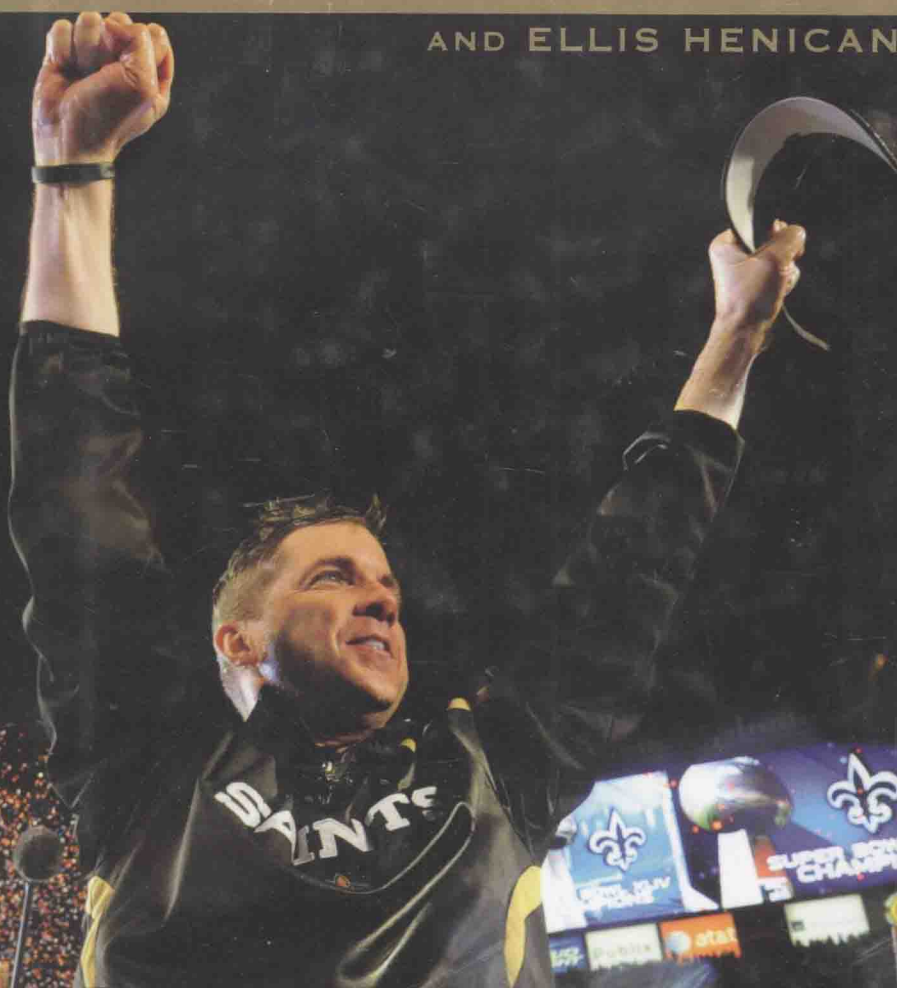


SEAN PAYTON

AND ELLIS HENICAN



HOME TEAM

COACHING THE SAINTS AND NEW ORLEANS
BACK TO LIFE

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AND ELLIS HENICAN

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**COACHING THE SAINTS AND NEW ORLEANS
BACK TO THE**



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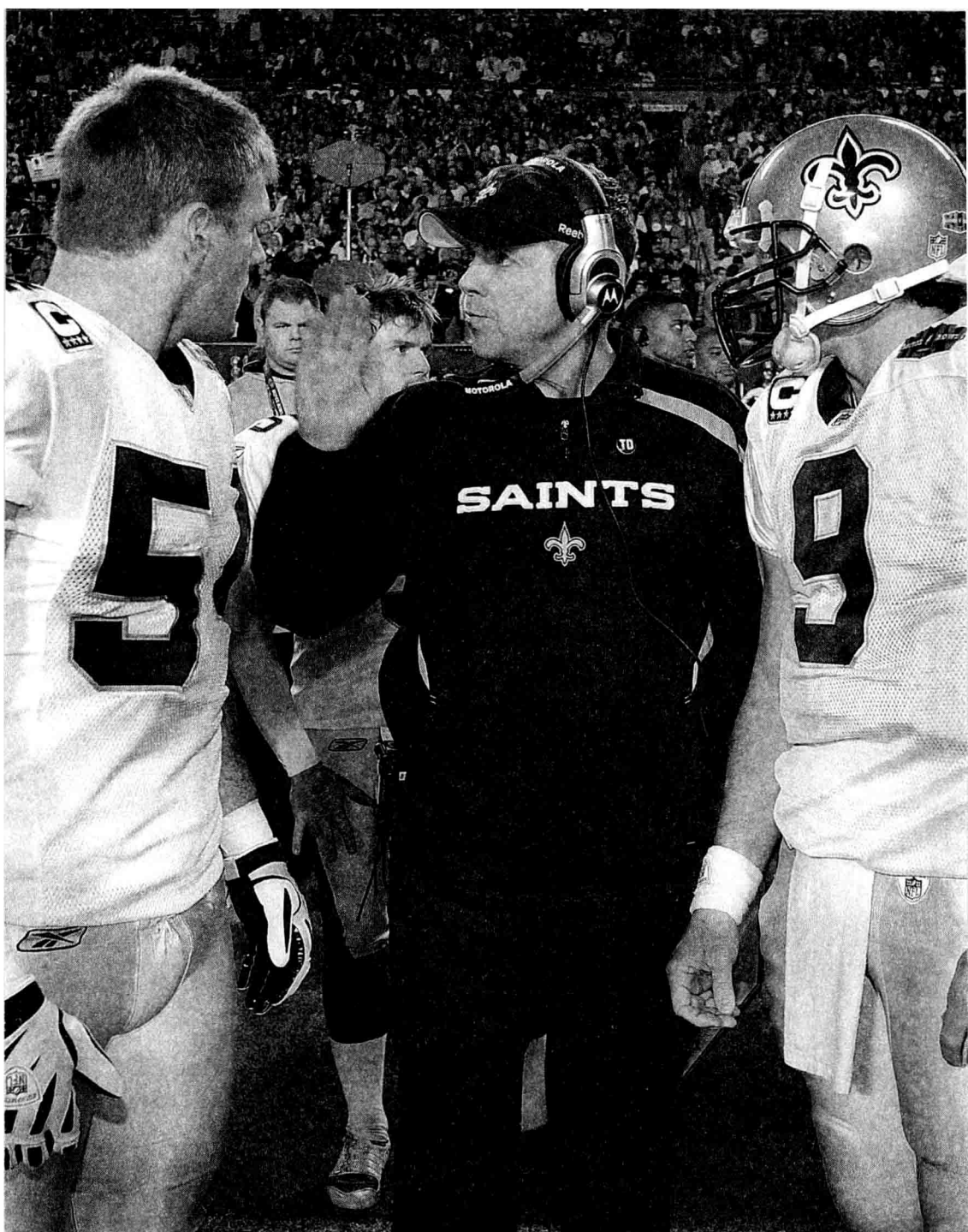
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HOME TEAM



*For those who came while others were leaving:
Beth, Meghan and Connor,
the coaches, players and staff of the New Orleans Saints
and all the brave and generous souls
who've helped to revive
New Orleans and the Gulf Coast—
my home team*

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■ INTRODUCTION ■

WHEN THEY REALLY LOVE you in New Orleans, they have their own unique ways of saying so. If a great trumpet player dies, people don't get all mournful. They dance in the streets with brightly colored umbrellas, then slide the dearly departed into a concrete tomb a couple of feet off the ground.

Well, I'm not ready for my own jazz funeral. Not yet. But I'm pretty sure I have now experienced the next-best thing: riding down St. Charles Avenue on a giant Mardi Gras float, parading with a bunch of guys I love and admire and some of the hottest brass bands on Earth while hundreds of thousands of appreciative people yell, clap, cheer, wave signs, weep openly and call out our names.

They were cheering for their team.

They were cheering for their city.

They were cheering for themselves.

And we were cheering right back at them.

How many people turned out for the New Orleans Saints Super Bowl Victory Parade? Nobody knows for certain. Attendance isn't taken at Mardi Gras parades. Eight hundred thousand? The media estimates went as high as a million. Either way, that's really saying something in a city whose official population is in the mid-300,000s, down a quarter since Hurricane Katrina, a metro area of a million and low change. Basically, nobody stayed home.

I know what I saw from my float as we inched through the crowds: men, women and children, fifteen and twenty deep, a swirling sea of black and gold along the entire 3.7-mile route from the Louisiana Superdome through the Central Business District, out and back down Canal Street, to Mardi Gras World on the Mississippi River.

“Thank you!” they screamed.

“We’re back, baby!”

“New Aaaaw-lins!”

New Orleans may not be the swiftest when it comes to amassing Super Bowl victories. But let me tell you: This city knows how to throw a parade. It was hard to imagine anything like this in any other city, this category 5 outpouring of gratitude and love. Babies in tiny Saints hats, giggling and waving. Grown women shouting the universal Saints hello: “Who dat? Who dat?” Burly men hugging one another. Kids rushing up for autographs. One old man in a Deuce McAllister jersey was standing by a blue police barricade on Howard Avenue, tears running down his face. Three Catholic nuns at Canal and Baronne were so ecstatic they were jumping up and down.

These were the people we’d been playing for—people who’d lost so much and struggled so valiantly, literally crying tears of joy. They’d lived through unthinkable hardship: losing their homes, being scattered across the country, some of them seeing their relatives drown. They came from every neighborhood and every background. Relative newcomers and people whose families have been in Louisiana for centuries. Black people. White people. People in such elaborate costumes, you couldn’t tell who they were. All of them were united in triumph now.

Many had brought signs from home. These weren't pre-printed placards. These were handwritten sentiments, direct and personal. "Bless you, Boys!!" "Only yo mama loves you more than we do!" "Our City, Victims to Victors." "Baylen Brees, will you marry me?" Baylen is Drew's baby son.

These were the people Jimmy Buffett was talking about when he called New Orleans "the soul of our country." They have been so kind to us. I truly have come to treasure them.

The people of this region lived through the most devastating natural disaster in American history. Eighty percent of their city was flooded when the levees broke. They'd lost their jobs. People they'd known, people they loved had been forced to leave and weren't coming back. Government had failed them at every level. The media had grown bored and moved on. And yet these people still had not lost their will to celebrate. Their spirit made me care deeply about a place I had barely known before. Their courage inspired a struggling football team all the way to the Super Bowl.

And here they were, standing shoulder to shoulder on this raw New Orleans night. Everything in New Orleans gets a name in a hurry. This was either Dat Tuesday or Lombardi Gras. Clearly, we were all locked together, city and team.

Reggie Bush looked totally Hollywood in dark sunglasses and a thousand-watt grin, throwing black-and-gold Saints beads and stuffed minifootballs from the running backs' float. He and Pierre Thomas shared a microphone—and some impromptu raps for the crowd. Tough-guy tight end Jeremy Shockey turned suddenly bashful as people started chanting his name. Darren Sharper, Tracy Porter and others from the secondary rode a float with a pirate theme. That seemed right, given how often they ended up stealing the

other team's ball. Thomas Morstead and Garrett Hartley—our young punter and young kicker, whose combined ages added up to mine—rode on a float borrowed from the all-female Krewe of Muses. Appropriately, it featured a giant shoe. Garrett kept jumping off the float, hugging and high-fiving the people he passed.

Tom Benson, the team's eighty-two-year-old owner, was the first to reach historic Gallier Hall, where the local politicians were waiting with elaborate champagne toasts. "Hail, Saints! Hail, Saints! Drink up!" Mayor Ray Nagin called out.

"This win is for the people of New Orleans and Louisiana," Mr. Benson said.

A grinning Drew Brees, our phenomenal quarterback and the Super Bowl MVP, rolled through the streets surrounded, as he often is, by his offensive line. Their float had a giant head of Bacchus, the Roman god of drinking and wine. Drew was tossing so many minifootballs, some people in the crowd grew alarmed: Was he putting his carefully repaired shoulder at risk? But Drew was feeling no pain. On this night, the deadly accurate passer, who'd hit a record thirty-two of his thirty-nine Super Bowl attempts, was aiming—oh, just anywhere.

"How's the Who Dat Nation feel tonight?" he called out to the screaming crowd, his question greeted with a giant roar. "New Orleans, we love you, baby!"

I rode with my assistant coaches on a "Smoky Mary" superfloat borrowed from the Krewe of Orpheus. Joe Vitt and Gregg Williams and Pete Carmichael and Big Dan Darymple and the others. I wanted all of them there. My wife, Beth, rode too. So did our children, Meghan and Connor. I believe in making these things a family affair. After what my

■ INTRODUCTION ■

family had been through with me, they deserved this ride at least as much as I did.

But the star of our float was the Vince Lombardi Trophy. I'd had the trophy with me since Sunday night in Miami when NFL commissioner Roger Goodell handed it to Mr. Benson and he handed it to me. The trophy is a regulation-size, sterling-silver Tiffany football in the kicking position. It is the most prestigious prize we have in our game—something most New Orleans Saints fans had never expected to see up close. I'd gotten some grief in the media for admitting I'd slept with the trophy the night we won. More like I'd passed out next to it. I'd even joked that I might have drooled on Vince. You know what? Maybe I did. But now, here I was, standing in front of this roaring crowd, holding this seven-pound piece of hardware over my head, hugging it, kissing it, waving it and shaking it for the crowd, pumping the trophy in the air. People understood immediately what it meant. It was an amazing symbol of triumph over adversity, a reminder of how far this team and this city had come. I wanted everyone to get a piece of that silver football.

When people saw the trophy, it was like they were viewing the Holy Grail. At one point, I got off the float—this was silly of me. But I got off the float because I wanted to get down to the street level and let some people touch it. Just touch it.

As I moved toward the crowd, people were leaning forward and reaching and squealing. In a few seconds, it was like an ant colony, with people just wanting to feel the trophy to know that it was real. For a moment, I disappeared beneath that hill of humanity. Nobody was pushing. Nobody was violent. But I could see the police moving toward me.

They looked a little concerned. They opened up a path and hustled me and the trophy back up to the float.

Whew!

By the time our float reached Gallier Hall, things had gotten so loose, the U.S. Marine Corps Band and the Ying Yang Twins were trying to outdo one another with competing versions of “Stand Up & Get Crunk,” the Saints’ unofficial Southern-rap anthem. I was seven Bud Lights in. It was my turn to greet the mayor. My wife squeezed my wrist and said, “Control yourself, honey.”

In his toast, Mayor Nagin praised the “gazumbas” I’d shown by calling that ambush onside kick to start the second half. *Gazumbas*? Only in New Orleans does a mayor compliment a football coach quite so vividly.

I just smiled.

“We wish all of you could spend one night with this trophy,” I said to the crowd. “Your support means so much to us. We thank you, and we’ll see you again this time next year.”

As the parade rolled on, it was hard to take all of it in. I wanted to embrace this unique moment, to feel it, to inhale it, to record every detail. The noise. The camera flashes. The outstretched hands. The love. Especially the love. I didn’t want any of it to end, as a mad jumble of memories rushed furiously around my head.

Playing football in high school and college and dreaming of the pros. Learning that coach—not quarterback—was my best position. Saying “yes” to Bill Parcells, “no” to Al Davis and “oh, well” to Green Bay. Getting my head around the whole idea of New Orleans, then trying to think of an answer when my wife asked me: “Are we really moving this family into a disaster zone?”

■ INTRODUCTION ■

Taking over a team the media gave no chance to, whose stadium was an international symbol of misery and might never reopen anyway. Picking schools for the children, finding a quarterback for the team and letting a Heisman-winning running back fall in our laps. Getting into the Dome and packing the place with the loudest and most grateful fans on earth. People who couldn't imagine staying in Houston or Atlanta or some other sensible place.

The buildings in downtown New Orleans are very close to the street, and many of them have second-floor balconies. So even up on a float, you can look directly into the eyes of the people. It's all more intense and personal here. The parade was like four hours of third down and five.

As we snaked through downtown, the adrenaline never let up. These were the people who'd been counting on us to bring a team and a city back to life. I think we both felt some relief.

And what was I doing here? Me. Someone who'd never been a head coach before. Anywhere. Leading a team that usually brought up the rear. A Midwestern kid, a decent college player who'd had a few cups of coffee in the pros but never really gotten a foothold there. A coach with strong feelings, looking for the right place to land. A guy who didn't get his dream job, showing up in a city whose survival was a genuine question mark, and discovering he belongs there.

As I rode in the parade that night, laughing and shouting and waving that trophy around, I knew right then I had to tell this story. I had to tell it as well as I could.

How a city and a team actually rescued each other. How neither one of them could have done it alone.

1

FOOTBALL DREAMS

I COME FROM NAPERVILLE, Illinois, an old farming community that became a prosperous outer suburb of Chicago. The area is known for its high-tech office parks, its educated workforce and its excellent public schools. It is tidy and overwhelmingly white. Naperville has a river, the DuPage. It isn't quite the Mississippi.

Both my parents grew up around Scranton, Pennsylvania, anthracite coal country, although I was actually born in San Mateo, California. I was the third of four children with two sisters and a brother. My dad worked in insurance. He moved the family a couple of times. But Naperville is where I went to junior high and high school. It's where I learned to love the game of football.

I went out for the team at Naperville Central High. Go, Redskins—excuse me, Redhawks! No one would call me an instant standout. I mostly sat on the bench until senior year.