

spirit

SOUTHWEST AIRLINES



The Game of Love

For a sport so full of hard knocks, football has its surprisingly tender side. From Joe Namath in pantyhose to the passion of the fans, it's all about heart—and not just about football.



LOVE & FOOTBALL

“HUDDLE UP!” It sounds so close to “cuddle up”—but suggest that similarity to a 350-pound tackle and you might end up on the hurtin’ end of a sack. Still, the seemingly remote worlds of love and football overlap in many ways—and not just in February, a month that brings us the Super Bowl and Valentine’s Day. There’s fan love, of course. And the love of the game. There’s the love the players feel for each other. The love a couch potato has for his Bud Lite. And the love his wife shows every time she pretends to be interested in the “wildcat” formation. There are women in love with the game, too—so much so that they passionately play it and report on it. Yes, love and football have been huddling for decades. Who knew that when John Madden was hollering about the red zone, he meant the heart?

BY **JOHN McALLEY & CHRIS RAYMOND** PHOTOGRAPH BY **ADAM VOORHES**

1920s-50s



Aug. 20, 1920
The Kickoff
 The American Professional Football Association (to be renamed the National Football League two years later) is launched. So too, in effect, is the era of the foam finger, tailgating, the "terrible towel," Cheeseheads, the "Ickey shuffle," and, lamentably, the football widow.

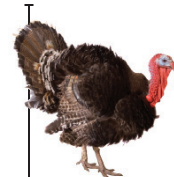
16
 NOVEMBER
 1952



GRRRR! For the first time, Charlie Brown falls for Lucy's trick play of pulling the football away as he goes to kick it. But good old Chuck had landed on his duff before. Violet sent him spinning in a Peanuts strip dated Nov. 14, 1951.



Oct. 3, 1955
Reversing the S.I. Cover Curse
 Hall of Fame running back Doak Walker appears on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. One month later, blond Olympic skier Skeeter Werner dons the *S.I.* cover. Fourteen years later, Walker and Werner wed.



Nov. 22, 1956
The Wishbone Play
 The Detroit Lions beat the Green Bay Packers in the first Thanksgiving Day game broadcast live on television. Dinner table disputes abound thereafter.

PEANUTS © 2010 PEANUTS WORLDWIDE LLC, WERNER BY JERRY COOKE/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, LOMBARD BY FORDHAM UNIVERSITY/GETTY

COWBOYS BY FOCUS ON SPORT/GETTY

AUG 31
1940

WINNERS NEVER QUIT

Vincent Thomas Lombardi marries the cousin of a Fordham teammate. Days later, he cuts his honey-moon short to return to coaching high school football at St. Cecilia in Englewood, New Jersey. He'll go on to become the greatest coach in NFL history.

Oct. 22, 1939
A Sunday Kind of Love
 NBC airs the first televised NFL game, from Brooklyn's Ebbets Field. The couch potato is thus born, and Sunday strolls with your beau take a punishing hit—unless they're to the beer barn.



SEPT. 9, 1960
2nd and Long
 To compete for a piece of the NFL action, the American Football League is launched with a 13-10 Broncos victory over the Boston Patriots, doubling men's pleasure—and their wives' irritation.

SEPT 24
1960



STARS ARE BORN The Dallas Cowboys play their very first game: a 35-28 loss at the Cotton Bowl to the Pittsburgh Steelers. The nation's love affair with the 'Boys wouldn't be officially consummated until 1978, when, in a highlights reel, a rhapsodic narrator dubbed them "America's Team."

1960s

Profiles In Courage
James Caan, left,
as Piccolo, and
Billy Dee Williams,
as Sayers, gave
Brian's Song their all.



NOV 30
1971

“I LOVE...BRIAN PICCOLO”

It has been said that there is no crying in football. It is also widely believed that real men don't cry. When it comes to the heartbreaking TV movie *Brian's Song*, those supposed truisms spiral right out the window. Based on the true story of the brotherly love and undying bond between Chicago Bears running back Gale Sayers (Billy Dee Williams) and his terminally ill teammate Brian Piccolo (James Caan), the film—dubbed one of the greatest sports movies of all time by ESPN and “the Mona Lisa of male weepers” by *Entertainment Weekly*—lays bare common wisdom about machismo and male friendship.

Arguably the original “bromance” flick, *Brian's Song* was watched by one in three American households when it premiered on Nov. 30, 1971. It remains universally beloved to this day. Williams, who went on to pop culture permanence as Lando Calrissian in *The Empire Strikes Back*, jokes, “Even Richard Nixon dropped what he was doing the night *Brian's Song* was on TV.” To celebrate the film's 40th anniversary, *Spirit* contributor J. Rentilly rounded up several of its key players—Williams, producer Paul Junger Witt, writer William Blinn, as well as Joy Piccolo, Brian's widow, and Gale Sayers himself—to reflect on the film's extraordinary emotional force. Love and football are celebrated on page after page of this special issue of *Spirit*. But nothing more powerfully brings those two themes together than the enduring and unforgettable *Brian's Song*. Read the story of the making of the film on page 102.

JUNE 8, 1966

Airborne

At the aptly named Dallas Love Field Airport, a cozy comingling of the NFL and AFL is struck between Dallas Cowboys general manager Tex Schramm and Kansas City Chiefs owner Lamar Hunt. The merger—under the banner of the National Football League—would be sealed with the playing of the first Super Bowl, on Jan. 15, 1967.



Nov. 17, 1968

Yodel Lay...Who?

Unwittingly, NBC pits a pixie from the Swiss Alps against a nation of raging football fans. With 65 seconds left in a nail-biter between the Raiders and the Jets, the network cuts away to a pre-scheduled movie of the kid's classic *Heidi*. Remarkably, in the game's final minute, the Raiders score twice to beat the Jets. The outcry is so intense the contest is dubbed “The Heidi Game.” Broadcast policies are forever altered.

1980s

SEPT 17
1972



HOLDING PENALTY! The words fantasy and football unite for the first time when savvy Cowboys G.M. Tex Schramm introduces the nation to the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders.



SEPT. 21, 1975
C'mon, Man!
Former Miss America Phyllis George joins the broadcast team for CBS's *The NFL Today*, a first stab at leveling the playing field for women in sports broadcasting—and an overt bid by CBS to bring greater numbers of female viewers into the Sunday huddle.

FEB. 1974
Sideline Pass
Joe Namath, the Jets' studly, bachelor quarterback, slips into a pair of pantyhose for a TV ad promoting Hanes' Beautymist brand. The most shocking aspect of the famously gender-bending spot? Joe Willie's legs weren't half bad!



JAN. 3, 1981
The Backup QB
Olivia Manning delivers her second Super Bowl MVP, baby boy (and future New York Giants quarterback) Eli Manning.



MARCH 5, 1982
The Screen Play
In the classic film *Diner*, Steve Guttenberg subjects his on-screen sweetheart to a 140-question "Colts quiz" to determine if she's "the one." She fails by two points, but walks the aisle a few days later, down the carpet runner he selected. "Colts colors," he says. "Very classy."



KNOWING THE SCORE Grambling State coach Eddie Robinson replaces Alabama's Bear Bryant atop college football's wins list. The secret to his success? Treating his players as if they were going to marry his daughter, Robinson says. "Coaching is a profession of love. You can't coach people unless you love them."

CAPPELETTI AND BRADSHAW © AP; ROBINSON BY RONALD C. MODRA/SPORTS IMAGERY/GETTY



MARCH 24, 1976
Born a Kicker
Five years into her marriage to Saints QB Archie Manning, Olivia Manning delivers her first Super Bowl MVP: bouncing baby boy (and future Colts quarterback) Peyton Manning.

JUNE 6
1976

MERGER TALKS

Figure skater JoJo Starbuck and Steelers QB Terry Bradshaw marry—just one of many marriages between pro players and famous beauties. Four years later, Starbuck will file for divorce, citing irreconcilable differences. "She likes the ballet, I like square dancing," Bradshaw says. "She likes the bright lights, I like the soft moonlight of the ranch."

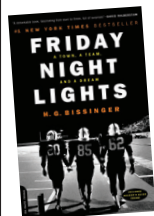


JAN. 30, 1985
The Ruling On the Field Is...
At a black-tie dinner in Washington, D.C., rugged Redskins running back John Riggins tests out his charms on Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. "Loosen up, Sandy baby," he says. "You're too tight."

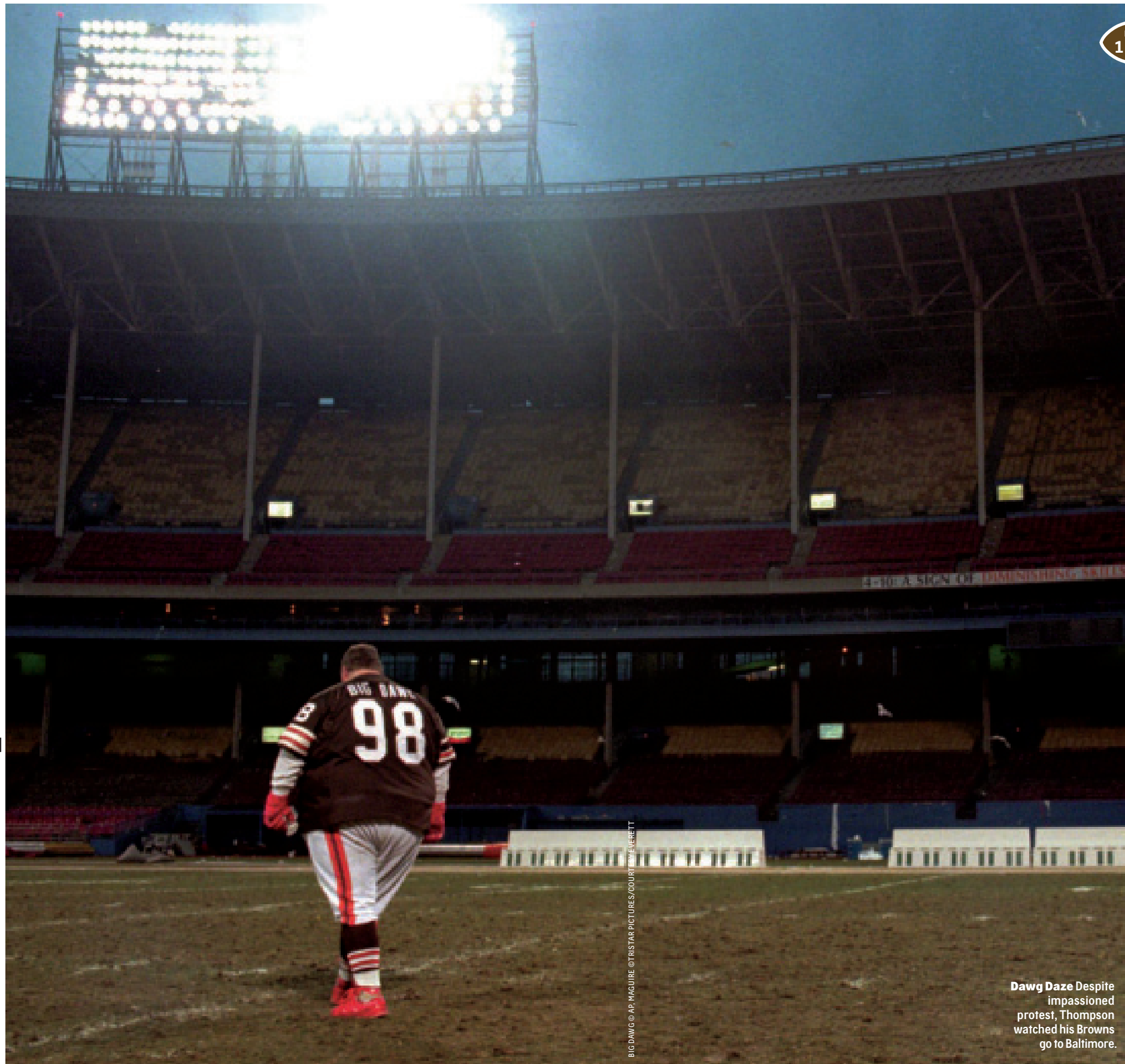
13
DECEMBER
1973

HE AIN'T HEAVY...
Penn State and eventual NFL running back John Cappeletti lends new meaning to the phrase brotherly love, dedicating his Heisman Trophy to his sibling Joey, a victim of leukemia, in an acceptance speech that rivals Gale Sayers' in its tear-jerking potency.





SEPT. 24, 1990
Binding Passion
Friday Night Lights, Buzz Bissinger's thrilling love letter to small-town-Texas high school football is published. Fourteen years later, the book will inspire a hit film, and, two years after that, a beloved series for NBC.



BIG DAWG © AP; MAGUIRE © TRISTAR PICTURES/COURTNEY EVERETT

Dawg Daze Despite impassioned protest, Thompson watched his Browns go to Baltimore.

FEB 6
 1996

THE CHILLY FANATIC

Season ticket holder John Thompson tells Congress how his heart will be broken if the Cleveland Browns move to Baltimore. Years later, in a testament to his passion for the team and his standing among its rabid fans—who are dubbed “the Dawg Pounders”—the big man legally changes his name to John “Big Dawg” Thompson.

13
 DECEMBER
 1996



PICKUP GAME Renée Zellweger proves in *Jerry Maguire* that even a football agent can find love, telling Tom Cruise: “You had me at hello.”

2000s

T
13
MARCH
2000



TAKING A KNEE New York Giants corner back Jason Sehorn proposes to Angie Harmon on *The Tonight Show*. Given her extraordinary beauty, even die-hard football fans can't resist the "Mr. Angie Harmon" quips.



**APRIL 17, 2002
Block and Awe**
In a White House interview with the *New York Times*, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice reveals her dream job: Commissioner of the NFL.

**JULY 6, 2002
Conservative Play-Calling**
Pro quarterback Tim Hasselbeck marries *Survivor* contestant and soon-to-be *View* cohost Elisabeth Filarski. Almost eight years to the date later, neo-con pageant queen Carrie Prejean marries Raiders quarterback Kyle Boller. Between the two brides, they've got the right side covered.



**FEB. 1, 2004
Unnecessary Roughness**
During the Super Bowl halftime show, Justin Timberlake and Janet Jackson reveal more than the nation's kids need to know about the birds and bees. They lay the blame on a "wardrobe malfunction."

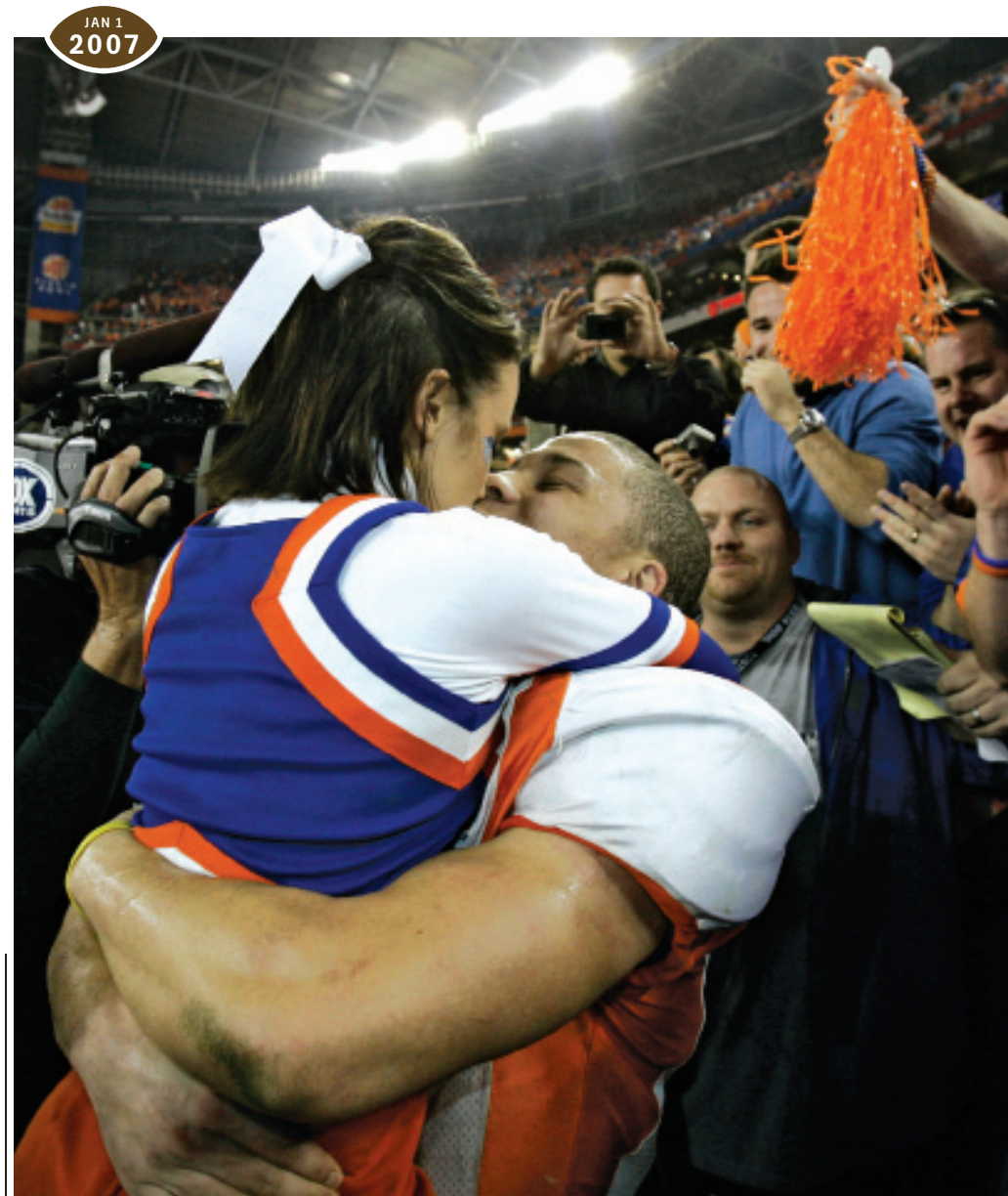
HARMON AND HILL © NBC UNIVERSAL, INC.; JOHNSON © AP



JAN 20
2001

HUT-HUT-HUT! PLEASE?
The Women's Professional Football League holds its first championship game in Houston, the capper to its first full season. The clock ultimately ran out on the WPFL, but not before it opened the door for other distaff ventures, including the Independent Women's Football League, the Women's Football Alliance, and the LFL. Yep, the Lingerie Football League.

**DEC. 20, 2003
Pass Incomplete**
During a sidelines interview, a clearly intoxicated Joe Namath—retired, sans pantyhose—tells ESPN reporter Suzy Kolber that he wants to kiss her. "Thanks, Joe," Kolber smirks. "I'll take that as a huge compliment."



OVERTIME VICTORY Immediately after his team's shocking win against Oklahoma in the Fiesta Bowl, Boise State running back Ian Johnson pops the question, on national television, to his cheerleader girlfriend Chrissy Popadics. Her response? "I think I'm going to pass out." And, of course, "Yes!"

06

SEPTEMBER
2007



JUST...BREATHE For the first time, country-pop star Faith Hill provides her swaggering opener to NBC's *Sunday Night Football* broadcast. In 2010, *Saturday Night Live* will brilliantly spoof her never-ending musical intro, as guest host Jane Lynch (dressed as Hill) sings, "There will be touchdowns, it's a guarantee/'Cause the game already started, and it's 14 to 3!"



SEPT 9
2009

HIT ME BABY (ONE MORE TIME)

Glee premieres on Fox and proves that some ballplayers—well, actors *playing* ballplayers—are really just Britney-worshipping softies under all that gear.

JAN. 13, 2008
T.O.ver the Top

In a post-game interview after a stunning playoff loss to the Giants, Dallas Cowboys wide receiver Terrell Owens tearfully defends QB Tony Romo, whose last-minute interception ended his team's hopes for victory. "That's my teammate, that's my quarterback," Owens says, weeping openly in front of his locker.

07
NOVEMBER
2008



INTENTIONAL GROUNDING

Something went wonderfully wrong when the Faith Christian School of Grapevine, Texas, took on the 0-8 "Tornadoes" of Gainesville State School. During the game, hundreds of the Faith faithful sat in the stands on the Gainesville side of the field, rooting for the opponent.

Before the game began, Faith parents and students welcomed the visiting Tornadoes with enthusiastic cheers and a spirit line. Why? Kindness. Gainesville State School is a juvenile correctional facility, and to that point in their winless season the Gainesville players—many of whom are from broken homes and embraced football as a way to refocus themselves and restore their self-worth—had seen few fans and heard barely a cheer. For one day, at least, the good people of Faith wanted to make them feel appreciated and loved. And they did—ecstatically so.



NOV 20
2009

In the Grasp Oher and Leigh Anne Tuohy celebrate his selection by the Ravens in the 2009 NFL Draft.

A TRUE HEARTSTOPPER

The Blind Side, based on Michael Lewis's 2007 book, opens in theaters and becomes a box office smash, bringing to light the extraordinary relationship between a young man from the ghettos of Memphis—high-school football player Michael Oher—and the generous family that takes him under its wing. Sandra Bullock won the Best Actress Oscar for her role as Leigh Anne Tuohy, the compassionate, hard-charging matriarch of the Tuohy family. Strangely, Oher—who went on to become a star offensive tackle at Ole Miss and is now a starter for the Baltimore Ravens—was portrayed in the film as the virtually mute center of his own story. Thankfully, he makes his voice heard loud and clear in his new book *I Beat the Odds*.

FEB 7
2010

Flood of Emotion
Super Bowl MVP
Drew Brees hoists the
championship gold.



DEC. 8, 2009
One Prolific
Passer

New England Patriots QB Tom Brady and world-class beauty Gisele Bündchen welcome their son Benjamin into the world—two years after Brady and world-class beauty Bridget Moynahan welcome their son John into the world.

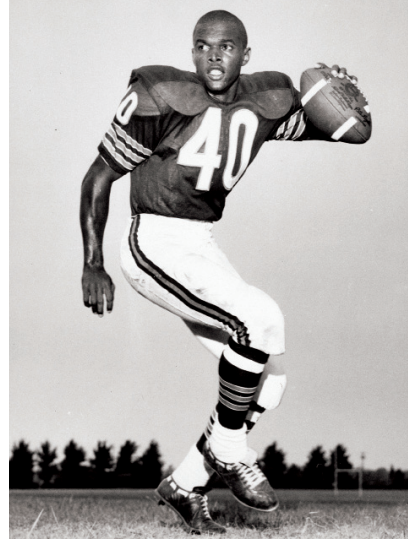
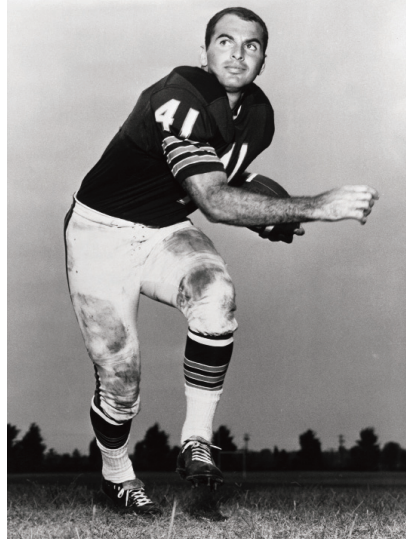
WHO DAT?! WHO DAT?! WHO DAT?! When the New Orleans Saints opened its 2006 season in the newly renovated Louisiana Superdome, it helped put to rest horrific memories of August 2005, when the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina forced more than 30,000 evacuees to take shelter in the wind-ravaged structure. But the Superdome reopening symbolized an even greater triumph: the rebirth of a city and hope. That ecstasy and deep civic pride reached a peak on Feb. 7, 2010, when the Saints defeated the Colts 31-17 in Super Bowl XLIV. More than just the love of the game was on display that day. It was football as life—and love. Who'll feel that sweet embrace this year? Let's toss a coin and get the Super Bowl XLV party started.

PHOTOGRAPHY © AP

Brian's Song

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 71)

Before a true story can become a film, it must first be lived. In 1965, the Chicago Bears signed two college hotshots to play running back, Wake Forest University's Brian Piccolo and University of Kansas All-American Gale Sayers. The latter became the Bears' starter and received the lion's share of playing time until a severe knee injury sidelined him during the '68 season. Despite their presumed rivalry, Piccolo and Sayers—the first black and white men to room together in the National Football League, at a time of great racial tension in the country—formed a fast, intimate brotherhood. Not content to have earned the starting running back position because of Sayers' injury, Piccolo dedicated himself to helping rehab the surgically repaired knee of his dispirited friend. During the 1969 season, as Sayers was regaining his Hall of Fame form, Piccolo was diag-



Truly Fast Friends Poetically, Piccolo and Sayers were separated by only one uniform number.

nosed with terminal cancer. Sayers stood by him every step of the way, until Piccolo's death on June 16, 1970. Sayers' 1970 autobiography *I Am Third* included a heartfelt chapter dedicated to his friendship with Piccolo. It formed the foundation for Brian's Song.

GALE SAYERS: I never figured on being a writer, but when I got injured in '68, a friend said, "You're not doing anything. Why not write a book?" I was doing that when Brian got sick.

JOY PICCOLO: Brian had a very unusual relationship with Gale. Gale

was very shy and Brian was the complete opposite. Brian spent a great deal of time bringing Gale out of his shyness. They were the best of friends.

In 1970, on a flight to L.A., legendary TV producer Leonard Goldberg was reduced to tears by *Look* magazine's excerpt of Sayers' Piccolo-centric chapter. "The stewardess asked me if I was all right," Goldberg told *Emmys* magazine. "I said, 'Yes, it's just this story I'm reading.'" When Goldberg's flight landed, he called his producing partner Barry Diller, and they cinched all rights to the story the next morning. Production on the film was fast-tracked.

PAUL JUNGER WITT, PRODUCER:

I had just left *The Partridge Family* after producing the pilot and first season, because I wanted to do something more serious and reflective of who I was. *The Partridge Family* wasn't it. [Laughs] Len Goldberg was kind enough to choose me to produce this project that made him cry on an airplane. **SAYERS:** Joy Piccolo and I went out to Hollywood, met with everyone, and got asked a lot of questions—about Brian and me being friends and roommates, the jokes we told, the nights we stayed up late together. There wasn't a question they didn't ask.

WITT: Bill Blinn, the film's writer, and Buzz Kulik, its director—these were real moviemakers who, at the time, happened to be available for some TV work. We caught Jimmy Caan after he had shot *The Godfather* but before it came out and made him a huge star. And we'd signed Lou Gossett Jr., a really great talent, to play Gale Sayers. Then we worked it all with as much love as we could.

WILLIAM BLINN: There are things like A.E. Housman's poem, "To An Athlete Dying Young" and the movie *The Pride of the Yankees* that provided us with some tradi-

tions and molds to use or break. The loss of an athlete, a superhero really, always hits us so hard. It makes us feel how fragile we are. When we lose someone like that, it's a more painful loss because it reminds us that everyone falls. **SAYERS:** My book was in stores and Hollywood was making it into a movie, so everyone was asking me who I thought should play me

and who should play Brian. I said, "I don't have any idea." I didn't know anything about Hollywood. **WITT:** Less than a week before production commenced, we got the call that Lou Gossett had injured himself pretty badly while training [for the film] with the Rams, and he wasn't going to be able to do the picture. We got a call from Berry Gordy at Motown say-

ing there was this cat in a movie he was doing [the Billie Holiday biopic *Lady Sings the Blues*] that we needed to see for the part. **BLINN:** Honestly, Billy Dee was probably the last name on the list [of replacements]. He was not a name actor at that time. But he was perfect for this. Like Gale, he was shy, very soft-spoken, reticent. He sits in the corner and watches and judges and makes his assessments. That's what Gale was. They had the same DNA. **SAYERS:** It was really weird meeting an actor who was pretending to be me. It helped that I liked him. Billy Dee, he'd watch me all the time, going over my mannerisms, trying to sense what made me tick. **BILLY DEE WILLIAMS:** I was a New York actor. I came to California because I needed to make more money to take care of my kid. I got a nice break when someone else went down. I can't tell you how truly blessed I feel about that.

Gale and me, we had so much in common. It was as though life had picked me to play him. And Jimmy Caan? He was genius. **WITT:** You can have a great script. You can have a great director. But there are so many things that can go wrong or right on a movie. There are so many things that can make a film truly great instead of really good. *Brian's Song* was a case of every element being in its right place and working with the same vision. It doesn't happen often.

Brian's Song began an accelerated, remarkably brief 12-day production schedule with a budget of \$450,000, shooting many interiors on the sets of the then TV hit Bewitched, interspersing stadium shots of Williams and Caan in action with NFL footage of the real Sayers and Piccolo, and using the expertise and enthusiastic cooperation of the actual Chicago Bears to make authentic the film's look and feel. By all accounts,

production was a joyful experience, full of the light, love, and prankishness Piccolo himself once cherished.

WILLIAMS: Gale kept laughing at my legs. He said my legs were too skinny. And they probably were. I was an actor, not a football player. Not much I could do with the legs. But he'd tease me about my legs being too skinny. And I'd tell him I was too good-looking to play him. We had fun. **SAYERS:** James Caan had Brian down to a T. It was unbelievable. He even looked like him.

WITT: The network initially wanted another actor to play Brian Piccolo—someone who is a very big star today and was a much bigger star than Jimmy Caan at the time. But we knew what we wanted. Jimmy worked at a ridiculously discounted fee for this movie because he loved the material so much. He was a football fanatic. I remember his excitement of getting on the field with the real Bears. He was beside himself.

BLINN: Jimmy Caan had a big wish-fulfillment thing going on. He had his football fantasies. He'd played ball in college. I think he was taken with the romance of being next to his heroes for an entire shoot. I know I was. I had to back off a little bit because I kept saying, "Oh my God, that's Dick Butkus!" These were rock stars to us Hollywood guys.

WILLIAMS: We worked out with the Bears in their training center in Indiana. I didn't go as hard as Jimmy did. He wanted to be one of them. Not me. Jimmy, he was a football player in an actor's clothes. He almost killed himself trying to fit in.

BLINN: Jimmy loved the rough and tumble of the training camp. I think they nailed him a couple of times a little harder than he would have preferred, but he got right back up. I think they respected that. Billy Dee never got into that competition. That's not his style. He's an artist. He's a poet. He's a whole bunch of

things. He and Jimmy came from different quarters in that regard. They're very different human beings. And I think that actually helped the picture. Brian and Gale were pretty different as well.

WILLIAMS: Jimmy and I had a natural and instant chemistry. How does that happen? I don't know how it happens with actors anymore than I know how it happens with women. It just worked. And we had a lot of laughs. There was a lot of sad stuff in the movie, so it was nice to laugh.

Although the film exudes tremendous warmth and high spirits, its most indelible moments are the gut-wrenching ones. Caan's performance reaches its devastating peak in a hospital scene, when Piccolo is in so much pain that he can barely open his eyes or utter a word as Sayers leans over him and clutches his hand. Williams's tour-de-force moment follows, when, as Sayers, at a black-tie awards ceremony, he accepts

the George S. Halas Courage Award (an acknowledgement of Sayers' comeback year in 1969) in honor of his dying friend. Williams delivers the speech with halting emotion and remarkable force.

"I'd like to say a few words about a guy I know. A friend of mine. His name is Brian Piccolo," he says, closely echoing Sayers's original speech. "He has the heart of a giant,

and that rare form of courage which allows him to kid himself and his opponent: cancer. He has a mental attitude which makes me proud to have a friend who spells out courage 24 hours a day, every day of his life. You flatter me by giving me this award. But I say here to you now, Brian Piccolo is the man of courage who should receive the George S. Halas Award. It's mine tonight—

and Brian Piccolo's tomorrow. [Very long pause.] I love Brian Piccolo. And I'd like all of you to love him, too. And tonight, when you hit your knees, please ask God to love him."

These soaring scenes are, on reflection, brought down to earth by an apocryphal tale about Caan's irreverence and Sayers' own Monday morning quarterbacking.

WITT: We were getting ready to shoot Jimmy's big death scene. The cameras are all set and everyone's ready to go, and Jimmy says, "Hold my Coke. Hold my cigarette. I've gotta go die." At least that's how the story goes.

SAYERS: I was shy, but I think Billy Dee made me *too* shy. I got the Comeback Player of the Year Award. I gave a speech. It's in the movie. But Billy Dee had me struggling to give it. In real life, I was very, very confident in giving that speech. I knew what I was doing. But it doesn't look it in the film. That's my only complaint about *Brian's Song*.

Production wrapped on schedule and on budget, with the network thrilled at the film's first cut. Witt knew a great musical score could really seal the deal, so he called the Frenchman Michel Legrand, one of cinema's foremost composers, with three Oscars and more than 200 film and TV projects to his name.

WITT: We had this minute music budget, maybe \$10,000. It was almost insulting, but I knew he was the man for the job. I called Michel in Paris and told him about *Brian's Song* and he said, "Send me the script." I did. He called back and he said, "I'll do it for your money—if the film is as good as the script." Now, this film was going to be my big break. I told the studio that Michel had agreed absolutely. So I had to fly to Paris and take the film with me and sit in a screening room with one guy—Michel Legrand—who,

if he liked it, was going to score my movie and, if he did not, was going to end my career. But about halfway through the film, I heard him weep. I've never been so *happy* to hear someone weep. This was a guy who didn't know anything about American football. But he did know a great love story. He wrote one of the most beautiful themes ever, for *any* film. I was

in Paris for several days while he worked, then went to his house, just outside of Paris. He had this old Moviola editing machine. He'd pump the film with the left foot and the piano with his right foot, and he played that short melodic phrase—the theme for *Brian's Song*—and I immediately teared up. He just nailed it. And I knew we had something really special.

Just ahead of ABC's broadcast, the network arranged for a private screening of Brian's Song with the Chicago Bears, the Sayers and Piccolo families, and the cast and crew.

SAYERS: Looking at that film with the players and the wives, there was not a dry eye in the place. It is something I will never forget. When you were looking at James Caan, you saw Brian Piccolo. And they were looking at Billy Dee Williams but seeing me. Brian's death was something we lived through together as a team. This wasn't just my friendship; it was something that affected all of us. So watching the movie that day with everyone, I'll never forget it.

WITT: We felt this enormous responsibility. And we were thrilled with the families' reactions. The critics were really secondary to the principals. If the film had garnered raves and awards [as it soon did] but disappointed Gale and the Piccolos, we would have been devastated.

SAYERS: After that day, all of us crying about our loss together, it was like we could talk about the old days again. Years later, we still sometimes wonder what Brian would be doing if he were alive. Brian's been gone a long time, but he's never really left.

And neither has Brian's Song. It's a movie that has transcended time, generations, and shifts in culture and attitudes.

JOY PICCOLO: Brian always used to tell my mother that he was going to be famous one day, but none of us knew it would only happen after he died. His legacy has lived on and he has truly affected the lives of so many people. The movie is a huge part of that.

WILLIAMS: I was in Belgium a few years ago and this little theater was showing *Brian's Song*, so I went in and watched it and found myself so emotionally caught up. Everyone

in the theater was crying. Again.

WITT: It was a story ripe for the telling. We were emerging from the '60s and the Civil Rights Movement, and pieces of the American Dream were finally starting to become a whole. To me, this story represented that. It was also a rare thing to delve into a relationship between two men on that level. This was before men were allowed to have feelings, let alone about each other. Their friendship was extraordinary. It became this movie, which became this incredible event. In a lot of ways, this story wasn't about the past as much as it was about the future—what kinds of love men could have for each other and people of different color could have for each other. That might not sound very tough-guy of me, but it's what I've seen. As Americans, we've had to learn how to respect and love one another. We're still on that road.

SAYERS: This is not a political movie. My life is not a political life. It was two football players working together, having a good time together, and taking care of each other. We were friends. We did right by each other. He was white. I was black. So what? Some people don't like that I feel this way, but it's the truth. My being Brian's friend had nothing to do with the color of his skin, and *Brian's Song* isn't a movie about that either. I was his friend. He was mine. He got sick. I tried to help.

Why do people love this movie? It's well done. And it shows that every one of us is human, even big, strong athletes. We want to believe that they don't fall. But they do. The movie brought out a note of human frailty and encouraged us to take care of each other. Maybe people treat each other better because of it. And if it's so, that's OK with me.

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