for all their hard work. I know it was not easy at times, but they handled everything with great respect and professionalism, and as a result we were able to put together a tremendous book.

I would also like to thank my family, friends, chaplains, teachers,

## COMING BACK STRONGER

mentors, teammates, and coaches for believing in me and being a part of this journey. I think about you all every day.

Then there is Chris Stuart. We have been through a lot together in a short amount of time. You are a true friend and a special person. Thanks for teaching me how to “win the day.”

And last but certainly not least, I would like to thank the city of New Orleans for embracing me at a time when I needed it most. You saved me.

# PROLOGUE

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2005

SAN DIEGO CHARGERS VS. DENVER BRONCOS

Eight seconds was all it took to change my life forever. Eight seconds at the end of the second quarter, in the middle of a meaningless game. Of course it wasn't meaningless to me. No game in the NFL ever is, especially when you have something to prove.

It was the final game of the season. With 4:22 left in the first half, our offense had taken over at our own eight yard line. The Broncos, our archrivals, had already sealed a playoff berth. At 9–6, we'd been eliminated from playoff contention a week earlier. Some said we should rest our starters and avoid any unnecessary injuries, but our coach, Marty Schottenheimer, disagreed. He believed that closing out a tough season with a victory on our home field was important—especially if that victory came against the Broncos. I knew he was right, and I also had my own reasons for wanting to be on the field.

A younger quarterback was waiting in the wings, and this was my chance to prove once again that I deserved to lead this team as we looked to the future.

The Broncos were up 7–0. The slight drizzle that fell over Qualcomm Stadium echoed the mood of the Chargers fans. In fact, there seemed to be as many people cheering for *Denver* as there were for San Diego. Denver certainly had a lot to cheer about that year; they had already clinched the number two seed in the AFC. Plus, their fans always travel well.

On first and ten, I handed off to LaDainian Tomlinson, who ran off left tackle for a one-yard gain. Running the ball wasn't going to be easy. The Denver defense was one of the best in the league against the run.

Second down was a pass to Keenan McCardell that fell incomplete. Champ Bailey broke up the play, as he always seemed to do. Early in the season he had picked off one of my passes in Denver and run it back for a touchdown. I wish I had that pass to do over again. But you can't live in the past in the NFL. And you can't live too far in the future. You have to live in the now.

Cam Cameron, our offensive coordinator, called in another pass play, and I surveyed the defense from the shotgun. I noticed John Lynch, All-Pro safety, creeping toward the line of scrimmage off left tackle. I knew what that meant: he was going to blitz. We had the correct protection called to block him, but there was still a sense of urgency for me to get rid of the ball. If we could get a first down, we would still have around 3:30 left on the clock to tie the score, or at the very least, attempt a field goal. Anything to take some momentum into the locker room at the half.

Nick Hardwick gave me a clean snap, and I dropped back in the pocket, going through my read. *Take care of the football. Make a good decision. Trust your progression on this play.* My feet

were in our end zone as I scanned the receivers running their routes. The coverage was good, but I anticipated the opening as Keenan McCardell ran into the clear. Just as I pulled the ball back to throw, John Lynch, who was blitzing from my blind side, swiped at my arm before I was able to get the throw off. Lynch had fought through his block, and he got just enough of my arm to knock the ball loose. It wobbled out like a wounded duck and rolled to a dead stop right in front of the goal line.

The last thing a quarterback ever wants to see is a football lying loose on the ground. It should be either in your own hands, in the arms of your running back, or on the way to your receiver. But never on the ground. Ever. I knew my arm wasn't going forward when the ball was stripped—it was going back—so it was definitely a fumble, a live ball.

Lynch was behind me, and Sam Brandon and Gerard Warren of the Broncos were in front of me, moving to recover the ball. I had been coached to never jump into those loose ball situations on the ground, because bad things happen to quarterbacks who dive into a pile. Jim Harbaugh broke his arm jumping into a pile when he played quarterback at Michigan, and I had seen Kurt Warner dislocate his elbow trying to pull in a fumble. A dropped snap is one thing. You fall on it and cover up, and you're okay. But a loose ball is different. With several three-hundred-pound guys converging from different angles in a matter of seconds, there's a high risk for injury. But in that moment, instinct kicked in. It was my responsibility to get that ball back. I had lost it. And I was going to recover it.

As I dived for the ball, I saw defensive tackle Gerard Warren coming toward me—all 330 pounds of him. I jumped toward the ball, extending my right arm to scoop it up and pull it in. As I hit the ground, Warren did what every defensive player does when he has a chance to take a legal shot at the quarterback. He

took it. He drove into my left side, jolting me backward. The blow spun my body around on the ground, while my right arm was stuck in an awkward position above my head.

The force of Warren's hit, and then the others who piled on, twisted my arm in a direction it is not supposed to go. The collision was ferocious, and it happened in a matter of milliseconds. And then there was silence—a stunned silence for me. The only way I can describe it is that the entire stadium became still. It wasn't just pain in my arm and shoulder—there was a signal that went to every part of my body telling me something was off. Way off.

When the whistle blew, the Broncos had the ball, and thanks to me, they were less than a yard away from another touchdown. Their defense celebrated and ran off the field. As our offense hurried off the field and our defense ran in, I rolled over, pushed myself up with my left arm, and struggled to stand. I couldn't move my right arm at all. When I looked down, it was tilted at a disturbing angle—stuck out to the side in an unnatural L. There was no movement and not much feeling.

As much as I didn't want to admit it, I knew exactly what I had done. This wasn't just a separation. I had separated my left shoulder in 2004, so I knew what that felt like. This was something with much graver implications. I was in absolute shock. I stood in the end zone looking up but not seeing anything. I glanced into the stands and tried to focus, but a million thoughts raced through my mind. I didn't need to hear it from a doctor: deep down I sensed how serious this was.

I started for the sidelines, and all of a sudden I became sick to my stomach. *This may be the last time I'll ever wear a Chargers uniform.* Fear rose up. *Maybe this is the last time I'll ever wear a football uniform. This could be the end of my career.* The feeling was real. I could taste it. And it was terrifying.

By the time I took a handful of agonizing steps, the medical staff had flown into action.

“It’s my arm,” I said. “I can’t move it. It’s stuck.”

They took me behind the bench, and Dr. David Chao felt around the injury. He winced as he examined me, and then he looked straight at me. “Drew, you’ve dislocated your shoulder. I need to pop it back in place. You ready?”

I nodded as his prognosis confirmed my worst fear. He extended my arm and pulled until it slipped into place. I held it close to my body and sat on the bench. I’ve heard that one of the most painful things to experience is having a shoulder put back into the socket, but I wasn’t feeling much of anything. I was focused on what had just happened and the implications of the injury—for me, for my family, and for my team.

I thought about my future and how long it might take to come back. Then I thought about Brittany, my wife. She had to be freaking out. We had plans for that night, New Year’s Eve, and plans for the off-season. I had my contract to think about. And next year. There were a lot of good, positive things going on in our lives, and in an instant, with one play, it could all be gone.

“You have to call my wife and tell her I’m okay,” I said to James Collins, our head trainer.

“Sure thing, Drew.”

We took that long walk from the field to the locker room, and I had an X-ray. That’s when the reality started to set in. And with reality came the pain . . . and the emotions. My shoulder started to throb, and with each wave I thought of Brittany. It’s one thing to go through an injury when you’re the one on the field, but it’s excruciating for family and friends who are watching from the stands.

“I have to get a cell phone and call my wife,” I said to one

of the doctors. “I need her to hear my voice. To let her know I’m okay.”

The cell service was bad in the locker room because it’s nothing but concrete down there. I was moving around trying to get a good signal, and I had to call Brittany three times before the phone finally connected. As soon as she answered, I heard the fear in her voice.

“Babe, I’m okay,” I said. I didn’t want her to know how bad it was, so I tried to keep my emotions in check.

“The trainer said it was your throwing shoulder, but he wouldn’t tell me any more than that.”

“We don’t know anything yet. I’m just getting the X-rays now. It probably looked a lot worse than it really is.”

She asked me what had happened, and I tried to explain it without letting on how bad the injury was. She’s been around football long enough to know it’s not a good sign if you’re taken to the locker room and you don’t come back out. And an injury to the shoulder of the throwing arm is never good news for a quarterback.

It didn’t take Brittany long to figure out things weren’t okay. That’s when the tears began running down my cheeks. My arm was throbbing. And the dreams we’d built seemed to come crashing down right in front of me.

I’m not one of those people who can keep the tears back once they start. When the emotion begins, it’s hard for me to control. So as we talked, I was trying to tell myself, *Be strong for her. Tell her it’s going to be okay. We’re going to be fine. Reassure her. You’re supposed to be strong here.* I tried to hold it together, but I don’t think I did a very good job.

I told Brittany I loved her and said good-bye. The second I disconnected, I just lost it. All of that stuff inside—the uncertainty and fear and questions—swirled around and came out. Part of the intensity behind those emotions was the

amount of work I had put into the 2004 and 2005 seasons. I had trained and practiced and done everything I could to establish myself as the quarterback and leader of the San Diego franchise. I had fought to earn respect from my team and from the Chargers faithful. But I didn't want them just to accept me as their quarterback; I wanted everybody—from the players on the field to the owner in the box upstairs to the fans in the stands—to believe *I* was the guy who could lead the Chargers to a championship. I felt like I had a lot of believers; I had convinced a lot of people. But there were still those who doubted, and unfortunately they were the ones making the decisions. I constantly felt like I had to look over my shoulder. I needed to fight and prove to them every day that I was their guy. Then, in the blink of an eye, in one play, everything seemed to have slipped through my fingers. I should have known better than to jump on the ball, but I never would have imagined something like that could possibly end my career.

Here's the thing. I truly believe that God can use anything—even an injury—for good. I believe that God has a plan for people's lives, even when that plan doesn't work out the way we think it should. I don't think God dislocated my shoulder, but in the normal processes of life, he allowed that to happen. And I have the faith to believe there was a reason for it. But in that moment in the middle of the exam room with the tears flowing, my worldview was clouded. I was struggling. I felt right on the edge. Other than maybe breaking my neck or getting paralyzed, a throwing-shoulder dislocation is pretty much the worst thing that could happen to a quarterback.

So sitting there with my shoulder in absolute agony, I remember thinking, *God, I know that if you bring me to it, you will bring me through it. I know you have a plan, but quite honestly I don't see it right now. But I know it's there. I know I have to believe.*

*I know I need to have faith. I have to trust you. And I do trust you. But it's hard right now.*

After the X-rays, my shoulder was absolutely throbbing. The pain was really starting to set in. I took a shower, and Brittany came and was waiting outside the locker room.

“Drew, you and your wife need to go home now,” the doctor said. “Just take it easy and ice that shoulder, and we’ll get you in tomorrow for an MRI.”

I thought about it a minute and gritted my teeth. “You know what? I’m not leaving until I get to see my teammates again.”

It was really important to me to stay until the end of the game. I wanted to be there for my teammates when they came into the locker room. I needed to show them that their leader would always be there for them. I wanted to look them in the eye and let them know that this might have knocked me down, but it didn’t knock me out. I would be back, and I would still be their quarterback.

I don’t remember the final score of the game—I just know we lost. It was miserable. From the weather to the final score to my injury, it was all miserable. Second-year quarterback Philip Rivers ended up filling in for me, and he played fine despite the circumstances. The second half was a blur for me, as I was getting my shoulder treated and slowly trying to gather my things. I tried to watch some of the game from the locker room, but it was difficult. I should have been out there playing, but I couldn’t. Once the game ended, the guys started to flow into the locker room with that defeated, end-of-the-season look on their faces. As they filtered in, they looked surprised to see me. I didn’t say anything. It was enough for me to be there when they came inside.

The guys didn’t know the extent of the injury then—and neither did I. Maybe that was part of why I felt I had to be there

with them. I knew this was really bad, and it might be the last time I'd get to be in that locker room as a member of the San Diego Chargers. I was trying to fight back the emotions, but it was hard. I didn't want my last memory or theirs to be of me walking off the field with my arm out of socket. If anything, I wanted that final moment to be in the locker room with all those guys who had been through so much with me. As they walked in one by one, I felt like something I'd been working toward my whole life was evaporating. This was not how it was supposed to end.

The next day I would have an MRI and then another exam that would confirm a 360-degree tear of the labrum and a torn rotator cuff. Basically, everything that held my shoulder together was shredded. I would learn later that only one out of five hundred shoulder dislocations were like mine. That translates to 0.2 percent—almost like winning the lottery. But without the cash.

There was a chance I would never play in the NFL again.

I was knocked down. My future was uncertain. Had I just played my final game as a Charger? Was my career over? This injury was the worst thing that could possibly happen to me.

Or so I thought.

# MARK OF A CHAMPION

## CHAPTER ONE

WHEN I HELD UP MY SON, Baylen, after the fourth quarter of Super Bowl XLIV, with confetti streaming down all around us, it was the fulfillment of a dream. But what I've discovered along the way is that the road to success is usually a pretty bumpy one. And there are no shortcuts.

They say you need three skills to be a great quarterback: toughness, intelligence, and heart. Although I didn't officially start training to become a quarterback until I was in high school, in a way, I guess God has been preparing me for that role all my life.

I had a great childhood, but it wasn't always easy. Then again, neither is life. And neither is football. As a kid, I got teased a lot because of a distinguishing birthmark on my right cheek. My mom and dad used to tell me that was where an angel had kissed me, but the kids at school didn't quite see it that way. They used to tease me and take jabs at me in the classroom and on the playground, saying things like "What

happened to your face?” or “Wipe that stuff off your face.” I couldn’t help but get in a few scraps over it.

When I was little, the pediatrician gave my parents the option of having it removed because there was a chance it could become cancerous, but in spite of all the harassment I took at school, I decided to keep it. Instead of seeing it as a bad thing, I chose to see it as something that made me unique and special. It set me apart from everyone else. In a way, it became my trademark.

Looking back, I guess it might have been smarter to remove it, because why take a chance on it becoming cancerous? I even had it biopsied a few years ago, and I still see the dermatologist every once in a while to make sure it’s okay, but now it’s just a part of who I am. I wouldn’t consider cutting off my arm. Neither would I cut off my birthmark. If I had ever been forced to remove it, I would have been devastated. My good friends who have known me a long time say they don’t even see it anymore. If I had it removed, they would notice, but now they don’t see it at all. They just see me.

In some ways, I guess you could say it was a character builder that helped me develop an inner toughness and an ability to shake off jabs and criticism. Not a bad trait to have as a quarterback in the NFL—or in any job, for that matter.

## **A Lineage of Competition**

If you look at pictures of me as a child, you’ll see the birthmark, but you’ll also almost always see me holding a football or a baseball. As far back as I can remember, football has been a part of my life.

When I was growing up, my father would throw to me in the yard, but my constant playmate was my brother, Reid. He’s two and a half years younger than I am, and we played all the

time in our little yard in Austin, Texas. Our “field” was a patch of grass that was about as big as a good-size living room. Trees bordered the yard, and those were our sidelines. The invisible goal lines were clearly defined in our minds, so we knew when we scored.

There’s a big gap when a fifth grader plays against a second grader or when a sixth grader plays against a third grader, so to make it fair, I would get down on my knees and Reid would try to run around me. And it wasn’t touch football—we were really tackling each other, and I would try anything I could to take him down. Even though I was scrambling on my knees, Reid still got beat up on quite a bit. Sometimes my dad would come out, and he’d play all-time quarterback, but most of the time it was just Reid and me.

I grew up in a very sports-minded family. My mother, Mina, was very athletic. In the late 1960s she was all-state in high school track, volleyball, and basketball. If she were playing today, she’d have gotten an athletic scholarship to just about any school in the country for any of those sports. But at that time women weren’t given many of those opportunities. She decided to attend Texas A&M, which had been an all-male military school. My mother was in one of the first classes of women to attend Texas A&M. It was there that she met my dad, an athlete himself who played freshman basketball.

My mom’s brother, Marty Akins, was an All-American quarterback at the University of Texas. Marty was part of the Longhorns team that beat Alabama and Bear Bryant in the 1973 Cotton Bowl.

My mom’s father, Ray Akins, was a Marine and served in World War II. After the war he coached high school football for thirty-eight years, winning 302 games in his career. He was a legend in the state of Texas, and best of all, he was my

grandfather. He coached at Gregory-Portland High School in Portland, Texas, just outside Corpus Christi. He used to let Reid and me attend his summer two-a-day practices. From the time I was about seven years old, right around my parents' divorce, until my grandfather stopped coaching in 1988, Reid and I would stand on the sidelines and hand out this green water to the players during breaks. It was something like Gatorade—green because of the electrolytes mixed in. I always felt like my grandpa was ahead of his time with that kind of stuff. It didn't matter what Reid and I were doing—it was a thrill just to be that close to the game and the players. I never would have guessed back then that I'd be on the other side someday.

That's my lineage. We have always been a very athletic and competitive family. Our get-togethers when I was growing up were all about sports. That's what we all loved. On Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, the Fourth of July, or any other time we got together, we'd eat a big meal and then end up in the yard playing something. We played basketball, football, Wiffle ball, washers, you name it. At the end of the day there was always a winner and a loser. The winner went away happy and the loser was mad, and you wouldn't talk to each other for a while. That's just the way it was, and we looked forward to those get-togethers like you wouldn't believe.

When I say we were competitive, that didn't just encompass sports. For example, there were times we'd be sitting on the porch at my grandparents' house eating plums from my grandmother's plum trees. After we ate them, we would see who could spit their pit farthest into the yard. Somebody would mark the longest spit, and we'd eat more plums just so we could have another chance to beat whoever was in first place. It was crazy, but it was so much fun. I usually won, by the way!

Anything we could find for competition, we were all

over it. One of my favorites was pitching washers. Also called Texas horseshoes, this game involves two- to three-inch metal washers and PVC cups that are sunk into the ground. You pitch the washer toward the cup and get points for being closest to the cup and more points for having it actually go in. Some people play on sandpits, but my grandfather made a court out of turf. That was a big game for us as kids, and it taught me control and accuracy.

I have no doubt all those backyard games played a huge part in stoking my competitive fire. And they're also some of my best memories.

## The Split

One of the most difficult things I experienced as a child was the divorce of my mom and dad. But it was that adversity that brought Reid and me so close. I was seven and Reid was about five when Mom and Dad divorced. At that age you don't quite understand how the world works. We were so young and had so many unanswered questions: *Why are Mommy and Daddy not together anymore? Was it something we did? Could we have stopped it somehow?* That is why when I met my wife, I knew divorce was not an option and I never wanted to put my children through that.

I remember seeing my parents sit down many times to talk, and I figured it was only a matter of time before we would be a family again. That is, until the day my dad sat Reid and me down on the couch to explain the situation. I remember it like it was yesterday. There are certain moments in your life you just don't forget. When he sat us down, I had no idea what was coming at first, although whenever he took off his glasses to talk to us, I knew it was not going to be good. The only time I have ever seen my dad take off his glasses, besides to clean

them, is when he is about to get emotional. He made it clear that day that things would never be the same again. To this day, I still get teary-eyed when I think about how painful that moment was for all of us.

Reid and I spent many nights awake long after lights-out, hoping and praying that our parents would get back together. We cried ourselves to sleep a lot during that time. The split wasn't an amicable one, and there was bitterness between the two sides. In fact, Reid and I were caught in the middle from the time we were kids until my mom passed away in August 2009. When you're a kid, normal is whatever is happening at the time. Reid and I basically had two homes. I'd spend two days at my mom's house, then two days at my dad's house, and we'd switch off every other weekend.

My brother and I really leaned on each other during that time. Our escape from everything was to take a bucket and a net down to the creek that ran through our neighborhood in central Austin to catch minnows and crawdaddies. That same creek ran through a local nine-hole golf course about six blocks away from our duplex. Reid and I even started a business as kids by fishing out the orange and yellow golf balls from the creek, shining them up, and selling them to the golfers. We weren't going to get rich off that deal, but it was enough to buy us baseball cards and Big League Chew at the local convenience store. As good as those times with my brother were, when we got back home every evening after one of our adventures, we would have to face the reality of a broken family.

We were inseparable, best friends. We did have conflict, though. I know it was tough on Reid to have me as an older brother. As much as we both assumed our futures were aligned, we were destined to travel different roads. He excelled in sports, but he didn't want to do the exact same things I did.

He wanted to find his own way. Since he didn't play quarterback, people would ask, "Why don't you play quarterback like Drew? Why don't you follow your brother?" He heard that a lot, and it made him mentally tough—that and all the whuppings he took from me. The truth is, I always felt like Reid was tougher than me. Of course, that was my plan all along: I was preparing him.

When Reid went to college, he partied a little too hard, got a couple of tattoos, probably because he knew our parents would not approve. He was rebellious like that. It was his way of separating, becoming his own person.

We're both supercompetitive; we work really hard at things, and when we set our minds to something, we will accomplish it. I'm so proud of him for walking on to play baseball at Baylor. His goal was to earn a scholarship and help lead his team to the College World Series, and that's what he did. The funny thing is, if you'd asked either one of us our dream when we were growing up, neither of us would have mentioned anything about football. We wanted to play in the College World Series. So watching my brother play in Omaha at Rosenblatt Stadium in 2005 ranks up there as one of the proudest moments in my life. My brother was living out a childhood dream for both of us.

In a way, my brother used the pressure people put on him to excel in different areas, like baseball and business. He now lives in Denver and works in sales.

Some things in my life have made me step back and say, "Man, how did my family end up with so many problems?" But I've found that when you start talking to people, everybody's family has something they've dealt with. Every family has issues and is a little dysfunctional. It's not whether you will have problems within your family; it's how you handle those difficulties when they come your way.

## Westlake High School

In spite of the divorce, I really didn't have a bad childhood. In fact, in my mind, my life was the greatest I could have asked for. Some things weren't easy to go through, but I wouldn't trade any of it. All the negative and positive mixed together to make me who I am.

For example, when I was a freshman in high school, I changed school districts. Mom felt that of all the public schools in the area, Westlake High School in Austin had the best combination of academics and athletics. She valued high academic standards as well as a good sports program, and Westlake had both.

I remember some conflict between my mom and dad about the school decision. My dad's a real easygoing guy, kind of a go-with-the-flow type, whereas my mom was super-competitive, probably overly competitive, if there is such a thing. When she and Dad would argue, she'd refuse to back down. Whenever she'd get in that bulldog mode, my dad would have no other choice than to agree with her decision.

My mom was the reason I went to St. Andrew's Episcopal School for sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. She wanted me to get a solid education as well as have a great athletic experience. Dad would say, "Why do we have to pay for private school? The public school's just fine."

But Mom wouldn't budge.

When I moved into the Westlake district, I didn't know many people. I remember the first set of two-a-days as a freshman. This was Texas 5A football. It was *Friday Night Lights*. There was a sea of guys, probably 150 to 200 kids, all ready to play. The coach said, "Okay, who thinks they can be quarterback?"

I raised my hand and looked around to see forty other hands in the air. I thought, *I am never going to see the field*. I was the new guy. All these guys had been part of the same program at the two

middle schools in the district. They'd had real game preparation and full-contact experience. I'd been playing flag football the past three years because our small Christian school didn't have enough players to field a tackle football team. The season hadn't even started yet, and already I was at a disadvantage.

There was a positive side, though: playing flag football had kept me from getting hurt early on. Plus, I'd learned a lot of the fundamentals without wearing pads. Flag football is all about throwing, catching, and running as opposed to blocking and contact. The movement is very athletic and fluid, and it forces you to have a solid grasp of the basics.

I ended up as the fourth quarterback of six my freshman year. The first three went to the freshman A team, and the next three went to the freshman B team. In effect, I was the starter on the freshman B team. Not bad, but I felt lost in a swarm of players.

During my sophomore year, when I was in the middle of two-a-days, my mom picked me up from practice. She could tell something was up because I was unusually quiet. After she pulled into the garage, she turned off the car and we sat there for a minute.

I looked at her and used a word that normally didn't come out of my mouth. "Mom, I think I might want to *quit* football."

She didn't freak out. She just squinted her eyes with concern and said, "Why?"

"Because I don't feel like I'm ever going to get an opportunity to play."

Jay Rodgers was the quarterback for the varsity team, and his younger brother Johnny was the quarterback on junior varsity. This was a football family. Their middle brother was the starting center on varsity, and their dad, Randy Rodgers, was the recruiting coordinator at the University of Texas.

Johnny Rodgers was destined to be the next starting quarterback for Westlake High School, and I was sure I'd get lost in the shuffle.

"You know, my real sport is baseball," I told my mom. "I want to get a baseball scholarship. I play football because I like it, but I don't want to sit on the bench. I don't feel like I'm going to get an opportunity, and maybe I'd be better off playing fall baseball and trying to get a baseball scholarship."

My mom took a deep breath. "That's a valid point. I wouldn't want to sit the bench any more than you do. So if you don't want to play, you don't have to play. But remember this: when you least expect it, that opportunity will present itself. You never know when it's going to come, but all it takes is one play."

I sat there and thought about what she'd said. My mother was an athlete and a competitor, and I valued her opinion. Besides, with a grandfather who was a coach and an uncle who'd played for the University of Texas, I didn't want to feel like I was missing out on some experiences. *This might be something I'll regret for the rest of my life if I don't at least follow through with this year.*

"You know what?" I said. "I think I'll stick it out for a little bit longer, and we'll see how it goes. I'm not going to quit midway through two-a-days."

Mom nodded and smiled. In retrospect, I think the fact that she didn't push me one way or the other freed me up to think clearly for myself. As it turned out, her words rang true the very next week.

One JV quarterback had decided to play baseball and the other moved to defense, so I was second in line to Johnny Rodgers. It was the last scrimmage of the year against Killeen, a tough team comprised mostly of kids whose parents were in the military, stationed at nearby Fort Hood. With the season

just one week away, this was the final dress rehearsal. Near the end of the game, when there was only one series left, Johnny dropped back to pass, hoping to end the scrimmage on a high note. In a split second, everything changed for me. Johnny got sacked in the backfield, and in the process he tore his ACL, putting him out for the entire year. One minute I was the guy who would ride the bench all season, and the next I was thrust into the role of starting JV quarterback.

Our JV team went 10–0 my sophomore year. In my junior year, I was the varsity starter. We were undefeated going into the third round of the playoffs.

That's when I tore *my* ACL.



An injury like that can change your life. I had no doubt about that—after all, that was the reason I was the starting quarterback. Johnny Rodgers had returned, but he was now our starting free safety. I had seen other players who tore their ACLs either recover really slowly or not come back at all. I was sure this was the worst thing that could have happened to me. It was the third round of the playoffs. We were going to state, and we were going to win the championship. Suddenly my season was over.

Our team lost in the next round.

I had been getting recruiting letters from some good schools, but when I blew out my knee, all the letters stopped. No school wanted to touch me. The worst part about it was that I would also miss the entire basketball and baseball seasons. And in my mind, my number one priority was still to get a baseball scholarship. I was only a junior in high school, and it felt like my life was over.

I had a six-month rehabilitation process, and I had to make

a decision: Was I going to quit or come back stronger? I chose to come back.

It was grueling. For three or four hours every day after school, I'd go in the training room and just grind, grind, grind. The pain of the injury was intense, and every day I had to fight to regain flexibility and mobility. But in the process, I was building up my strength and resolve.

The doctor told me that my ability to recover from this injury was totally dependent on my commitment to the rehab. I was bound and determined to come back—not just to where I was before, but better. My goal has always been to take a negative and turn it into a positive. I want to be a problem solver, not a problem creator. The glass is always half full for me. Make the best of every situation.

The ACL injury was a defining moment in my life. I made a decision not to let something negative control my emotions. And the interesting thing is that decision led to another that would also follow me the rest of my life.

## EPILOGUE

NOW THAT THE SAINTS have scaled the ultimate football mountain and won a Super Bowl, it would be easy to sit back and enjoy our World Championship. But success presents as many challenges as setbacks do. I know every team we play is going to want to knock us off the pedestal. We'll have targets on us all year. It's up to us to find the motivation to push forward and build on the work that's been done. Will we be better in the new season? Only our commitment to growing stronger and getting better will answer that question. There aren't any shortcuts on the path to success. The way to do it is the same as it's always been: take things one game at a time, one drive at a time, one play at a time.

Winning the Super Bowl is not the end of the adventure. There's more to our journey—we have not arrived. Now it's time to prepare for the next challenge.

The story isn't over for New Orleans, either. We've made a lot of progress, but it's too soon to relax. It's not like every part

of the city has suddenly been rebuilt overnight. If you drove through the Lower Ninth Ward with me, I'd show you some areas that look amazing, where people have rolled up their sleeves and banded together to rebuild. But I'd also show you houses where it looks like Katrina happened yesterday, places where there's nothing left but a slab. We've done some great work. But the story of our recovery is still being written.

The people of New Orleans are up to that task. And so are you.

I might as well tell you that whatever your struggle is, there is no final exclamation point that says, "You're done!" Yes, there was immense satisfaction for our team when we held up that trophy, especially after everything we had been through. The tougher the journey, the sweeter the celebration at the end. But that was only one major milestone on our long list of goals.

When I set out to write this book, my ultimate goal was not to get you excited about my career or the Saints, or even to make you want to move to New Orleans (although we'd love to have you at least visit us!). My desire was to have you turn the last page and become excited about waking up tomorrow. You will undoubtedly have challenges ahead that you will have to face and overcome. But don't forget that adversity is not your enemy. It can unleash a power in your life that will make you stronger and help you achieve amazing things—things you may have never thought were possible . . . until now.

Now that you've heard some of my story and the events and influences that have contributed to the person I am today, I'd like to make this personal for you. If I could sit down with you and have a face-to-face talk, these are some things I would say.

- *Find a mentor.* No matter who you are or what your profession is, we all need someone who can keep us grounded and speak truth into our lives. Find people who have built

their lives on a solid foundation, and humble yourself to learn from them. I've never known a successful athlete, businessperson, or anyone else who has made an impact on the world who didn't stand on the shoulders of other great men and women.

- *Don't give up.* The worst thing that could happen in life is not getting knocked down; it's getting knocked down and then staying down. If you lose a job, if your relationships crumble, if you face a health setback—get up. You may fall again and it may hurt, but get back on the horse. And once you're up, hold your ground. Commitment is when you refuse to give yourself an excuse.
- *Turn your defeats into triumphs.* Any difficulty you face—whether it's a tear to your shoulder, a person who betrays you, a dysfunctional family, or the bad luck you have with the economy—can unleash power within you for good. Use that negative to help you not only climb out of the hole you're in, but rise to greater heights. The greatest opportunities in life are the ones that test us the most.
- *Dream.* If your mind can conceive it, you can achieve it. Not on your own, and not without struggle and hardship and effort. But when that vision mixes with hard work and commitment, you'll be amazed at what you can accomplish.
- *Hope.* In order to come back after a disappointment and accomplish something great, you have to believe in something bigger than yourself. But it's not enough to just put your hope in hope. You have to have an object of hope. For me, God is the center of that hope, and I lean on him to order my steps and show me the right path. Having hope in the Lord means I trust in his plan and believe he's

never going to put anything in front of me that's too hard to handle with his help.

- *Be flexible.* My dream was to win a championship with San Diego and play my whole career with that one team. That didn't happen—it wasn't the plan. And it took a devastating injury to tear me away from that city. Be flexible enough to know when you're being led in another direction, and then follow that new vision with all your heart. You are being led there for a reason—coincidence is usually God working anonymously.
- *See adversity as an opportunity.* Remember, experience is what you get when you don't get what you want. No matter what comes your way, remember that God can use everything in your life for good, even though it may seem unfair or insurmountable at the time. Seize that adversity and let it make you stronger. Welcome it, and unleash its power.
- *Don't be afraid of taking a few steps back.* A step back is not necessarily a setback. Sometimes you have to take a few steps backward before you can get the momentum to jump over a chasm in your life. The goal may be farther than you thought, and what you see as backtracking may really just be helping you get up the speed to make the final jump.
- *Don't spectate—be ready.* Instead of standing on the sidelines watching, spend that time getting ready for the next play. Too many of us are caught sleeping at life's traffic lights. When the next opportunity comes your way, make sure you have prepared yourself well enough to seize the chance you've been given. You never know if you will get that opportunity again.

- *Remember who you are.* God created each one of us for a purpose. You will find that purpose in doing the small things well, in taking things one day at a time. That purpose will always have an element of serving others. If you're well grounded in who you really are, and if you do the right thing for long enough, eventually you will start to see the fruit of those decisions.

When people think you're not big enough, not smart enough, not wise enough, or not experienced enough for a task, remember that faith will carry you through. The test of adversity is one that's fought with faith.

- *Finish strong.* It is not where you start in life, but rather how you finish. It's that last play that can make all the difference in the outcome. Keep it simple: in everything you do, make your last rep your best rep.



If you take away only one thing from this book, never forget that sometimes your greatest victories can come from your greatest defeats. The next time adversity knocks on your door, stand up tall and do the right thing. You can do more than just survive. You can come back—stronger.