

THE



All-Pro quarterback
Drew Brees has
revived New Orleans's
moribund football
franchise and lifted
the city's battered
spirits. Here's where
he makes his Crescent
City connections off
the field. By Joseph
Guinto. Illustration
by Tim Bower.

It was not a hot and humid and steamy and quiet New Orleans night in the clichéd “Stanley Kowalski sweating though his undershirt” sense, but rather a wet and wintry and cold and quiet New Orleans night that Drew Brees returned to hours after falling one game short of the Super Bowl. Luckily, the glum weather was good for preserving the gumbo.

It was nearing three a.m. when Brees walked up the steps of the Uptown New Orleans home he and his wife, Brittany, had bought the prior winter. The couple — college sweethearts who met at Purdue University — had spent almost a year restoring the 100-plus-year-old place, a project that included making \$50,000 of Hurricane Katrina-related roof repairs. Brittany was stuck in Chicago, where victorious fans were cheering their Super Bowl-bound Bears after the 39-14 dismantling of the Saints. Brees, though, had taken the team charter back to New Orleans and driven himself home from the airport. The drive, normally 30 minutes, had taken him nearly two hours. Saints fans had lined the road from the team's private air terminal, forming a two-mile collection

of cars and people and banners and umbrellas. Brees had inched along in his car, signing autographs and shaking hands while people thanked him for turning in the best season of his six-year NFL career — one that earned him the starting quarterback's job in the Pro Bowl — and for leading the Saints to their best season in the team's 39-year history. For hurricane-weary New Orleans, the Saints' success could not have come at a better time.

The fans at the airport were just the beginning, though. When Brees got home to his empty house, he found that he wasn't really alone, after all. “I had balloons tied to my front door,” Brees says, recalling the scene. He's at the Saints' training facility and has


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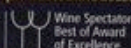
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He Said... Here are places that make a connection with Drew Brees in the Crescent City.

DINING

Clancy's, Creole, moderate to expensive, (504) 895-1111

Commander's Palace, Creole, expensive to very expensive, (504) 899-8221, www.commanderspalace.com

Drago's Seafood Restaurant and Oyster Bar; moderate to expensive; two locations: Hilton New Orleans Riverside, (504) 584-3911, and Metairie, (504) 888-9254; www.dragosrestaurant.com

Emeril's Delmonico New Orleans, Creole, expensive to very expensive, (504) 525-4937, www.emerils.com/restaurants/neworleans_delmonico

Galatoire's Restaurant, Creole, expensive, (504) 525-2021, www.galatoires.com

K-Paul's Louisiana Kitchen, regional, expensive to very expensive, (504) 524-7394, www.kpauls.com

LODGING

The Ritz-Carlton, New Orleans; moderate to very expensive; (504) 524-1331; www.ritzcarlton.com

Windsor Court Hotel, very expensive, (504) 522-1992, www.windsorcourthotel.com

SHOPPING

Brooks Brothers, (504) 522-4200, www.brooksbrothers.com

Magazine Street Merchant Association, (866) 679-4764, www.magazinstreet.com

Royal Street, one block south of Bourbon Street

Saks Fifth Avenue, (504) 524-2200, www.saksfifthavenue.com

The Shops at Canal Place, (504) 522-9200, www.theshopsatcanalplace.com

ATTRACTIONS

Audubon Park, Audubon Zoo, and Audubon Aquarium of the Americas; (504) 861-2537; www.auduboninstitute.org

Entergy IMAX Theatre, (800) 774-7394; *Hurricane on the Bayou*, www.auduboninstitute.org

Mardi Gras, (504) 568-9000, www.mardigrasneworleans.com

SPORTS

Audubon Hike and Bike Trail, www.audubontrail.com

Audubon Park Executive Golf Course, (504) 212-5290, www.audubongolf.com

just finished a preseason practice on one of those stereotypical New Orleans days — 95 degrees, 70 percent humidity. “I had cookies sitting on my porch. I had brownies. I even had gumbo there, in a Tupperware container, on my front doorstep. Only in New Orleans are you going to have one of your neighbors leave you gumbo on your doorstep. It’s pretty awesome.”

“Pretty awesome” is a good way to describe Brees’s tenure in the Crescent City. He arrived in March 2006 and found a city still trying to put itself back together. Brees was doing the same. On the first day of practice for the 2006 season, he was barely able to throw passes beyond 10 yards. In his last game as a San Diego Charger, Brees had been injured in a freak play, and he sustained seriously torn ligaments in his shoulder. The Chargers released him, and most other NFL teams refused to pick him up. The Miami Dolphins, who decided to go with the injured Daunte Culpepper rather than take a chance on Brees, told the Austin, Texas, native that they believed he had only a 25 percent chance of ever playing professional football again.

The Dolphins, interestingly enough, finished last year with a losing record and cut Culpepper. The Saints, on the other hand, were propelled into the playoffs by Brees’s surgically reconstructed shoulder, by the inventive offensive schemes of first-year head coach Sean Payton, and by the number-two overall draft pick in 2006, Reggie Bush. The team, and particularly Brees, could hardly have been a better fit for the city. “I think it is amazing how, when I got here, I was rebuilding a shoulder and a career,” Brees says. “And this organization was rebuilding a team — a franchise. And New Orleans and this whole region was rebuilding too. So we’ve all been kind of going through this rebuilding process together. And last season, you really felt like we could all do it together. Although we fell short, our season gave a lot of people hope, not only for the future of our organization and the team, but for the future of New Orleans.”

That future includes Drew Brees, quarterback, and Drew Brees, New Orleanian. He’s a fixture in his Uptown neighborhood, regularly seen out walking his dog, chatting with neighbors, shopping in nearby stores, and making the rounds at the numerous famous restaurants all over town. “Oh yes,

he's had dinner here," says David Gooch, manager of Galatoire's Restaurant — a true historical eatery and where, it's worth noting, the fictional, classless Stanley Kowalski refused to dine. "Brees is a real nice fella, and we're sure glad to have him in New Orleans." That's a good thing, because Brees is a fella who's glad to be in New Orleans.

Why would Drew Brees take a chance on New Orleans? Because New Orleans took a chance on him. When I first came here, it looked like a bomb had gone off. A lot of people may have come and looked around at that devastation and said, "I want nothing to do with this place." But, first of all, I came here and met with everyone from the organization, and I got the feeling that they had more confidence in me and my ability to come back from my shoulder injury than I did in myself. That meant a lot. Then, I looked around the city and decided that there was an opportunity to be a part of a rebuilding process, to be a part of a city that will come back and be better than it was before. To be a part of something like that

— well, I don't think most people have that kind of opportunity in their entire lives.

You think your job is hard? What do you figure it's like to be playing on a team that's giving hope to a troubled city? It's not a burden at all. It's such a motivating factor. I found it amazing that people barely had money to rebuild their lives, and yet they found a way to buy season tickets. So you realize that people put so much hope and faith in the Saints, and you realize that it is your job to deliver back to the fans and give them everything that they are hoping for.

It's about a 15-minute drive to the Saints' practice facility from the center of New Orleans, which is why most players live in the suburbs. Brees lives in Uptown. We're still in the process of renovating, just because old homes need a lot of TLC. You look around, and everybody is rebuilding. Some people [rebuild] out of necessity, because their homes were destroyed, some just for the same reason as us — old houses need

work. So everybody is doing their part in upkeep for the city and trying to revitalize it and make sure it keeps that same charm that it always has had.

Sure, it's hot sometimes in New Orleans, but you can't stay indoors every day. So go where Brees goes. We live less than a block away from Audubon Park. So during the off-season, we're out there walking around almost every day. It's a great place for people to visit. There's a hike-and-bike trail we like. They've got a great executive golf course there. There's a great zoo there.

It all has a real community feel. You've got Tulane University right there, and Loyola, so you've got students studying in the park. And sometimes we're just out walking the dog or sitting, lounging, relaxing, and maybe getting a SnoBall. You know snow cones? They call them SnoBalls down here. There's a guy out there who pulls up with a SnoBall machine. They'll cool you off.

Oh yeah. New Orleans has other kinds of food too. This city has the best restaurants



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in the country. You could go to a different restaurant every night of the week and get a great meal, and you still would not hit the same place in a year. There are that many great places. My top five are Emeril's Delmonico, Commander's Palace, K-Paul's, Drago's, and Clancy's.

Hold on. Don't rank those. You know what? Those are in no particular order. I couldn't tell you which is my favorite. Because some nights, I'm craving that calamari from Emeril's Delmonico; some nights, I'm craving that turtle soup from K-Paul's. Or maybe shrimp tasso from Commander's, or charbroiled oysters from Drago's. Maybe the redfish fillet from Clancy's or the crab-meat salad. You name it, man, they've got it. And you've got to go try these places. My wife and I have probably each gained 10 pounds since we've come here.

After you eat, you must rest. Brees has a couple of suggestions for where to do that in New Orleans. There are some really kind of unique and quaint hotels in the Quarter, but I have two favorites in the city. One is the Ritz-Carlton. It's awesome. I also love the Windsor Court. My wife and I stayed there for her 30th birthday last year.

We've mentioned that it gets hot, right? Luckily, you can cool off with some indoor activities. Man, you've got to go see the IMAX Theatre. It's down next to the Audubon Aquarium. Actually, the aquarium is great as well — I wouldn't miss that. But the IMAX is playing a movie called *Hurricane on the Bayou*. It's interesting because they started filming it six months before Hurricane Katrina. Halfway through the shooting, the hurricane came. So they have a lot of before-and-after footage of the devastation in the city. The premise is that we need to rebuild our wetlands so we're not as susceptible to a major hurricane. The film really gives you a lot of perspective as to what happened here and what we can do to fix things.

It's worth noting that Brees signed a six-year, \$60 million contract with the Saints. Sometimes he spends that money shopping. Up and down Canal Street, right outside the French Quarter, [there's] some good shopping. You find more traditional

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stores, your Saks Fifth Avenue and your Brooks Brothers and that kind of thing, at the Shops at Canal Place. If you want eclectic, fun clothing stores, you go to Magazine Street, which is in Uptown. There are a lot of local stores there. If you want antiques, you have to go to Royal Street in the French Quarter. Plus, of course, there are all kinds of other unusual shops in the Quarter. You'll run into voodoo shops and places for beads and all that stuff.

Brees topped one columnist's jokey ranking of players who aren't jerks, so forgive him if he doesn't know much about the bars in a city lousy with swilleries. Really, for my wife and me, our nightlife is really just going to a great restaurant; taking a nice walk afterward, whether it's downtown or in the French Quarter; and then maybe catching a movie. Sometimes we'll go to a jazz club. I'm not a Bourbon Street guy, so I can't help you there.

But my wife and I were on a Mardi Gras float in the Bacchus parade. I always assumed Mardi Gras was just kind of a dirty thing, with a bunch of drunks and idiots with beads. But the way we experienced it was so classy. I was in a tux, and my wife was in a really nice gown. People were just so excited and so into the moment — and there are costumes and floats and families everywhere, and all this tradition. There's nothing like it.

In a city that still needs help outside its tourist core, Brees is doing his part with his Brees Dream Foundation charity. Our philosophy is that right now in New Orleans, we're reaching a tipping point. You have people who have been out of the city for a long period of time and want to move back, and you have people who have moved back and are trying to decide whether they want to stay. One of the main things that is going to make people come back and make people stay is if they know that their kids are going to be taken care of. That involves having a place to go to school, having after-school programs to go to, having mentorship programs available, athletic fields to play sports on, and parks and playgrounds to go to that are safe.

So we have a huge campaign trying to raise over \$2.5 million for several projects in the area — rebuilding schools, athletic fields,

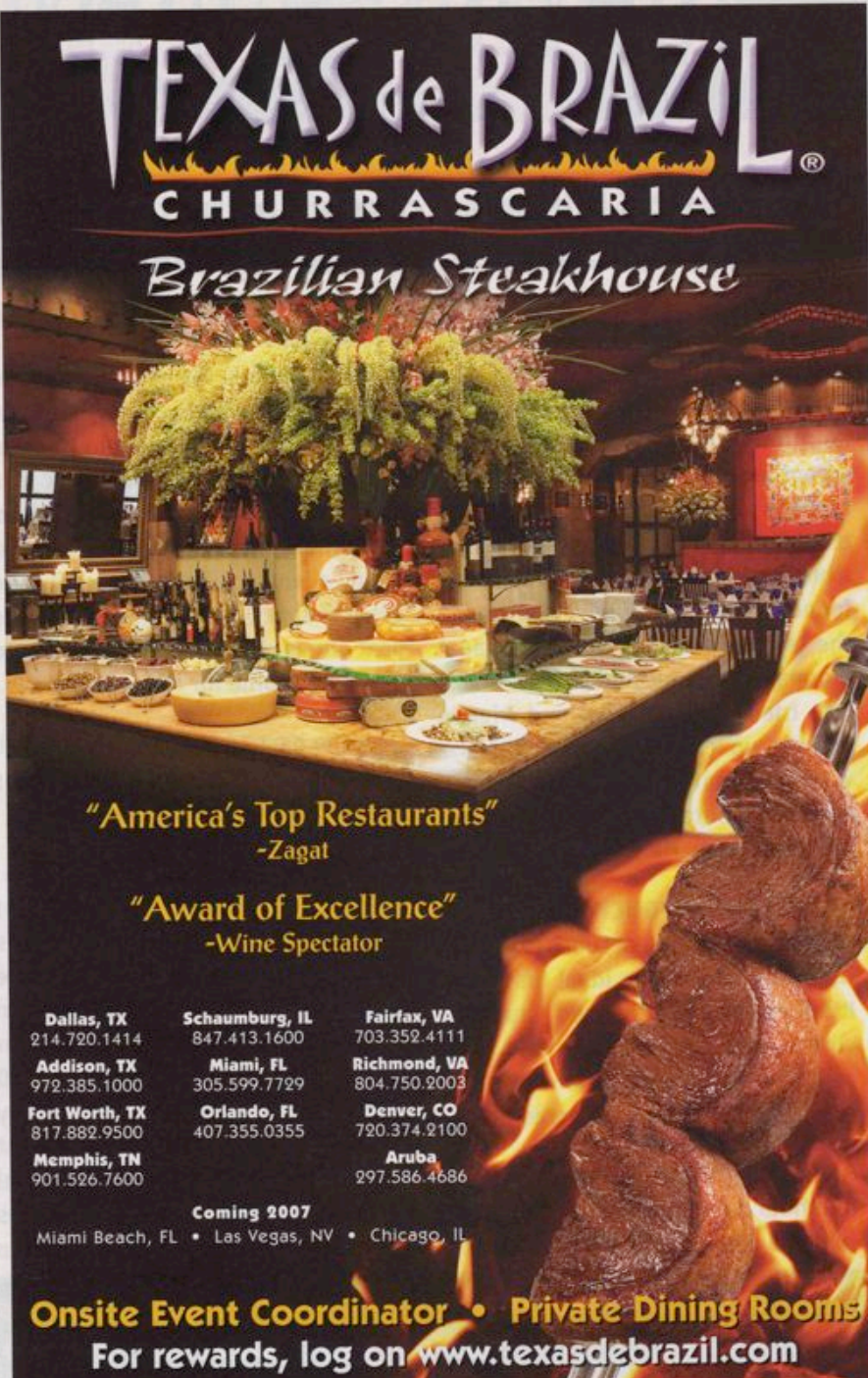
parks, and helping schools gain more programs and hire more teachers. We're slowly, methodically going to rebuild. And I promise you we're going to do it the right way.

That's a lot of work, given that this guy has an offense to run and a team to lead. But then, Drew Brees has his reasons for working as hard off the field as he does

on it. Just in our short time here, my wife and I have come to absolutely love this city. We have been so accepted by the people here that we really now feel like we're New Orleanians. So we want to give back in the same way we've been given to. **AW**

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Frequent *American Way* contributor **JOSEPH GUINTO** wrote about Andre Agassi for our August 15 issue.



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