



Jan/Feb 2010

***"A saint is never consciously a saint— a saint is consciously dependent on God."*— Oswald Chambers**

Drew Brees rolls his eyes and smiles. By now, he expects it, even if he doesn't believe he deserves it. But the parallels are just too easy to pass up. "You've been dubbed the Patron Saint of New Orleans by just about every media outlet in the country..." they always start. It's only natural.

But for true believers, it's supernatural—almost like God's biggest wink of all time. The fact that someone as servant-hearted and Christ-centered as Brees would be sent to play for the one team with a spiritual nickname: the New Orleans Saints.

With all its major twists and turns, Brees' story is turning out to be truly faith-inspiring. The injured and slighted quarterback looking for a fresh start. The down-on-its-luck team in search of a leader. The ravaged city in need of inspiration and hope. All culminating with the collective and individual emotional comeback of each.

"The timing for this city, the Saints organization and for me—we were just brought together," Brees said. "I absolutely believe that everything happens for a reason and that God puts you in positions where you might be wondering, 'Why is this happening?' But that's when you just trust and have faith and believe that it's all for the greater good. I truly believe that's what happened here."

As much affection as Brees feels for the Saints and the city of New Orleans, they return the sentiment. After a November article in The New Orleans Times-Picayune covered Brees' visit to a local elementary school, online reader comments offered indisputable evidence: "Drew Brees is the best thing to ever happen to the Saints."

"We are lucky he is a SAINT forever. Your heart is in the shape of a Fleur De Lis."

"...long after the season is over, the love, works and memory of men like this will outlast anything done on a football field on Sundays."

At just the right time, in just the right place, Drew Brees was sent to rescue a city and a team. It's a mission he takes seriously and is one that will endure long after this Saint goes marching onto the field for the last time.

Long before the lights of the NFL propelled Brees into the public spotlight, the young quarterback received a calling.

It was on Jan. 15, 1996—his 17th birthday. He was sitting in church with his family in Austin, Texas, listening to the sermons as usual and letting the float in one ear and out the other. But this Sunday was different. The pastor was speaking a language he understood, telling the congregation that God was looking for "a few good men" who were willing to serve Him.

As a young leader with innate desires for greatness and purpose, the message resonated with Brees.

"When he said that, I immediately thought, 'Hey, that's me. I can be one of those few good men,'" Brees said. "As a guy, that message really translated well. And, for the first time, I felt like God was really talking directly to me."

Shortly after making a decision to enter the service of the Lord, his football stardom began. He "Breesed" through an outstanding college career with the Purdue Boilermakers setting five Big Ten Conference quarterback records including career passing yards (11,792) and total touchdown passes (90), and was selected by the San Diego Chargers as the first pick of the second round in the 2001 NFL Draft.

Despite his collegiate success, Brees' first three seasons with the Chargers were rocky as he split playing time with veteran quarterback Doug Flutie. By the start of the 2004 season, he appeared to be headed back to the bench when the Chargers drafted the highly touted Philip Rivers out of N.C. State. But when a Rivers preseason hold-out gave Brees another chance to prove himself at starter, he seized the opportunity by turning in a Pro-Bowl season and leading San Diego to the playoffs.

In 2005 Brees continued to produce on the field, setting a career high in passing yards (3,576), but he hit a career-altering snag in the last game of the season when a questionable, albeit legal, tackle left him with a torn labrum and partially torn rotator cuff in his throwing shoulder.

For Brees, the timing couldn't have seemed worse. Already on uncertain terms with the Chargers, the injury put a dagger in his time with San Diego and sent Brees looking for a new team—one that would be willing to take a gamble on an injured quarterback.

"At the time, I felt like that was the worst thing that could ever happen to me at the worst time," Brees said of the injury. "I started to feel sorry for myself and ask, 'Why me? Why now?' All those things were very easy to ask. But, as I look back now, I can say, 'God, that was probably the best thing that could ever have happened to me.'"

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, a disaster that leveled the city of New Orleans on Aug. 29, 2005, the Saints organization found itself in complete chaos. Without a usable stadium, the team was forced to play "home" games in San Antonio's Alamodome while the Superdome underwent repairs and sheltered the local homeless.

The turmoil showed up in the team's record and performance, and their season ended with the firing of head coach Jim Haslett and their search for a new quarterback. With Brees on the market, the desperate Saints saw a chance to uncover a diamond in the rough and perhaps gain a powerful leader who could resuscitate the flatlining team. After a half-hearted contest from the Miami Dolphins, who eventually opted to sign a healthy Daunte Culpepper instead, the Saints got their man.

Soon, Brees and his wife, Brittany, found themselves relocating from sunny Southern California into the wreckage of New Orleans.

"At the time, we were all in the process of rebuilding," Brees said. "The Saints were trying to rebuild. The city was trying to rebuild. And I was trying to rebuild, literally, a shoulder and a career."

It didn't matter what had happened with San Diego. All Brees knew was that he would now be heading up a team of 3-13 Saints who had spent a season in absolute disarray.

Still, both he and Brittany agreed: They were all-in. If they were truly going to start over, they were going to do it right. The Breeses purchased a home in New Orleans and made a complete move, committing wholeheartedly not only to the Saints but to the entire city. While Brees worked to come back from injury, he set the Brees Dream Foundation to work to help in the reconstruction of New Orleans. Not only did he and Brittany contribute physically to the rebuilding of local schools—Brees himself jumped in hands-on by pounding nails and building walls beside construction workers—they also set to work to repair the quality of life for the local citizens by organizing after-school programs and even deep-sea fishing expeditions for kids with cancer.

Soon, members of the community began to recognize the gift they'd been given when the Saints signed Brees: hope.

"It was almost like a mutual embrace," said Saints' Director of Community Affairs Nick Karl, now in his ninth season with the team. "Drew and his wife opened their arms to the community, and the community opened them right back. As he will tell you, he was definitely brought here for a reason."

The reality of that reason seemed to culminate on Monday night, Sept. 26, 2006. It was the moment New Orleans had been awaiting for more than a year: the reopening of the Superdome and the symbolic rebirth of the city. On that night, the entire nation realized that there was more to this story than football. In a virtual group hug, Saints fans returned to their home stadium to watch their team defeat the Atlanta Falcons, 35-27, and, more remarkably, improve its record to 7-0. After the abysmal record of the previous season, the turnaround was stunning.

All season, Brees himself captivated fans with his on-field leadership and skill. Any lingering questions about his ability to return from injury were answered by way of franchise and NFL records, a starting Pro Bowl position and Brees' ability to help new coach Sean Payton transform the Saints from a 13-loss team into 10-6 division champs and NFC runners-up.

For his combined excellence on and off the field, Brees was named the Co-Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year along with former Chargers teammate LaDainian Tomlinson.

Less than two years after major disaster, the Saints were back, and New Orleans was returning to life. And it appeared to be, in both subtle and obvious ways, connected to the actions and inspiration of Louisiana's new hero, Drew Brees.

After the extraordinary 2006 season, Brees and the Saints weathered average seasons in 2007 and 2008, but came roaring back in 2009, starting out perfect through the first 14 games—a streak that included eye-opening, come-from-behind victories over both the Dolphins and Falcons.



Brees signs the jersey of Tahlia Hinrichs, winner of the NFL/JCPenny Take a Player to School Day.

Over the course of those four years with the Saints, lifenchanged in several ways for Brees, most notably when he and Brittany welcomed their first child in January 2009—an event Brees refers to as "an unbelievable gift from God." Still, in other ways, his life has stayed largely the same.

Case in point: Nov. 10, 2009. As the national spokesman of the NFL/JCPenny Take a Player to School Day program, Brees woke up early to drive to the home of Tahlia Hinrichs, a first-grader at Metairie's St. Francis Xavier Catholic School. At 7:40 a.m. he walked to the door, knocked and asked for Tahlia by name. A shy, blue-eyed girl appeared and took her time warming up to the outgoing Brees, who charmed her with conversation until it was time for them to leave for school.

Once they arrived at St. Francis Xavier, Brees spent the morning engaging all of the star-struck kids in physical activity, speaking to them about physical education and, of course, tossing around the pigskin.

"The kids had no idea it was going to be Drew Brees who showed up that day, so they were pretty excited," said Karl, who snapped photos at the event. "But that's just the kind of guy Drew is. He's the best. He hasn't changed at all since he got here in 2006. He's the same community-focused guy today as he was four years ago."

While it's true that Drew Brees' external outreach has been a consistent positive for the city of New Orleans, the quarterback himself knows that, inside, he is a different man than when he first arrived.

"I feel like I'm such a tougher person mentally and spiritually," he said. "Being able to be here and be a part of this community and rebuilding effort and then take my career to the next level—it's all exposed me to things I never would have experienced otherwise. I'm stronger in my faith, as a husband, as a father and as a football player."

And he only plans to get better, especially when it comes to those matters of faith. In order to stay sharp spiritually, Brees sets aside time every day for prayer and reading the Word and also participates in spiritual activities with the team—actions

well respected and appreciated by those he leads on the field.

"What makes a man is the ability to sacrificially give expecting nothing in return, and what makes a leader is someone who is willing to die to self every day for the benefit of the team. Drew has that down pat," said Heath Evans, a Saints fullback who, along with his wife, hosts weekly Bible studies for the team at their home. "Real men of God are always trying to find ways to draw closer to the King. Drew never misses a chapel, team Bible study or couples' Bible study. His focus is always team-focused instead of Drew-focused. That is the make-up of a true leader."

The trust of his team is what helps the Saints operate like the well-oiled machine they are, even when they are down 24-3 on the road to the Miami Dolphins, as was the case on Oct. 25. That Sunday, Brees guided the Saints back from a 21-point first-half deficit to defeat the Dolphins by 12. It was a stunner that further solidified the Saints' reputation as the team to beat in 2009.

"In that situation, it would have been easy to say we really messed it up and that we were down by too many points to come back, but that's not our mentality. We'd worked too hard and invested too much to give up," Brees said. "I just encouraged them to take it one play at a time and go out there and get it done."

"I think that points to my role on the team, part of which is helping others and putting them in positions to succeed. Obviously, I have to work to be the best quarterback I can be for the team, but, if there's ever a time when I can help a guy by pulling him aside and talking to him about a route or showing him something in the weight room, I want to do that. But not only with things on the field, but also things in life."

Whether he's intentionally teaching them or letting them play out through his actions, life lessons seem to naturally emit from Drew Brees.

He's taught a team what it means to win, a city what it means to hope, and athletes worldwide what it means to persevere. As a result—whether he likes it or not—Brees' new city has dubbed him their personal saint. Even if that is in well-intentioned jest, no one can deny the underlying divine truth to it.

Titles don't matter to Brees, though. He continues to roll his eyes at the reference, knowing he's just doing what he knows to do: serve the Lord and love others. He would act the same whether he was calling plays under stadium lights, playing with his son (or random classes of first-graders), or discussing spiritual topics over a meal with his team.

Maybe the fans of New Orleans have it right after all: "a Saint he will always be." **STV**

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— Heath Evans, Saints FB

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