Wandering Souls of The Graveyard

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Wandering Souls of The Graveyard

Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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in
English
Professional Writing

by

Brandon Rizzuto

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Table of Contents

Abstract................................................................................................................................iii
Prologue........................................................................................................................................1
Chris Chauvin.................................................................................................................................4
Damian Barnes...............................................................................................................................20
DJ Morgan.......................................................................................................................................33
Tim Dalton.....................................................................................................................................51
Steve Petersen................................................................................................................................62
Brandon Rizzuto............................................................................................................................75
Epilogue.........................................................................................................................................85
Vita..................................................................................................................................................87
Abstract

The collection of essays is based on my experiences in professional football while working with the New Orleans VooDoo during the 2011 and 2012 seasons. The collection of stories encompasses my personal journey with football players, administrators, and owners during the two seasons I worked for the team. This work is also about my decision to go back to work for the New Orleans VooDoo. All the names of the characters have been changed.
Prologue

In the football-based movie *Any Given Sunday* starring Al Pacino, Jamie Foxx, Dennis Quaid, and Cameron Diaz, there is a scene where Luther ‘Shark’ Lavay, played by NFL Hall of Famer Lawrence Taylor, is in the sauna with the team’s young, cocky quarterback Willie Beamen. Willie has been all but excommunicated by his teammates because of his poor attitude, and Shark takes the opportunity to tell Willie the fine line that exists between making it and not making it in the NFL:

“Let me tell you something: For every sucker who makes it, for every Barry Sanders¹, for every Jerry Rice², there's a hundred niggers you never heard of. Sure. The game's taught you how to strut, how to talk shit, how to hit. But what else? Suddenly, there's no more money, no more women, no more applause. No more dream. This is what I'm trying to say to you. When a man looks back on his life, he should be proud of all of it. Not just the years he spent in pads and cleats. Not just memories of when he was great. You gotta learn that in here (points to his chest). Or if you don't, you ain't a man, you're just another punk.”

Shark again is seen later in the movie as an important and pivotal plot piece regarding the life of a professional football player. In the later scene, Shark is in a meeting with the team doctor, head coach, and assistant coach, and is informed that he has a cracked vertebrate. He downplays the severity of the injury as the team personnel states how highly dangerous, perhaps lethal, it is for him to continue his football career. Such brute force or impact to his neck at a certain angle could cause paralysis, perhaps death. Shark, with tears in his eyes, still pleads with the coaches and team doctors to let him continue his football playing career. In his tearful lobbying, Shark says:

“Football is my life, Coach, my life…it’s all I know how to do.”

¹ One of the greatest, most celebrated NFL running backs of all-time.
² Also, one the greatest, most celebrated NFL players of all-time. Jerry Rice was an NFL wide receiver.
Shark ultimately plays, under the condition that he signs a waiver understanding that he is playing against the doctor’s council and would go on to record the team’s most crucial defensive stop. But he is hurt on the play and carted off on a stretcher with an apparent spinal injury. Though a fictional character, Shark emulates the real-life football players that I encountered while working in the Arena Football League for the New Orleans VooDoo. For two seasons, I was the team’s media and public relations contact. Those two seasons, I met more men, both young and old, who fell into that “hundreds of other” players that “you’ve never heard of” because they never made it to the NFL and found themselves making $400 a game in the AFL trying to make it. And of all of those trying to make it (with maybe one or two per year from the AFL actually landing on a NFL practice squad), almost all of them were trapped between the arena’s walls because football was all that they knew how to do. It was the only thing that they had learned or could remember learning. By default, they were arena football players; lured to the league with hopes that they would be that success story that made it; that they would be the one in a million to go through the AFL to the NFL as Kurt Warner\(^3\) did; and to also not face the harsh realization that football was not a sustainable reality. The AFL, and the VooDoo, is where many players – and coaches for that matter – got stuck in a kind of football purgatory.

I spent the 2011 and 2012 seasons with the team in “The Graveyard,” which was the common nickname for our home field. The 2011 season was terrible with a 3-15 record. In the 2012 season, we finished 8-10 with a playoff berth, which is nothing to shrug at by any means,

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\(^3\) Kurt Warner is a NFL and AFL Hall of Fame quarterback. Warner started his professional career with the Iowa Barnstormers of the AFL, then going on to quarterback three NFL teams, leading two of them to a total of three Super Bowls.
but it was a one-and-done with a 66-53 loss at Philadelphia. Philadelphia went on to play in the ArenaBowl\(^4\) that season, making our loss maybe a little less painful. Still, all losses are painful. The team lost a total of 26 games during my two-year span; I watched the roster change, and change…and change. I saw season ticket holders diminish from 6,600 in 2011 to 2,400 in 2012; I watched some of the most idiotic and, for lack of a better term, dumbest business practices I’d ever seen in my professional career go on both on and off the field. I also witnessed good men do great things; I witnessed bad men do bad things.

As this collection of stories reads on about some of the men I encountered while working in professional football, I hope you feel the compassion for them that I felt. I hope that I do their characters justice, and that you find yourself a fan of them and their inner and outer struggles; that you see human beings under the helmets and pads, and minus the cleats.

They are just like you and me. They are just like you and me.

\(^4\) The Arizona Rattlers defeated the Philadelphia Soul, 72-54 in New Orleans. The game was held at a neutral site for the League’s Silver Anniversary.
Chris Chauvin

The New Orleans VooDoo folded at the conclusion of the 2008 season. The VooDoo were one of the top-revenue grossing teams in the AFL. They were selling out a 16,000-seat arena, merchandise sales were soaring, and corporate partnerships were in demand so much so that there was a waiting list on certain advertising items.

Still, the team was taking a loss on the business side. The players’ salaries were destroying the business model of the League; the League was built on set salaries for young and hungry players trying to make it to the NFL, which all but ensured profits for owners, thus making for a healthy operating league. For example, when the League resurrected itself in 2010, every player received a set weekly pay rate of $400 before taxes and deductions. With that model, all was well in the AFL until the League welcomed NFL money and NFL owners into its operation in the early 2000s. Though the AFL had a financial security net it had never had before, more money led to more problems as NFL owners brought with them NFL players. The NFL players, who were at the tail end of their NFL playing careers, were coming to the AFL and demanded NFL salaries, and NFL owners were not shy with the pocket book. Though aged with wear and tear, the older NFL player was better than the younger AFL player, so salaries increased to an unsustainable plateau; and subsequently, the League folded after the 2008 season. The VooDoo were the first to announce their closure and others soon followed.

As the coffin was nailed shut in 2008 on the VooDoo, so did it seem that the dream of Chris Chauvin died as well. Chris signed on with the team late in the 2007 season and had emerged as the starting quarterback in 2008. What made the gig sweeter was that Chris was a

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5 Jerry Times, owner of the Dallas Cowboys, owned the Austin Wranglers; Art Blank, owner of the Atlanta Falcons, owned the Georgia Force.
local, born and raised in River Ridge and a standout quarterback at John Curtis Christian High School. He was doing what he always wanted to do: play professional football in his hometown.

“When the VooDoo [terminated its franchise], I was hoping some other teams would call. Then last year [2009] basically every team in the League called, but they all wanted me to move,” said Chris in an interview with the Times Picayune. Chris was only interested in playing football in his hometown. He had made a life where he was from; he married his high school sweetheart and was absorbed into his in-laws’ family business. Chris then became the sales manager for River Parish Disposal. With the death of the VooDoo, football became an afterthought, a past life for Chris.

Then the phone rang in September of 2010 and there was a voice on the other end of the line asking him about playing football for the VooDoo. It was new VooDoo owner Steve Petersen, who helped buy the VooDoo and League out of bankruptcy. Steve asked Chris if he still had the desire to play football. Chris said he would have to talk to his wife and his father-in-law before he made any decisions. Chris then called back Steve in less than 15 minutes.

“I’m in,” Chris said to Steve.

***

I first met Chris in December of 2010 at the training facility where he was doing his conditioning. Chris did not look like a quarterback; he looked more like a linebacker or a fullback. Where most quarterbacks are tall and slender, Chris was only 6’2” (on a good day) and seemed as wide as he was tall. He had always been what some would classify as “thick” for a quarterback, and his time off from the game made him go from thick to pudgy.
His body slowly and steadily lost momentum, and the color in his face changed. I watched as he struggled doing this workout and that workout, at times even taking a break from the screaming of his personal trainer to throw up in the nearest trash can.

“You got to watch out for those Oreos, they are so damn good,” Chris said, trying to catch his breath, drenched in sweat and turning to face me.

“I am Brandon, the media guy,” I said with my hand extended.

“Chris; Chris Chauvin,” he said as he crushed my hand. He had bear-like hands with a brick-like feel, and what was probably his normal handshake for him was a painful experience for me.

“You want to get one in,” he continued and pointed at the workout floor lined with cones.

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, if you are going to be grinding with us, I want you to know what the grind is like.”

I didn’t want to make a bad impression; if I said no, I was going to be labeled a pussy and/or possibly lose the trust of the team’s star player before the season began. When you’re the “media guy” the players need to know that you have their backs and will protect them from the outside world, and sometimes protect some of them from themselves. Media types are like tigers; much as a tiger waits for its meal to expose itself, members of the media can be just the same as they stalk the post-game locker room after a loss or attend every practice waiting to see someone doing the wrong thing only to write about it or be the first to tweet about it. The media guy is also there to shoo media away when they need to be shooed, like a club bouncer of sorts. It was in moments like this when you gained a player’s trust.
Yet, if I said yes to this terrible idea and had an embarrassing workout – or even threw up as he did – then I would have made a fool of myself. Either way, I was at a loss. I could hear a quiet voice in my mind get a little louder with the passing seconds. *Fuck it just do it, fuck it just do it...just fucking do it!*

“Uh, yeah. I can do one. I got clothes in the car,” I said. I really didn’t have much going on that day besides work, and I figured, well, this is work after all.

“Big dog! I like it. I like it,” Chris said. “Go change and get ready for a beat down.”

I was 25 years old at the time and in, what I thought, the best shape of my life. I worked out every day, mostly early mornings before work. After work I would play in a few softball leagues in the evenings and considered myself fairly athletic. I remember thinking that I got this.

After doing drill after drill, running here and running there, followed by this medicine ball throw and that ladder drill – I couldn’t have been more wrong. I didn’t *have* this and I started to feel the unsettling queasiness of my stomach taking form; my vision started to blur and before I knew it I was trying to talk myself out of not throwing up. Most of us have that moment right before we throw up when we know we are going to throw up, and we plead with ourselves for it not to happen. Sometimes it works. Most of the time, though, it does not. With the high-intensity of the workout, I could not even beg my body not to; it just happened.

“You alright?” Chris asked while I was throwing up my breakfast. The one thing, probably the last thing that I wanted to happen or, better yet, the last thing that I thought might happen on the first day I met Chris was me throwing up in a trash can in front of him.

“Yeah man. I’m good.”

“You sure, B? You mind if I call you B?”

“Yeah that’s fine. My friends call me B.”
“My friends call me Chris. You can call me Chris.”

Chris stood right over me while my head was in the trash can; he kept talking like my throwing up was just the usual. Maybe for football players, this was normal.

“You know, I was really just fucking with you about working out. I never thought you’d actually do it,” Chris said as he tossed me a towel to wipe my face.

“All media guys that I have been around in my life have all been fat, out of shape, and generally had some sort of fucking weird thing about them,” Chris said.

“I know what you mean. There are not a lot of media relations people that take care of themselves. I have a work hard, play hard type mindset.”

All I could remember thinking at that moment was that I would never accept another of his invitations to workout with him again; however, it was an eye-opening experience into the football player’s world. Having just 45 minutes of hell like that made me appreciate more of what football players go through; it also made me appreciate Chris more, knowing that he had gained a significant amount of weight over the off period and was putting himself through hell trying to get back into football-playing shape. This was also his second two-hour workout of the day.

“How about we go get some food and booze after this,” Chris said.

“Yeah, I don’t know about the booze, though.”

“I like you even more. I don’t drink, never really have. Food it is.”

I didn’t know it then, but over the course of that 45 minutes of my embarrassing escapade of a workout, I had gained a really good friend.

***
Offensive Coordinator Dex Duval paced the sideline. With weathered skin and just a few hairs up top, Duval looked a lot older than his early 40s. His temper matched his appearance.

"You’re running the fucking play all wrong," yelled Duval.

“Double “X” left, bench route…double “X” left, fucking bench route.”

It was training camp, middle of February and the 2011 season opener was March 11.

Dex Duval was what some people would call a loose cannon, and he was also infatuated with himself. He fashioned himself as a ladies man and a smooth-talker, but he was far from any looker I’d ever seen. Dex was good at three things: drinking, yelling, and making every female intern in the office feel uncomfortable. One of the interns said she felt like Dex had more eyes than Medusa had snakes, and that she felt that even with his back turned away from her that she still felt like he was checking her out.

But Dex was a great AFL quarterback in his playing days, and went on to be inducted into the League’s Hall of Fame, though those credentials didn’t necessarily make him a great coach or person. To this day, I have never seen a coach not have a physical playbook. No bullshit, no joke; Dex Duval did not have a playbook to give his players. Usually on the first day of training camp, a coach will distribute his playbook much as a teacher gives his students a syllabus on the first day of class. Not Dex Duval. When asked about his playbook, he pointed to his head saying that he calls the game on instinct. It was the most idiotic approach I had ever witnessed. On occasion, Chris would jot down drawings in a composition notebook. The entire team would huddle around Chris as he flipped from page to page showing each player what his assignment was, so it was no wonder why “Double X left, fucking, bench route” was not run correctly in practice.
“I ain’t never seen no shit like this before,” said one of the players in the huddle, letting off some frustration about their situation.

“Hey, it’s alright baby. Alright, we got this, we got this. Double X left, bench route just like in the notebook. Ready, break,” said Chris in the huddle after the tongue lashing from his coach. Moments like that are what made Chris Chauvin a natural-born leader; he had the ability to lead, and he always led in the most positive way. Being around football teams throughout my career, I have come to understand that most of the guys on a team are on-the-fence guys. The on-the-fence guys are looking to the alpha-male in the room to lead them, just like a pack of animals in the wild. In a football locker room, the alpha-male will decide which side of the fence everyone will be on – whether the team will respond to adversity with positivity or negativity. Chris was the alpha-male and was always positive. He was a coach’s dream.

Just like that day in the huddle when Dex Duval was screaming at them about not running the play correctly, Chris could have easily agreed with that disgruntled player. Chris was probably just as displeased with the situation, but he turned it into a positive. Double X left, bench route was run the correct way the next play.

“Good job, I am glad that we don’t have a bunch of fucking retards out here,” said Coach Duval as he clapped his hands to show his approval of the play being executed perfectly.

As one can imagine, with no playbook or game plan, Dex Duval did not last long with the VooDoo. Three games into the 2011 season, Dex was fired as offensive coordinator. With a new offensive coordinator, the team went on to win its first game of the season at Cleveland – a real ugly 34-33 game. However, the offense didn’t show much improvement. The arena football game is a high-scoring game; most teams score in the 60-to-70 point range; the VooDoo were averaging just over 30 points per game halfway through the 2011 season. With the team on its
second offensive coordinator and still struggling, Chris as the quarterback was next in line in the blame game. A new quarterback was signed; Chris was benched. Though he was probably most embarrassed and disappointed to be sitting the bench, no one ever knew it. Whatever qualm he may have had, he hid; he just kept on being Chris, being positive and doing everything necessary to be successful as a team.

D Bryant was signed as Chris’s replacement. Chris took D to lunch his first day, and stayed late with him every day the first week to teach him the playbook. D’s first game was on par with Chris’s performance and so was the second. It was apparent that the quarterback was not the problem; it was the team assembled around him. But, the head coach, Carter McGlenn, did not want to hear that, nor did he take criticism lightly. He didn’t want to hear that we led the League in sacks given up, dropped passes, and turnovers. I started to think that Carter and some others on the team did not like Chris for the attention he got because he was a local. To most, Chris was like a superstar. Everyone in New Orleans knew him, but not everyone in New Orleans knew others like Carter.

The VooDoo went on to start two other quarterbacks before the job went back to being Chris’s again. By that time, the season was over. We were eliminated from playoff contention with six weeks left in the season – a true mark of being terrible. D Bryant left for a non-football job in his hometown of Detroit, as he probably thought it would be best not to get killed running for his life behind our spotty offensive line. The other two replacements had short stints playing before they were served walking papers. Chris was back playing, but he was getting killed. This is probably where being a little “thick” came in handy, that little extra padding between him and the turf protected him after being sacked and/or knocked down every other play.
Even with the dismal season and all the reasons to just give it up, Chris kept going. I don’t think that I ever saw someone who enjoyed playing football more than Chris. Getting cracked in half play after play by some angry and rather large human being didn’t stop Chris from getting up, getting back in the huddle, and doing it all over again. His energy was contagious and encouraging, but unfortunately that energy didn’t translate into wins for the VooDoo. Still Chris kept playing; kept doing what he loved.

***

Sometimes after practice and after all of the reporters left, Chris and I would go play golf. Chris knew everyone and we rarely ever paid for a green fee, a golf ball – anything. Most treated Chris as if he were their long lost son; I never saw someone not generally happy to see him. He had that it quality, that quality that always brings out the best in those around him.

And on top of that, this guy could hit a golf ball to China. I had never in my life seen someone legitimately drive a ball over 300 yards. He did it so effortlessly. As much as I liked him, I hated him for that.

“Suck that, Eli!” Chris said jokingly after he followed through his drive out of the tee box. The ball bounced up on the fringe of the green.

“You beat Eli Manning, didn’t you?” I asked.

“Yeah, I beat his ass my senior year.”

“That’s got to be pretty cool man; you beat a NFL Super Bowl MVP, also from your hometown. Not too many people can say that, Y’know.”

Chris put his club back in his bag, and we got back into the cart. We went on a search-and-rescue mission to find my ball and the conversation continued.
“Yeah, most people get all geeked out when I start talking about how I beat Eli, or that I played with DeAngelo Williams\textsuperscript{7} and Stephen Gotskoski\textsuperscript{8}.”

“That’s cool, though. You know a lot of people would love to have the experiences that you had.”

I jumped out of the cart to go walk into the woods to find my ball. Under the brush and near a pine tree, I had the most impossible shot. I cheated. I kicked it out of harm’s way. Chris saw me. He called me out.

“You know what’s the difference between winning and losing?” Chris yelled in my directions.

“What?”

“Getting caught cheating. I am docking you a stroke.”

He laughed, and I laughed. Him docking me a stroke was not going to decide this golf outing or any before or after. He was by far a better athlete than I, and the separation was easily seen on a level playing field such as a golf course.

My shot from the woods was a scud missile that found the fairway, but still some 100 yards from the hole. I walked back to the cart. Chris and I continued.

“Did you like playing in college or in the pro’s better?”

“Honestly, I like it all but my best memories are from high school.”

“Really?” I asked as we drove to my ball so I could hit again.

“Yeah man. I met my wife, I started all four years and we only lost two games. I am still friends with almost every one of those guys.”

“How many games did you win?”

\footnotetext[7]{Current NFL football player with the Carolina Panthers.}
\footnotetext[8]{Current NFL football player with the New England Patriots.}
“Over 50; some state championships and shit and shit, Y’know not that big of a deal.”

He laughed, I laughed. He was fun to be around.

“You would think that most people would say playing in college or professionally or high school.”

I got out of the cart, selected my club and took a hack at my ball. By chance, it rolled up on the green. As I walked back to the cart, Chris followed up my statement.

“Don’t get me wrong, I have enjoyed my football career. College was awesome, and getting a chance in the CFL\textsuperscript{9} and NFL\textsuperscript{10} was awesome; I love the game, more than the game ever loved me back, but there is more to life than football.”

“I know, but football dominates pop culture. You are like a god to some people.”

“I wish people didn’t look at me like that. I am way more proud of marrying my wife and the thought of us having a family than anything that I ever accomplished on the football field.”

I couldn’t say anything to that. Here I was just a normal guy thinking that every football player lives for the limelight, the money, the women, etc. But then here was Chris refuting that. We continued to play golf.

Chris spoke about his family. His mother and his dad; his siblings and his wife; he told me that his wife was pregnant and how excited he was to be a dad himself. I was happy to get to know him.

“So what about you?” Chris asked.

“What do you mean?”

\textsuperscript{9} Canadian Football League.
\textsuperscript{10} Chris went to training camp with the Cleveland Browns in 2005.
“You have a woman in your life, you got people you care about, what you want to do with yourself…fuck, I can’t do all of the talking here,” Chris said with a smile on his face.

I had never had a player – or even a coach – ask me anything about me before. I almost didn’t know what to say. I didn’t have a girlfriend, maybe some female interests but nothing serious. I told him my father was a roofing contractor and my mother worked for State Farm as an insurance agent, and that I had a younger brother that I really had no relationship with and that it was probably my fault. My parents never put too much of an emphasis on sports. They knew I was somewhat decent at baseball, but really never pushed me to it. I never played football. My mom wouldn’t let me. Chris laughed and said I had a good mom.

He rattled off this girl and that girl that was single and said he would set me up with her. He said that I deserved a good girl, someone to love me. He told me that one day I would find “the one” and that I would know when I found her.

“Hey Chris, I’ve never had anyone ask me questions about my personal life before. Y’know, at the work place. It’s kind of you.”

“Don’t mention it; we’re in this together. Everyone from the head coach down to the water boy, ain’t no one excluded from family.”

“But you don’t take the water boy to go play golf like me.”

“Of course not, I wouldn’t want you to get your ass kicked out here by both of us; you might kill yourself out here if that happened. You are far too bad to be as competitive as you are.”

***
The last game of the season was at Orlando that year. We had nothing to play for and it showed in everything the franchise did. The owner, Steve, didn’t even buy tickets for the flight until two days before. Needless to say, our travel day was a complete disaster. Unlike the NFL where each team has a private jet, the AFL teams fly commercial airlines. It was always funny to see these 300-pound, abnormally large men have a middle seat between two people.

But that final trip to Orlando was anything but funny as our travel group of thirty was on four different flights to different connecting flights in different cities before, at some point, arriving in Orlando. My flight group went through Dallas, to Nashville, then to Orlando. I arrived with six players in Orlando at 4 p.m. the day before our game. Some of the players had arrived already, while two other flights had yet to land.

The players were pissed. On top of the terrible air travel that day, Steve had also forgotten to supply per diem to the players so they could eat. Steve didn’t say it, but being 3-14, he was trying to save some of his losses. He wanted to get that dismal season and experience over just as much as the rest of us, and it showed in his poor treatment of the players. That trip to Orlando, he really did treat them lousy.

The travel and the per diem were not the worst that happened that week. Steve had also not paid his bills to the League and because of that we were on hold for transactions. Our backup quarterback had left the team for personal reasons, meaning Chris was the only one we had on the roster – and the only one we were going to have going into that week. Chris’s family attorney called the AFL office and threatened to file suit if his client, Chris, suffered any injury that week. He was right to. If the other team knew the only quarterback was Chris, it would make sense to knock him out of the game.
Even after Steve’s complete negligence of not paying per diem, delaying booking flights, and attempting to go into the final game of the season with just one quarterback, Chris was the one that held it together. He had every right to join in the bitch fest and boycott talk of the last game as the players were planning on going to Universal Studios instead of the game. Chris spoke up.

“Guys, guys. We can easily go to Universal Studios just as easily as we can go play the game,” said Chris.

“What the fuck is your point, Chris?” said one of the raging mad players.

“My point is that we are professionals and just because someone doesn’t treat us as such doesn’t mean we should do the same back. Look, today was bullshit. Seriously, travel today was bullshit.”

The rest of the players in the lobby of the hotel turned to look at Chris. All of them either turned his way or started walking towards him.

“But y’know what we get to do tomorrow? We get to play a football game. You hear me; we get to play a football game. How many people you grew up with would trade places with you right now, to have a chance to play just one more game?”

More and more people in the lobby started to take notice as Chris spoke. He was gravitating. Everyone got closer.

“Yeah, we can bitch and complain how we got here; we can bitch and complain about our season. But for some of us, probably me, tomorrow is the last time we will be playing football.”

He paused for a moment. His face sank somewhat. He looked nervous. He continued.

“I…I, ah…I always knew I’d say those words one day. In 2008, my career was taken from me. I thought I had a 2009, that I had a 2010…but one day I woke up, and there was no
next year. And I can tell you that in those two years away from football, I missed it so much...I mean, all I thought about was another opportunity to play one day.”

Chris got choked up. His eyes filled. He did his best to hold back.

“And one day, whether that day is tomorrow for some of you, like it is for me, you will be staring down an end to a life. A football life. I have been playing this game since I was 9 years old. For over 20 years, football is all I’ve known. The last time I left this game, I left on someone else’s terms. Tomorrow, I will leave on my own. Y’know, there are no guarantees in life or football, all we got is what we got – and what we got is one last game, and perhaps, for some, like me, one last chance to play football.”

There was a silence in the hotel lobby. Everyone stood processing what Chris was saying. There were players in the room like Chris, older guys who were on their way out. This could be their last game, whether they wanted it to be or not. Hell, it could even be some of the younger guys’ last game; I mean we were the worst team in the league and there were maybe two or three of the guys who were good enough to sign with another team. And it turned out, it was the last game for many of those guys.

“That’s real shit, Chris. I can respect that,” said one of the players.

“Yeah, we will be there tomorrow,” said another.

“Tomorrow, we got you.”

The next day, the players were all on the bus to the game. They all got off at the loading dock of the Amway Center, went to the locker room, and dressed for the game. The locker room was silent. Players had their head phones on and most of them sat silently at their locker with a few heads bobbing.
The game was the same as the rest before it; it was turnover after turnover, and Orlando pulled away rather quickly. The final seconds ticked off the clock as it did for the careers of a few players that night. Chris Chauvin was one of them. He left this time on his own terms.
Damian Barnes

“B, I traded for a guy; he’s sending in his paperwork to the office,” said Head Coach Carter McGlenn at Monday’s practice. “This guy right here, he’s what we’ve been missing, and he’s going to get us back. Believe me, B. He’s going to get us right.”

It was the same sort of thing he had said about every person we had acquired for the team since training camp. “This guy’s a baller,” “He’s a donkey, watch’em when he gets here,” or “I ain’t never seen no one with skill like that” is what I remember hearing about almost every player that was signed. After hearing the same lines over and over again, and seeing the product on the field become even more unbearable to watch, I remained skeptical of anyone that McGlenn praised. I expected Damian Barnes to be just like the rest of the players brought in or traded for.

McGlenn gave me his number and told me to call Damian. He instructed me that Damian might have some trouble getting the fax through so I might have to talk him through it over the phone. I did not think that to be odd since I had to walk a few of our other signees through how to use a fax machine. I never thought part of my duties working in the front office of a professional football team would involve giving instructional seminars on how to use fax machines – which is a dead technology, by the way – to players, but as my tenure went on, doing things like giving lessons on how to use a fax, or even how to use a copy machine, became common. It was kind of fun, actually.

After leaving practice, I got back to the office around noon. No fax had come through. I called the number I had been given, and the robotic voice of the operator answered.

“You have reached a non-working number. Goodbye.”
I called the number two more times with the same result. Could coach have texted me the wrong number? It was possible, so I called him.

“Oh, yeah, I forgot; that was the number he gave me yesterday, but it got shut off. Call this one; let me know when you’re ready,” said McGlenn. I obliged, and he gave me the new number.

“Now, if a woman picks up, just ask to speak to Damian,” said McGlenn as he hung up the phone.

This was a first. I was going to call someone looking for someone else. Who was I calling? I thought to myself that this was a bit sketchy.

I called the number, and sure enough, a woman answered. She sounded elderly with a raspy smoker’s voice. She exhaled into the phone, like she was struggling to breathe.

“Yes ma’am, is Damian Barnes there?” I asked.

“Who calls this house looking for him?” she asked.

“My name is Brandon Rizzuto. I am calling from the New Orleans VooDoo of the Arena Football League. Damian was traded to us and – ”

“Voodoo? You got some nerve calling here! This is a house of God; no one here is interested in your voodoo.”

The phone disconnected, and the monotone of the dial stilled me for a few seconds. What the hell just happened? This was a new first for my time in the front office of the VooDoo.

I called back. On the second ring, someone answered, and this time it was man.

“Yo,” said the voice.

“Yes sir, I am looking for Damian Barnes,” I said.

“What business you got with him?”
“I am calling from the New Orleans VooDoo of the Arena Football League, I am calling to get his contract so he can –”

“Coach said you might be calling. My high school coach has my contract. He’ll fax it in today. He knows how to use the fax.”

“That’s great. Happy to have you on the team; I need to get some information on your football playing career to build a bio for you for the website and game notes. You mind answering a few questions while I have you on the phone?”

“Google me.”

“Ah, excuse me? I don’t understand.”

“Google me, it’s all there. I gotta go.”

Before I could say anything else, the phone line went silent. As with my first call to Damian, I was equally confused by my second. There was only one thing I could do: google him.

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It was late Monday night when the contract finally came through on the fax machine. It was late, but it didn’t matter to me. I had not moved from the time Damian hung up the phone on me. I had stayed at my desk, reading about Damian. There were so many articles and so many interesting tidbits about this man. In 2005, he was rated the No. 1 overall high school prospect in the nation by one online site, while the leading site in college football recruiting and high school prospects, Rivals.com, had Damian listed as the No. 2 overall player in country.

All of this recognition came from Damian’s junior season in 2004 when he had 86 tackles and 14 sacks in 10 games from the defensive tackle position. For a non-football person reading this, a defensive tackle lines up at the line of scrimmage and upon the ball being snapped by the
offense, the defensive tackle is supposed to clog up the middle and stop the run. By clogging up the middle, the defensive tackle draws a double team and creates lanes for other defenders to get into the offensive backfield, and with enough push from the defensive tackle position, the defensive tackle can disrupt the passing pocket enough to get pressure. The vast majority of defensive tackles, sometimes called nose guards, are there as run stuffers and are not known for their pass rushing skill. Damian could not only stop the run between the tackles, he could sack the quarterback as well – something not too often expected or even asked of the person playing the position.

It is rare to find a defensive tackle with the talent to do both – and do it in the way Damian did it. He was a special high school talent, and he signed his national letter of intent to play for Florida State following his senior season in 2005. But Damian never made it to campus at Florida State. From the day he signed that letter to play for the Seminoles to the night that I received his signed contract to play for the VooDoo, a lot had transpired in Damian’s life.

Damian had spent time in jail for a felony; he had an undisclosed amount of marijuana and was attempting to sell it to an undercover policeman; after his arrest, his first son was born and he did right by him, got a job, and supported his new family; all he could find was a job as a garbage man. Damian had all but fallen off the radar, before finding a temporary football home at Shaw University in North Carolina. Shaw, a NCAA Division II school, was incomparable from the then two-time National Champion Florida State Seminoles, but it was a second chance. That’s all that mattered to Damian; the going-to-class part of the agreement he signed to become a student-athlete was not what mattered to him, and after one season, Damian failed out of Shaw University. This forced him to enter the 2010 NFL Draft, but every team passed on his services – whether it was because of his rap sheet or lack of actual game time exposure, Damian’s name
was not called. Even after the draft when NFL teams are free to sign any of the undrafted free
agents, Damian’s phone didn’t ring.

Damian was right. “Google me” was the correct way to get to know his story and why he
was coming to the New Orleans VooDoo. When he hung up the phone on me, I thought that he
was a complete asshole, but now, I could understand why he didn’t want to sit on the phone with
me and tell me his saga. I would not want to have to tell that every time someone called looking
to employ me. “Google me” was the easiest way of getting it all out there in the open for
Damian, and it may have been for me too if I were in his shoes. I was excited at the thought of
working with someone like this. Damian had a story and I wanted to know it.

***

I remember the first game Damian played for the VooDoo. It was in Chicago versus the
Chicago Rush. This game was just like all of our games prior. We had turnovers, blown
defensive assignments, wrong routes run by the receivers – you name it, we did it. We were our
own worst enemy; however, there was one noticeable upgrade and that was Damian at defensive
tackle. In the first quarter, the 6-foot-2, wall of a man was tossing offensive lineman around like
child’s play and the Rush quarterback was constantly running for his life. Damian was an
unstoppable force, running over the center and giving the fullback more than he could handle on
every play. Damian even had a tackle for a loss to end the first quarter, but it didn’t matter; the
game was practically over with the Rush having a 23-7 lead. Like I said, we were terrible.

The VooDoo’s starting fullback got hurt in the second quarter, and Damian was relegated
to fullback duties as well as his spot on the defensive line. He played on both sides of the ball
the rest of the game.
“If you’ve gotta take a play or two off, take it on defense,” said McGlenn. “We can’t have another QB get hurt; we’ve been through too many already.”

“Yes sir,” said Damian, and he went back in. By the end of the game, he was responsible for three Rush players leaving with injuries – all clean and legal hits – and his dominance was made known. No defender touched a VooDoo quarterback while Damian was blocking for him.

A quiet and humble Damian entered the arena that night, but a different Damian left it. He was more boisterous, more jovial and just flat-out mean.

“I fucked them niggas up! Ain’t no one fucking with me in this league. Ain’t no body gonna challenge me,” said Damian on the field after the game with both teams shaking hands.

“Hey, Barnes, shut the fuck up and shake hands,” said McGlenn. But Damian kept on with his chatter.

“I ain’t gonna be here too long, and that’s good for this sorry ass league. I hope that someone is gonna challenge me so I don’t get bored,” said Damian.

“Hey, fuck you, dawg!” said a Rush player.

“Nah, fuck you, nigga! You and your sorry ass teammates.”

A scuffle broke out between the two, and each team did their best to stop the fight. Once Damian and the opposing player were separated, McGlenn grabbed Damian by his shoulder pads and dragged him off the field towards the tunnel that led to the locker room.

“Are you fucking stupid, boy?” said McGlenn.

“I ain’t no one’s boy, I am –”

McGlenn grabbed Damian by his face mask and pulled him right up to his face, looked him dead in his eyes with his eyebrows sunk and veins popping out of his neck.
“You listen to me, boy,” said McGlenn. Damian stopped talking, stopped laughing, and locked eyes with McGlenn. “We lost the fuckin’ game! We lost! I don’t give a fuck how well you think you played tonight, we lost the fucking game. Having you out there talking shit makes our loss that much worse. Get your fuckin’ ass in that locker room, boy!”

McGlenn let go of Damian’s face mask. Damian’s face went from plain and serious to a steadily rising joker-like smile. He slowly retreated to the locker room, walking backwards and never letting go of McGlenn’s eyes. Damian lightly chuckled, an evil, low-decibel laugh.

“I got ya, coach. I got ya.”

Damian’s individual success that night did not give birth to a monster; it awoke the one he always was. Some of the questions I had about Damian were answered that night and in that moment. That interaction told me something that Google could not.

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The tape of Damian’s first game did not lie. Everyone was helpless when it came to playing against him, and the Chicago Rush knew that firsthand. The coaches sat in the film room watching play after play of Damian bull-dozing this guy, viciously tackling another, knocking another unconscious – he was perhaps the most violent football player I had ever seen play in person.

“Are we going to keep him?” asked Mark Tucker, an assistant coach.

McGlenn sat with his arms folded, looked across the table at his other coaches, and paused before responding.

“…Yeah…Fuck, he’s the best shot we got at winning.”

“He’s a huge liability – both on the field and off the field,” said Tucker.
“I know…I know…but if we don’t start winning we’re done anyway, so we’re going to take the gamble.”

With a 1-6 record on the season, McGlenn was right about having to win and win soon. Being in the front office, I heard the higher-ups talking; I knew that he did not have that much longer as coach if he kept losing.

The week leading up to that week’s game at Kansas City was drastically different for Damian than the previous one. In the week’s practice before the Chicago Rush game, Damian was pretty quiet and studious. He studied the charts and playbooks given to him and avoided me as if I were a bill collector. Maybe that had something to do with a media and public relations person, like myself, at every one of the teams he had played for harassing him with all of the questions that I wanted to ask him, and he just didn’t want to answer them anymore. Everything Google told me about him made me that much more interested in wanting to know more of his story, and that much more eager to tell his story if he allowed me to tell it. But in that first week at practice, on the road traveling to and from the game, and at the game itself, Damian did not even do so much as exhale in my direction, let alone speak to me. The second week, he was more than happy to talk with me, but only about anything but his story and how he got to the VooDoo.

“Hey, you,” he said pointing at me in the locker room after practice. “I’d like to talk to you. Meet me outside.”

I thought that this was my chance to get to know Damian, and maybe to let the whole world (or at least the fan base) get to know Damian a little; to let everyone know why he was not playing in the NFL; why he never made it to Florida State; why he got into selling drugs; and how he became a garbage man. Google told me he did those things, but Google never told me
how or why those things happened or didn’t happen. This was going to be his chance to clear his name, and I was eager to help him do that. So many players in the AFL had a similar story, but no two are alike; I was sure that Damian’s would be different and that it would be more gut-wrenching than the ones I had heard before it. If I were in his shoes, I don’t know if I would have had the will to continue to pursue football; I know that I would have waved goodbye to any football dreams I had when my son was born, or having been out of football for years, the thought of getting in football-game shape alone would have been the deciding factor for me. But not for Damian – but why? I wanted to know.

“They say you got a few friends at the Saints. Is that true?” Damian asked me as soon as he saw me when he walked out the locker room door. No hello or where’s a good place to eat – nothing of that nature.

“Ah, I do have some friends at the Saints, but none of them work in the scouting or player personnel department.”

“Well, if your friends work there, then they know people in the scouting department.”

“They probably do, but I can’t call them and ask them that. I can barely call and ask them favors for myself.”

“You just don’t wanna help a nigga out, huh?”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re a racist, aren’t you?”

“Damian, I do not understand how my not wanting to make a call for you, who I barely know, to the Saints makes me a racist.”

Damian laughed that evil, low-decibel chuckle that he had in Chicago. I could feel my heart pound on my rib cage, worried that he might assault me – like all of sudden he would go
into game mode and turn into the violent player I’d seen all but kill a few players in the previous week’s game. That laugh was his tell; I was perhaps the most uncomfortable I had ever been with a football player one-on-one. This guy could crack me in two without much effort; he knew it and I knew it.

“This talk is over,” said Damian as he walked away from the locker room towards his car.

He was right, the talk was over. He didn’t speak to me for the rest of the week. Even on the flight to Kansas City where he sat across the aisle from me, not a word.

Once the game began in Kansas City, Damian was more vocal than he had ever been. Just like in Chicago, Damian played both offense and defense. On defense he was unstoppable, and on offense he was stopping everyone from getting to the quarterback. He let everyone know it too.

“You can’t fuck with me, nigga! You and your pussy ass boys better do something to stop me,” said Damian, which were only a few of his taunts. As the game went on, his demeaning heckles made Mike Tyson look like a model sportsman.

“I can’t believe you’re letting me embarrass you like this in front of your bitches and hoes. They’re going home with me tonight.”

After a while, the Kansas City players had had enough. On a play late in the second quarter, two players high-low\textsuperscript{11} blocked him, which sent Damian to the ground in a fit of rage. When he came to his feet unscathed, he threw two punches at his blockers, the officials tossed their yellow flags in the air, and both sides separated their teammates. Damian was ejected.

\textsuperscript{11} High-low block is a term when two players combine to block an opposing defender; the block involves one player blocking the defender below the knees, while the other blocks above the waist. The block can lead to serious injury, with the body lower body receiving force from one direction and the upper body receiving force from the opposite direction.
As he came to the team bench, he slammed his helmet against the wall; once in the sideline area, he threw chairs and water coolers, making his way closer to me. An arena football field mimics the setup of hockey – in fact, it’s almost the same dimensions except where there is ice in one, there is turf in the other. Much as hockey has a holding area where each team waits, so does arena football. It’s a small space; wide enough for two average-sized humans to pass each other without touching shoulders. The small, rectangular area gets a lot smaller real quick, as 21 football players pile in for a game.

When Damian approached my area of the sideline, he had a look in his eye that was unnerving. I became petrified. Watching him toss water coolers, chairs, and anything else that he could get his hands on, I was certain that I was going to be next to feel his wrath. He approached me swiftly, and stood directly in front of me. The man was fueled with rage; if he wanted to cause major physical harm to me, or perhaps even kill me, he could do it right at that moment. The few seconds that elapsed as he stood in front of me felt like a lifetime. He then leaned down, got right in my face, and let out a bone-chilling yell. With my eyes closed, I could feel his anger blow through me to the back of my skull. I then felt the air move; I opened my eyes to see his back to me, as he stomped his way to the locker room.

The game resumed. We won. I did my job: got the head coach interview after the game, wrote the game story, collected all the statistical information, and headed back to the hotel. I was happy that Damian had taken his anger out on the water cooler and left me unharmed. That night, back in my hotel, I replayed the day’s events. Damian was the scariest mother fucker I had ever encountered.

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As with all away games, the day following the game was a travel day. These days were long and brutal, making multiple stops for connecting flights. What can I say, we were a poor team on a shoestring budget, and with that came flights on Southwest. Bags fly free on Southwest, and for our ownership, free sounded good no matter what it was. Flying from Kansas City to Dallas, I sat across the aisle from Damian. I didn’t look his way, and as far as I knew, he didn’t look mine. When we got to Dallas, we had a two-hour layover. We all made our way to the food court.

I followed a few of the guys before seeing a McDonald’s and stopped. In front of me in a large line was Damian with one person separating us. Great, I thought to myself. The line moved, until it was Damian’s turn to order at one of the registers.

“Welcome to McDonald’s can I have your order?” the cashier asked Damian.

“I’ll have a number one.”

“I am sorry, sir, we are out of Big Macs. Can I get you something else?”

“Whatever is in a number one is what I want.”

“Sir, we are out of Big Macs, I would be happy to get you something else.”

Damian stared at the menu. His hands started to lightly shake. He stared harder and harder, and with each squint of his eyes, he looked more and more uncomfortable – the most vulnerable that I had ever seen him. My interactions were, indeed, limited, but this was a side I had never seen before.

“Can I get you something else, sir?”

“Nah. No, ma’am. I’m good.”

Damian walked off, made his way to the neighboring Taco Bell. Behind me was Tim Dalton, the team’s general manager.
“He can’t read,” whispered Dalton into my ear. “I saw him trying to read the medical
documents he had to sign. It was a one-page document that he stared at for over an hour.”

“That’s terrible, Tim.”

In that moment, it all made sense: never arriving at Florida State, never going to a junior
college, failing out of Shaw University. As I sat down and ate my McDonald’s, I saw Damian
for what he really was, a grown man who could not read – or at the least one who suffered from
some sort of reading deficiency that plagued him.

To me, Damian was like lion in the classic tale of Androcles and the Lion\textsuperscript{12}, except
Damian was not going to let anyone help him take the thorn out of his paw. He would always
revert to protecting his secret and hiding his weakness, rather than admitting his deficiency and
getting help. While eating, others were at the table I sat at in the food court; they were talking; I
didn’t hear them, I could only see their mouths moving. I zoned out, gazing at Damian across
the many tables that separated him and me. Knowing his secret deeply saddened me; though I
was petrified of him, I could not help but to feel sorry for him. How he had made it this far in
life troubled with literacy as he was is beyond me; I just wished he had let me – or anyone for
that matter – help him.

Two weeks later, he was released from the team. I never saw or heard of Damian Barnes
again.

\textsuperscript{12} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Androcles
DJ Morgan

DJ Morgan was head-and-shoulders one of the best athletes I had ever seen in person. Going to practice every day and watching him juke defenders out of their shoes (sometimes literally), and then seeing what he was doing in practice translate to on the field was equally as impressive. Most of the time, a player’s skill is shown at its best in practice and we, as fans, get to see small snippets of their true ability in a game, but DJ Morgan showed his talents on any field, whether it was a practice field or a game field. But DJ was too good for the AFL. Not in a personality sense, like that he walked around thinking he was better than everyone else, but in a talent sense. It was obvious that he could be in the NFL.

“Hey DJ, I have two interviews for you after practice today,” I said.

“You should have them here at practice so they can see me ball out,” DJ said.

“They will be here towards the end of practice, I’m sure they will see you practice.”

DJ was always well spoken, and outside of Chris Chauvin, he was the best go-to person to speak to the media. I didn’t have to worry about what Chris or DJ were going to say, and that made my job a little less stressful. DJ was also one of a handful of guys, like Chris, who held college degrees. Many of the guys that I encountered in my time with the VooDoo had gone to college, but after their last game of the fall semester of their senior year (if they made it that far), school became an afterthought. Of those, many just needed a minimum of six hours of class credit to get their degree. Not having that degree for many of the players all but assured they would have few options beyond playing football.

But DJ was a little different. DJ graduated with honors from Virginia State and had his teacher’s certification. In the offseason, he was a teacher at a grammar school, which allowed him the opportunity to continue to train in the mornings and evenings. DJ’s job enabled him to
teach only in the fall and use his entire annual and sick leave in the spring to play in the AFL – probably not 100 percent legal, but he got away with it. Prior to joining the VooDoo, he had played for two other AFL teams, so his grammar school job was used to the drill. They probably liked the fact that DJ was playing professional football with at least two games a year nationally televised, which gave the school some recognition and the children a role model-like person.

Professionally, DJ was indeed a role model. He did all the right things, said all the right things, and he was a great person and good man. But there were things that may have kept him from playing in the NFL. As I spent more and more time with him, I came to know DJ, the self-proclaimed “Superman” on the field, had his fair shares of kryptonite.

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It was Friday, April 15, 2011, and I was about to go on my first road trip with the New Orleans VooDoo. To open the season, we played four consecutive games at home. We lost all four, had an offensive coach change, and had probably everything that could go wrong on the football field go wrong. Turnovers, penalties, injuries, internal fist fights, locker room quarrels – you name it we experienced it.

I thought it might be a good change of scenery for the team and staff to get out of town for a road trip. In truth, the travel aspect of the job for me was a real selling point for wanting to leave my previous job at Nicholls State for the VooDoo when the opportunity came along. With Nicholls State, I traveled with the teams that I served as their sports information director, but the destinations were in small college towns like Nacogdoches, Texas, Conway, Arkansas, and Lake Charles, Louisiana. Now don’t misunderstand me, I really enjoyed those smaller towns and exploring them, but having been at Nicholls State for four years and having seen these small
tows two and three times a year became boring. I had been there, seen that, and wanted something different. One of the things in my contract to work for the VooDoo included travel; when Steve, the VooDoo owner, told me that I would have to travel, he said it like it was a bad thing. I guess he thought that I might not want to be away from home all that much, but to be honest, I was a 25-year-old young man with no wife and kids at home. The travel was an added bonus as far as I was concerned, and going to Cleveland was my first taste of that travel experience.

That first trip to Cleveland had the team flying a two-stopper on Southwest Airlines. From New Orleans, we flew to Birmingham, then from Birmingham to Cleveland. Our first flight out of New Orleans was at 6:15 a.m. with an hour and a half layover in Birmingham, then a 10:05 a.m. departure to Cleveland; we did not arrive in Cleveland until right before noon. If you count our arrival time at the airport for 5 a.m., the VooDoo had been traveling for a little over seven hours, and awake for more than eight, and it was only noon. This is the norm for most AFL teams.

It wasn’t until this trip that I learned more about the lifestyles of our VooDoo players, particularly DJ. I arrived at the airport early on Friday to help our equipment manager unload the equipment trailer. In the process of helping him unload everything, our players’ bus pulled up. Every one of those players walked right past us, most of them without even acknowledging the two of us carrying bag after bag to get checked. I chalked it up to tiredness, not disrespect, as each of them looked like he had just waked.

We unloaded the bags, got everyone checked in, and made our way to TSA for the security check. We made it to our terminal at 5:45 a.m. After my morning workout of lifting and tossing some 30 bags for our flight, I was starving. I made my way to the Smoothie King
stand, bought a small smoothie and a bag of almonds. I drank the smoothie so fast I had a brain freeze, and tossed the empty Styrofoam cup into the trash before making it back to the terminal. All I had in my hand was a bag of almonds.

The terminal was mainly filled with our players, and their presence was known by their uniform travel suits and just being abnormally large human beings. It sounds strange to say, but there was a “drunk” smell in the air – like alcohol was seeping through the pores of someone or a group of people. You know that smell of beer and liquor being sweated out, combined with the smell of cigarette smoke; it is an undeniable odor and a clear sign of a fun night on the town.

As I sat across from a group of our players, I began to notice that my prior thought of some of them being tired was wrong; these guys had not gone to sleep yet, and went straight from the club to their apartments to change, and then to the airport to take the flight. These guys were still drunk and had yet to sleep. Their blood-shot eyes and slow movements were a direct result of drinking, and not being tired from yesterday evening’s practice. I tried not to stare; I tried to eat my almonds and not look at them and then it happened.

“Yo, B. What is that you eating?” said DJ.

“Some almonds. Want some?”

“You mean to tell me you eating almonds for breakfast,” DJ said while he laughed. “I mean all the things to eat in the morning; bananas, oatmeal, muffins, and you eating almonds.”

“Well, yeah, I mean –”

DJ interrupted me, laughing and slurring his words.

“White people are strange, dog. White people are so strange. I mean, almonds. Fucking almonds.”

“Would you like some?”
DJ burst out in laughter, drawing more and more attention to himself and to his state of being. The coaching staff looked the other way; our general manager looked the other way. The only person to try to calm DJ was one of his closest teammates, Marcus Thomas.

“Hey, DJ, chill the fuck out,” said Thomas.

DJ’s laugh dulled. He sat across from me, slouched down in his chair, shut his eyes and was almost simultaneously sleeping. It was strange to see a grown man behave so oddly and then be sleeping quicker than a tired baby.

Marcus came and sat right next me. He leaned over and started talking, mostly small talk. Then he apologized for DJ.

“He doesn’t know what he is saying right now,” said Marcus.

“I mean, I didn’t take it personal. What’s his deal, anyway?”

Marcus looked to his left and right, then leaned towards me.

“DJ has been sick and hasn’t been able to sleep. He is just delirious right now, that’s all. It’s really nothing to worry about. Nothing to be alarmed about.”

I felt it to be peculiar that Marcus was trying to lie. It was obvious that DJ and about six others on the team had gone out the night before. After all, it was New Orleans, and DJ knew all the hot spots. DJ’s father was born and raised in New Orleans, and though their family moved when he was young, DJ spent his adolescent summers in New Orleans with his cousins. He had a lot of friends and family that he visited regularly in New Orleans, so it made sense that he could serve as the party person on the team.

“Mo, there is no reason to lie for him. I know that he went out last night.”

“How do you know that?”

“Mo, I am from New Orleans. I have been there and done that before.”
Marcus laughed and chuckled; when he chuckled, his body giggled a little bit. Marcus was the biggest life-sized teddy bear you had ever seen, standing 6’6” and weighing 290 pounds. He was one of the handful of guys that had a college degree, having graduated from Louisiana Tech prior to his senior season. Unlike DJ, though, Marcus wasn’t much of a partier or drinker. He fancied himself as DJ’s guardian.

“Yeah, DJ and them went out last night. This is usually what he does on the night before a road trip.”

It made sense too. If there was a night that DJ and some of the guys were going to go out, a night before travel day was the safest bet. They could stay out as late as they wanted; sleep the entire travel day in airports, and continue sleeping after they checked into the team hotel. The only bit of physical activity they had to perform that day was a team walk-thru at the stadium. After the walk-thru, the team goes to eat and then back to the hotel to rest. DJ knew the routine and took advantage of the down time.

After we arrived in Cleveland, we checked into the hotel and went to the walk-thru. I was sitting on the side at the arena and DJ walked by me. He still reeked of bar smell. How he was not throwing up out there jogging around on a hangover was beyond me. But if Marcus was right, this was the norm for DJ and his body had somewhat become acclimated to this routine, and the jogging and jumping probably didn’t upset the chemicals in his stomach as it would the average person like me. It was at times like this that I was reminded that being a professional athlete in the best physical shape helped the athlete recover from hangovers quicker. After all,

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13 A walk-thru is a no-pads practice that is a non-contact, light-work session that all teams do before a game. It serves as an opportunity to get acclimated to the arena and/or the city’s atmosphere (elevation and/or climate) that they are playing in the next day.
Max McGee\textsuperscript{14} got drunk the night before the NFL’s first ever Super Bowl and went on to help lead the Green Bay Packers to a landslide, 35-10 victory over the Kansas City Chiefs. Maybe going out and drinking wasn’t so bad for DJ; maybe it was his way of letting loose, and I should think nothing of it.

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Cleveland turned out to be a successful road trip for the VooDoo, as the team won its first game of the 2011 season, 34-33 in one of the lower-scoring games of the 2011 AFL season. But either way a win is a win, no matter how ugly it was. Cleveland was undefeated before the winless VooDoo gave them their first loss. For the team, it was their first win of the season, but for me, it was my first win working in professional sports. I know that I don’t matter or decide the outcome of the game; I work for the team and have a job to do whether the team wins or loses; however, it was cool to walk into a winning locker room for a change, and to go eat dinner after a win rather than a loss. It was the best of all feelings to be a winner; losing games is a beat down and not a fun experience. I cherished this win.

After we got back to the hotel, a few of the coaches, the general manager, and I went to the hotel bar to have a drink. We toasted and put back a few beers. We talked about the game and what we did right, what could have been done better, and what we needed to do to keep winning. I was just there to listen and drink with them. Their knowledge of the game was fascinating. They talked about how they got away with one, but they were hopeful that the win

\textsuperscript{14} Max McGee, who played college football at Tulane, admitted to violating team curfew and having a night out on the town the night before Super Bowl I. McGee anticipated not playing in that game, having not been a part of the team’s game plan in practice, but an injury to a wide receiver early in the game, thrust McGee into action. He scored the game’s first touchdown and finished with seven receptions for 138 yards and two touchdowns – keep in mind he was hungover.
might spark something. They were optimistic but realistic at the same time; they knew we really were not that good.

On our second beer, we watched a group of our players go through the lobby dressed in jeans and button-down shirts. They were hopping in a cab and going out to celebrate the win. By traveling commercial, there were no flights at 11 p.m. nor any guarantee the game that night would be over in time to make a late flight; therefore, we always left the day after the game. Also, as always, our travel was in the morning, and we had to be at the airport around 5 a.m. As I watched DJ and some of the other players get into the cab from the bar window, I was sure that they were going to go out all night again. The same clothes that I saw them leave in that cab were the clothes that all four of them had on when we got on the team bus to the airport. As a part of our travel party, they stood out not only by the smell again, but also by not having on the team travel gear. The four also wore blood-shot eyes and moved slower than the rest of the pack.

We made it to the second stop on the homeward bound trip, with the plane switcher in Charlotte. While in Charlotte, most of us went to McDonald’s. As we ate, I looked across the airport terminal and saw DJ at a bar. Next to him was an empty shot glass and glass filled with red juice and garnished with celery and lemon on the rim. It was 9 a.m. and DJ, by all accounts, was still consuming alcohol.

I didn’t know what to think; I didn’t want to be in denial, but I also didn’t want to jump to conclusions. I just secretly hoped that DJ was still celebrating the first win of the 2011 season, or that maybe the empty shot glass on the bar and Bloody Mary didn’t belong to him.

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Ironically that season, all of the VooDoo wins came on the road and all of them were ugly wins, but at the end of the day, they were wins. All eight away games followed the same routine for DJ. As the season went on and the team lost more and more games, the players all seemed to be following DJ’s lead on the road trips. Head Coach Carter McGlenn looked the other way. Maybe it was this lack of discipline that led to the team’s downfall and poor performance. Either way, more and more guys were basically saying “fuck it” and joining DJ in the drunken stupors and no one was trying to stop it.

“They are grown men; they make their own decisions,” said McGlenn when this was talked about. It was a very passive way to look at the current situation in my opinion. DJ was, by far, the best player on the team, and having a record-setting season\footnote{DJ Morgan set the AFL’s all-time all-purpose yards record in the team’s final game of the 2011 season.} and with the personal relationship that Carter and DJ had, I guess some things were swept under the rug. Carter and DJ were close off the field, so much so that Carter’s son’s godfather was DJ. Maybe that is why Carter let DJ get away with a little more than the average player. I thought, though, that Carter missed an opportunity to school DJ on the decisions that he was making as a man. I couldn’t agree more that grown men make decisions, and they must answer to those decisions, but all people are never too old for a little guidance or a helping hand. As the season went on, I thought that DJ could use a helping hand, but no one offered it to him; perhaps no one thought that he needed it because he was playing so well on the turf.

We won in Kansas City, our second win of the season, and the team celebrated in the downtown bar district of Kansas City. I, along with Tim Dalton, also went downtown after our game. As always, Tim and I sat at a bar and people watched. Our team was never far out of our periphery, and there was DJ pounding shot after shot, and then following those shots with a big gulp of his beer. There were women around him and the other players that DJ generally hung...
with, and the women were all attractive. DJ was not a bad looking guy himself. He had a light complexion, was in model-like shape and always well groomed. He had a welcoming smile and crisp personality. Throw in the fact that he was a professional athlete, and it was no wonder he had a female following.

The women he always had around him never brought too much thought to my mind. It was the massive consumption of alcohol that worried me. I was worried that DJ might have a problem, but I never thought it to be my place to ask him about it. I was just the media guy, someone along for the ride and charged with the task of documenting the team’s statistics, pre-game and post-game stories, finding fun and interesting facts about the team for the media, and organizing all the media requests for interviews.

“He’s a drunk,” said Tim pointing at DJ.

“I noticed that he does drink a lot. Is that normal?”

“Normal for a player to drink? Yeah, they have fun. I did when I was a player.”

“But the amount that he drinks, Tim. He drinks heavily at least three times a week.”

Tim ordered another round from the bartender before he continued his conversation with me; two Yuenglings on tap and two shots of Jameson whiskey. Though a bit ironic to be drinking and commenting on someone else’s drinking, DJ’s alcohol consumption was noticeable.

“DJ drinks heavily like that a lot; I would say more than three times a week.”

Tim would know. Tim coached DJ for two seasons in Shreveport for the Shreveport-Bossier City Battlewings. DJ was the star player there as well; Carter McGlenn was the defensive coordinator.
“I cut DJ,” said Tim as he took his shot of Jameson. “He and I had a blowout one day at practice about his Twitter account. He was out of line; he got heated and threatened me in front of the team, so I cut him.”

“What happened next?”

“DJ showed up at the practice facility while we were watching film with a 40-ounce beer covered up by a brown bag, slurring his words, hollering at me…it ended with him crying, like a complete one-eighty from where he was at just moments before.”

I then took my shot of Jameson and washed it back with a sip of the beer. Good god, how I hated shots.

“Did you take him back?”

“I did. I did against my better judgment and because Steve wanted him on the team. That season was so fucked; you have no idea. We were terrible and I feared that I would lose my job.”

Tim still lost his job at the end of that season, and then became the General Manager for the team that fired him, and that is how I came to know Tim.

“If I would have known then what I know now, I would have done things a little differently. I would have tried to get DJ some help. But my hands were tied,” Tim continued.

Tim validated only what I already thought. I figured there had to be something that was keeping DJ from being in the NFL. There had to be a few notes in his file that were flagging a team from taking a chance on him.

“Do you think that he will get the help that he needs?”

“I tried to talk to him that day that he showed up at my office when he was in tears. As far as he is concerned, he doesn’t have a problem and doesn’t’ need help.”
But Tim and I both knew that those who need the help don’t ever think that they need the help. Unfortunately, many of the interventions for drug and alcohol users happen just before it’s too late, as if something bad happens that is the last straw before the last straw; however, DJ had always avoided the last straw before the last straw. Somehow, he was able to function and walk straight enough to not make most people around him wonder, but there were people like Tim and me who had a hunch that all was not right.

“Do you think McGlenn knows that DJ has a problem?”

“I mean, I think so. Sting is in the same position I was in last season. DJ is the cash cow, the show. His hands are tied.”

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Practice had concluded, and the team went into the film room to study the next week’s opponent. The guys usually showered, lunch was brought in, and the film session began. Sometimes I slipped into the film room to see what the players were studying about the opposing team. I was the team’s sideline reporter for the away games, so it was good for me to study up on our opponent; this way, during the game, I could add more information to the broadcast rather than just asking coaches and players questions.

In the film room, all of the players huddled around DJ as they watched a video on his phone. All were laughing and joshing at DJ and the film in which he co-starred.

“DJ, you sure did Superman that ho,” one of the players said.

DJ didn’t see me in the room, but I imagine that my being in the room or not being in the room wouldn’t have mattered. He kept showing the film to his teammates of him and some lady, one of his many, in a homemade sex tape that he made from his iPhone. The shocking thing then
followed as one of the coaches walked in and watched the video with the players. The coach then gave DJ a high-five and went about getting the projector ready for film.

I stayed in the back of the room, quietly not drawing attention to myself. I couldn’t help but be appalled, not only because DJ was being degrading towards women, but because a person of authority watched the video and did nothing about it. I could not only hear the video, but could see some of the screen through all of the guys as they moved around. I can’t say that I was shocked by this behavior; I was surprised how some of the players – and a coach – acted toward seeing the film, but I wasn’t really shocked. DJ always had women around him and was a legitimate ladies’ man. I can only assume that this was not his first – nor would it be his last – homemade porno that he would show his teammates and buddies. I felt bad for the poor girl in the video, as I can guess that she didn’t intend for her and DJ’s intimate encounter to make team bulletin board news.

“Look at you skeeting\textsuperscript{16} all over,” said one of the players.

“Yeah, she will be by the apartment later if any of you all want a piece. She is a freak, we could probably run a train on her,” DJ said.

“White girls are freaks, dog. They love that black mamba,” said another one of the players.

It was in that moment that my presence in the room was noted. Not that I mattered all that much, but most of the time the players would try to behave somewhat suitably in front of me as I was the buffer between them and the outside world. I am sure that DJ probably didn’t want me to see that, but he also probably really didn’t care about me seeing that display either. I

\textsuperscript{16} A term used, as described by Urban Dictionary, for when a man pulls out during sexual intercourse and ejaculates on the women he is having sex with.
watched film with the team, and after had dinner with Tim. It felt awkward, but I had to bring it up; I had to ask Tim what his thoughts were on that.

“That’s what I got into it with him about when I coached him,” said Tim when I told him what I saw earlier that day in the film room.

“Not only did he do that when I coached him in Shreveport, he went to Twitter to tell everyone that he did it. I tried to tell him that some NFL scouts were watching him and they were probably watching him on social media as well – not to mention, he’s got little kids following him for Christ’s sake,” Tim continued.

“So you told him that he couldn’t do that, then what happened? He told you to mind your business?”

“He told me to go fuck myself, to be frank,” said Tim as he laughed. “He got in my face and it was one big shit show. I cut him. Steve made me sign him back and here we all are…again.”

DJ’s situation was none of my business; I was just the media guy – a fly on the wall – but I was slowly learning why DJ was in the AFL and not the NFL. As more time went on, and we lost more and more games, DJ became more and more transparent with his lifestyle. There were a few times I witnessed him to be slightly inebriated, with most those times at the players’ apartments. As a part of my job, I had to film the “VooDoo Cribz” segment at the player’s apartments for our games, and I would run into DJ. He was always cordial, never an asshole like some of the guys, but there was a noticeable behavior change from day to day. Some days while I was there, he would have a brown bag around whatever he had in his hand, casually sipping.

Then there was that day when Steve fired Carter as head coach. DJ and Carter were close, and as far as DJ saw it, the two were a package deal. DJ didn’t take the firing all that well.
The day we had the press conference to name Tim the interim head coach, DJ showed up
drinking at the press conference. Every television sports reporter in town was there, so were all
the writers. I was emceeing the press conference when I saw DJ walk in and sit in the back. He
had a beer in his hand.

I read the franchise’s statement on the firing of Carter McGlenn, which was then
followed by the introduction of Tim as interim head coach. When I introduced Tim, there was
some applause; however, there was a loud and continuous “boo” from the back corner of the
room. It was DJ. As soon as I introduced Tim, I went to DJ, asked him to walk outside so I
could talk to him.

“Fuck that, I am going to stand right here,” he said.

“DJ, don’t make a scene, come outside –”

“Nah, fuck you and fuck this, I ain’t playing another game for y’all. Y’all fired my
nigger and you want me to keep going like nothing happened. Fuck that. I know I am the reason
people come to the games, what happens if I just quit?”

“DJ, there are reporters along with Mike Neu17. Please come talk to me outside.”

DJ put down his beer and walked with me outside. His hands were shaking. Unlike
Damian Barnes, who I thought could and would physically harm me if he could do so without
consequence, I knew DJ’s hands were not shaking because he was holding back a violent attack;
his hands were shaking because he was emotionally vulnerable and alcohol was at play. Once
outside, his shoulders seemed to shrug, and his demeanor went from anger to sadness.

“I don’t want to play for y’all if Sting ain’t my head coach,” said DJ in a very calm, soft
tone.

17 Mike Neu was the former Head Coach of the New Orleans VooDoo who then became a scout for the New
Orleans Saints when the VooDoo folded. Mike was still a fan of the VooDoo, and showed face. He was also
scouting the AFL for talent.
“DJ, you know that’s not smart. That’s the business of football; if you don’t succeed you get cut or if you’re a coach, you get fired. It’s a business of what have you done for me lately, not what you have done for me in the past.”

His face melted and his eyes watered. No tears ever came down, but I could tell DJ was clearly a mess.

“Look, NFL scouts are looking at you, one of them is in there. You shouldn’t be at these events like this, y’know, drinking.”

“You ain’t my daddy; I can do what I want,” said DJ.

“DJ, I’m not trying to be your daddy; I’m trying to be your friend.”

In that moment my relationship with DJ changed. DJ didn’t have to say it, I saw it in his face that he knew that I had his best interest in mind; that I wanted him to succeed and that I wanted him to make it to the NFL. More importantly, I wanted more for him in life. He had all of the intangibles but lacked self-control and maturity, which held him back from achieving his dream of playing on Sundays).

“You think I should leave?” DJ asked.

“If you are okay to drive, then yes. I think that you should leave, relax the rest of the day, and show up for practice tomorrow ready to work.”

DJ nodded and I walked with him to his car. He opened his door to get in and stopped for a second. He turned to me and said the most unexpected thing.

“I am sorry for that day in the airport.”

“What do you mean?”

“That day I made fun of you about eating almonds. That was me being an asshole, and I shouldn’t have done that. I’m sorry, B.”

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18 “Playing on Sundays” is a common saying referring to making to the NFL.
Until that moment, I had forgotten about that incident. I left it alone somewhere in the back on my mind; however, I was thankful that he acknowledged it, and it kind of let me know that I had gained some sort of respect from him.

“Don’t mention it. Go home, relax, and let’s finish the final three games of the season.”

DJ got in his car and then drove off. I went back inside. Tim was still speaking and started taking questions. I was hopeful that no one had seen DJ or heard his outburst. The press conference continued. No one asked about DJ.

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The 2011 season ended in Orlando for the VooDoo, and the only thing that the team had to play for was DJ setting the AFL single-season all-purpose yards record. DJ needed less than 100 yards in the final game to put himself into the record books, and with under a minute left in the game, DJ broke the record on an end-around handoff that he carried 12 yards for a touchdown. The 12-yard run was one more yard than needed, which was good enough to give him the record. Though there are no moral victories in football, the last place VooDoo secured DJ’s place in history, and by association they too were an essential part of that record. Though DJ was the one carrying the ball, catching the ball, and returning the ball, someone was blocking for him, and someone was throwing the ball to him. DJ’s record was a team record, and the only noteworthy item from the 2011 season.

The final seconds ticked off the clock, and Orlando won, and with the win, Orlando’s season was continuing while the VooDoo’s hopes of an ever-after died a long time prior to that night. Though the season was over for the VooDoo, it was just continuing for DJ. DJ had three tryouts at three different NFL teams. One, for sure that I knew of, was the New Orleans Saints.
I was happy for DJ to get that opportunity. I was just overjoyed in general that he had an opportunity waiting for him at the conclusion of our season. Don’t misunderstand me, I wanted him to make it. I wanted him to make it for him; I also wanted him to make it for the AFL. The League is a league that prides itself on graduating its players to the NFL. If DJ were to make it, he would show future players that you can get there by coming here if you make the most of your opportunity.

From my colleagues at teams that he tried out for, commonly known as “sources” in the journalism world, I was told that DJ’s tryouts went well. He ran his routes well; he showed speed and agility; he showed his soft hands; he showed his ability to accelerate in kick return and follow blocks; by all accounts, DJ did everything right. But DJ never made it to the NFL. My source told me something telling that I will never forget. He told me that although DJ was a great athlete, he was too much of an on-field and off-field liability. On the field, he was considered old at age 27 and more susceptible to injury, thus not worth the investment, and off the field, his reputation preceded him. My source knew everything about DJ; he knew how DJ ended up at Virginia State – which was news to me; I never knew DJ started his collegiate career at Virginia Tech – and that he liked to go out and party. All of these factored in for at least one of the teams that he tried out for following the 2011 season.

“‘It’s a better risk for us to take a chance on a 22-year old with some minor baggage, than to take the risk on a 27-year old with a suitcase full of a past,’” my source said. When I think about squandered opportunities and what could have been, I always think about DJ. Like most dreaming of an NFL life, DJ didn’t realize that his window had shut and went on living like it was still open. DJ never made it to the NFL.
Tim Dalton

While with the New Orleans VooDoo, I was fortunate enough to spend most of it with Tim Dalton, the team’s general manager. Tim was a former NFL and AFL player. In the NFL, he had played for the New England Patriots and Chicago Bears; in the AFL, Tim had played in the inaugural season in 1987 and won the first ever ArenaBowl with the Denver Dynamite. He played two more seasons with the Dynamite before spending his final AFL season as a player with the Sacramento Attack in 1992. From then on, Tim spent time coaching high school, college, and professional football.

Tim made a name for himself as the head coach of the Shreveport-Bossier Battlewings, providing the owner, Steve, with the only two winning seasons in his tenure as owner of an arena football team. But the 2010 season was Tim’s last reign as head coach, with the Battlewings finishing 3-13, and Tim was fired at the end of the season.

“I was down but not out,” said Dalton. “I was happy to be a part of the League for as long as I was, and when I got to be General Manager, I was even more excited that I got to stay around.”

The Shreveport-Bossier Battelwings announced that they were moving their franchise to New Orleans to be the VooDoo, taking on the team’s logo and colors, on September 14, 2010. With the announcement came Tim being named General Manager, and former VooDoo quarterback Chris Chauvin signed and named the starting quarterback. The VooDoo sold 1,200 season tickets over a 24-hour period from September 14 to September 15 – which was the most profitable single day in franchise history, and the most profitable for any franchise in the history of any team in the AFL.

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19 As of the end of the 2014 season, still the only two winning seasons in the reign of Steve Petersen as an owner of an arena football team.
Tim moved himself down to New Orleans, having only been to New Orleans for vacation prior, and to see Bruce Springsteen perform a couple of times at Jazz Fest. The first time I had beers with Tim, I got the entire back story on why Bruce Springsteen was the greatest musician to ever live. In fact, the only reason Tim had satellite radio in his car was for the one channel dedicated to just Springsteen music 24/7.

“You hear that, I was at that concert,” Tim said while I rode with him to grab a few beers after hours. Tim was big fan of hanging out after work. He felt like we should all want to hang out with the people that we work with after we get off of work. Otherwise, we would never work together when it was time to actually work. After my first year in the AFL with the VooDoo, I couldn’t have agreed more. The job and lifestyle is intense, high-stress, and long hours; it’s important to like and trust the people around you in a job like that.

“That was the summer of 1979, he was fucking awesome,” Tim continued about Springsteen, singing a few lyrics and tapping his steering wheel like he was playing the drums. “Tell me, you like Bruce?”

“To be honest, I know some of his songs, but not all that much. I love music; I can’t live without it, but I have to admit, I haven’t listened to all that much Bruce Springsteen.”

“Then you haven’t lived,” Tim said with a straight face and no smile. He was serious. He continued on the saga of Springsteen.

“You see, Brandon. You wouldn’t know all that much about Bruce. Hardly any of his stuff was studio recorded because he got in a pissing match with the label and he told them to fuck off, and then…”
Tim just went on and on about Springsteen. Tim could have written Springsteen’s biography, and with how infatuated Tim was with him, Tim probably would have done it for free – or – paid Springsteen for the opportunity. That is how much he loved Springsteen.

“Oh look, we are here,” Tim said.

*Thank the heavens,* I thought to myself. I was over hearing the Bruce Springsteen sob story. I found it hard to be sorry for a man who was doing what he loved and made millions doing so.

“This place is dead, Tim. Why did you want to come here,” I said as we sat in Tim’s car in the parking lot.

“Fox and Hound, baby. I know the bartender here. She’s hot, and she has a case of the Timmy’s. Just wait till you see her.”

We made our way inside and to the bar where this bartender greeted Tim like he was a celebrity. She came out from behind the bar to give him one of those overly-sensationalized, too touchy-feely “hello” hugs when someone is trying a little too hard to flirt. Tim loved the attention. After he introduced me to her, she went back behind the bar and poured us a pitcher of beer. While she was pouring our pitcher, Tim stared at her.

“Man, does she have two midgets in a head lock or what?” Tim said.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Ah, come on, Brandon. Loosen up. She’s got big tits. She’s got two midgets in a head lock. Do you see the comparison now?”

I couldn’t believe I didn’t draw the correlation sooner, but I did find that funny. I have heard my fair share of joshing and done some myself, but never before then had I heard of a woman’s breasts being referred to having two midgets in a headlock.
“Ohhh, I get it,” I said with a laugh.

“Come on, B. I know you are from the South and went to high school in Louisiana, but come on. You got to be quicker than that.”

Tim was always fun like that, and even though he was close to 50, he looked to be in his late 30’s. He was tall, tan, and in great shape. I guess once an athlete, always an athlete. He also was a single man, married and divorced once with two children from that marriage. Both were boys, with one in college and the other a junior in high school. Neither followed in their father’s footsteps of a football life, and Tim was the last of the Dalton’s to put on pads and cleats.

As a young boy, his parents immigrated to the United States from Wales. His father was a rocket scientist hired by the United States government during the Cold War to help build rockets. The family immigrated to Stratford, Connecticut, and there is where Tim discovered football.

“Both my parents are very smart, too smart,” he would tell me. He was right. I don’t know too many people that can say that their parents are rocket scientists. We continued to drink that night at Fox and Hound. With the passing hours, I became less and less uptight, as Tim would say, and easier to talk with and have a conversation. Tim genuinely cared about me as a person. He wanted to know about my childhood; he wanted to know if I had a girlfriend; he wanted to know what kind of music I liked and what concerts I had been too; he was open and ready to listen to anything that I wanted to tell him. I liked having that relationship with the people that I worked with. I knew that working in sports is not like working any other job. In sports, you work long and crazy hours; some days you go in at 8:30 a.m. and leave at 3:30 a.m., and you are expected to be back later that morning at 8:30 a.m. The sports business is a fast-
paced, high-risk high-reward profession. With that comes an even higher level of stress to succeed. Tim knew that having been a coach at many levels and being a head coach in the AFL prior to being named General Manager.

“You have to like the people you work with because sometimes, maybe more often than not, you are not going to like work. It is important to like the people around you so you can work together through shitty situations,” Tim said.

I understood that more and more as I got to work with Tim and for the VooDoo that first season.

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As we got closer to the season, anything that went wrong, Tim got the blame for it. Unfortunately, Tim was Steve’s whipping boy and Steve let everyone know it, too. Steve had leverage over Tim, and he knew it. Steve knew that the odds of Tim being a head coach in the AFL again were slim to none, and that Tim’s landing another job that was going to get him what he was making as General Manager were also slim to none. Tim knew that he was in a tough spot as well.

“I get all the responsibility but no authority to make any decisions,” Tim said one day after work while we were having a few beers. He was right and as time went on, I noticed that more and more. Tim was the executioner. When someone needed to be cut from the team, he did it; when someone needed to be fired, he did it; when there was a pissed off corporate partner or season ticket holder, Tim was sent to fix it; when the team was doing horribly on the field, Tim was sent to practice to see what was going on. Tim had the worst of the worst of jobs, but he had a job, and that’s all that I believe mattered to Tim.
In Tim’s trials and tribulations, I learned a lot by watching him. Some what to do and somewhat not to do; either way, Tim taught me a lot and I am thankful for that. One thing I vividly remember was the season ticket disaster that took place before the season began. The owners were too cheap to mail tickets and wanted all of the season ticket holders to come to the VooDoo office on Poydras street to pick up their tickets. This, as one can imagine, pissed a lot of people off, and Tim was left for crowd control for something that was not his decision nor his doing. As each season ticket holder came into the office, you could feel the tension in the air. They were frustrated and they had every right to be, as part of their price to pay for season tickets was shipping and handling. But Steve slithered out of having to explain that one by using the excuse of Mardi Gras week being the reason we did not mail tickets. To some, it made sense since the tickets did not arrive in the VooDoo office until a week and a half before the first game. Once the tickets were sorted and placed in envelopes, it was the Friday before Mardi Gras and a week before our first game. Mailing the tickets at that point may have caused some to arrive late; however, the majority would have been on time or received the day of the first game.

“Anything that fat fuck can do to get out of spending money, he will do. I have been working for him too long and know him too well; be prepared, B. We are going to have a lot of pissed off people on our hands,” Tim said. He couldn’t have been more correct.

Hardly any of our 6,600 season ticket holders that season came to pick up their tickets at our office. Whether it was because it was Mardi Gras madness or people were unaware that we were not mailing season tickets, the majority did not come. On game day, over 5,000 season ticket holders waited in the Will Call line for their tickets with some standing in line for over two hours. As you can imagine, this was not the best first impression for the new VooDoo. It took a
total of three games before everyone who bought season tickets got into the building, but the trouble didn’t end there.

Of the 6,600 season tickets sold, over 1,000 over the seats in those tickets were double sold. By double sold, I mean two – sometimes three – people showed up to the same seat in the arena to find someone else sitting in their seat only to find out that each person’s ticket stub had the same ticket information. The direct cause of this was having three people in Shreveport selling tickets and two in New Orleans, and no real solid cross checking of the books. There was no reason to have a Shreveport office, but Steve lived in Shreveport, which is the only reason why Shreveport had any relevance. The main decision-making force for the VooDoo was in Shreveport, making moves from an ivory tower, while the staff in New Orleans led by Tim was tasked with doing all of the damage control.

I will never forget those first three games and the pissed off people that Tim had to deal with.

“I thought this one woman was going to throw her shoes at me,” said Tim, laughing after the first game. “She was so pissed that she took off her shoe to either throw it at me or use it as a weapon to beat me with. Either way, I saw that woman take her shoes off and I will admit, I got a little scared.”

Tim was sent in for cleanup duty without the right supplies. We had an oil spill on our hands, and all the brass in Shreveport gave us was a small broom and a dust pan. We were inadequately prepared to handle the disaster that was planted in our laps, and Shreveport didn’t seem to care all that much. They were far, far away from the battlegrounds.
“I just gave a few people Steve’s cell phone and said fuck it.” Tim said one day while having drinks after work. “That’s how pissed off they were; they wanted to speak directly to the owner to voice their problems personally. After a while, I just said sure, fuck it.”

That was the smartest and dumbest thing that Tim could have done. It was smart because it let Steve and company in Shreveport understand how dire of a situation we had on our hands in New Orleans, and that season ticket holders being upset wasn’t limited to a few isolated incidents. It was also the dumbest thing because he aggravated his boss, he bit the hand that fed him, and Steve never forgot that.

Couple the ticket situation with a terrible, downright disgusting display on the football field and being 0-3 after the first three games back in New Orleans, and we had the perfect disaster. It was too big for any one, single person to clean up, but Tim was expected to somehow make this dismal situation bearable. It wasn’t and never balanced out. Tim was outmatched, and to be honest anyone would have been outmatched – even God may have struggled. The only positive was that by game four everyone who bought season tickets got into the game for the first time since the team came back. That was the only plus.

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With the team reeling at the midway point of the season, Tim was sent by Steve to practice to be the eyes and ears for him. Ironically, Steve seemed to trust Tim’s opinion on football, considering that he fired him at the end of the 2010 season. Tim was a nark, an undercover spy for Steve, and the other football coaches and some of the players knew it. It was awkward for Tim to do it, but he had too. Tim was a glorified personal assistant and what Steve
asked (or demanded) Tim did with a smile on his face. It was to no one’s surprise that when Carter McGlenn was fired that Tim was named the interim head coach.

Tim swore that he wasn’t undercutting Carter, and I believed him. Carter really had no excuse for having such a terrible showing that season. Carter blamed it on Chris Chauvin at quarterback, Dex Duval as offensive coordinator, Steve not giving him this or not giving him that; however, he was the head coach and he made all of his own personnel decisions. He had the best indoor facility in the AFL for training camp as we worked out at the Alario Center20; he also had one of the better medical providers in the League with Tulane Institute of Sports Medicine, and he also had the city of New Orleans, which sold itself. In my mind, the accountability for the 2011 season was on him. But Carter fell into the same trap that Tim did the year prior; he got so scared about losing his job that he just did whatever he thought would please Steve, which was most definitely the wrong course of action. Deferring to Steve only gave Steve more power over him; that is how Steve was, and I have to give Steve credit, he knew how to really trap people with their own words.

Carter was dismissed from the VooDoo 14 games into the 2011 season. The VooDoo were 2-12 at that juncture, ranking last in League in points scored, yards given up on defense, and turnover margin21. The most shocking stat was the turnover margin at -19; being -19 in the turnover margin meant that the VooDoo turned over the ball 19 times before it forced a turnover of its own. The VooDoo were averaging three turnovers per game, while the defense was forcing less than one per game. However you slice it, this was a bad football team and Carter was held responsible – and rightfully so.

20 The Alario Center is located in Gretna and is an indoor complex that has a large space where the VooDoo practiced in 2011. The space was so large for us to practice that the entire AFL field could fit, which made it one of the best if not the best in the entire AFL.

When Tim was named interim head coach, there was almost a sigh of relief on his face. I could have sworn that he walked a little taller and talked with more authority. Tim was back doing the job that he loved and the only job that he ever really knew: coaching. Tim didn’t know how a front office of a team worked or should work; he was in over his head in that regard. Though I do believe that he was smart enough to figure it out, he was never going to be given a fair shake at being a general manager. Tim was better off being a head coach, and even though the gig was for only the final three games of the season, he was the happiest I’d ever seen him and I was happy for that.

After the first week of practice under Tim, the air was a little lighter. Tim gave the team a speech on professionalism and what it meant to be a pro. This time in their career required them to be a pro, whether they liked the change at head coach or not, they had to be pros.

“Sometimes you get pissed off, sometimes you get pissed on; getting pissed off and getting pissed on happens to all of us, and you have to move on from it,” said Tim at the first team meeting with him in his new role. “You have to be strong and realize you are still getting paid to do a job. You are getting paid to play football and to be a professional football player. I only want guys on this team for the remaining three games that want to be football players.”

After the first practice, three players were cut because of their poor attitudes. Tim meant what he said. The rest of the week went on and the VooDoo made their way to Tampa for their first game post-Carter McGlenn. And the team won convincingly, 64-33.

Tim had some tricks up his sleeve, and with the 2011 season coming to an end for the VooDoo, the team played loose and had fun. Tim called a fake field goal as time expired in the first half to give the VooDoo the lead, and the team never surrendered the lead the rest of the game. It was so much fun being in the sideline box that night in Tampa as the VooDoo beat a
team that was better than them on paper, a team that had a more talented roster. As I sat there watching the game, I could not help but smile and be happy. This was what it was supposed to be like for me – for all the fans of the VooDoo. We were supposed to have fun, and we were supposed to win – or at least be competitive.

But like the two prior victories before this one, the feeling was short-lived. The VooDoo closed out the season with two consecutive losses and finished the season 0-9 at home in The Graveyard. At the end of the season, Tim was moved back into his role as general manager and the search for the new head coach began. It was like Tim was grounded for an entire year, and then let out to play for three weeks, only to be grounded again. I felt bad for Tim. I knew that he really wanted that next head coach to be him, but Steve wouldn’t allow it. Steve felt that he needed a big name to come in and sell tickets to an already disengaged fan base. Tim was not a big enough name for Steve, and so he moved on through the list of candidates.

Tim was a good man and didn’t deserve all of the trouble he had to go though. Under a different owner, Tim would have been a very successful general manager. At the conclusion of the 2012 season, Steve fired Tim.
I will never forget the first time that I met Steve Petersen. I was interviewing for the media relations position with the VooDoo and showed up in a suit on a September day in 2010. The interview was at the French Quarter RV Park where he and his wife stayed in their travel bus when they came to New Orleans. It was odd, but I didn’t think anything more of it than their being wealthy and that this was the way they chose to spend their wealth. I left my job at Nicholls State early that day to get home and freshen up. It was a hot day, and putting on a suit was the last thing that I wanted to do, but I wanted this opportunity. I wanted to work for the VooDoo and was willing to sweat it out, literally, if I had too. I remembered what the VooDoo had been before: a thriving franchise with 16,000-plus fans at every game. Who wouldn’t want to be a part of that?

I pulled in the RV park and made my way to their bus. Tim Dalton, the team’s general manager, greeted me in shorts and a t-shirt and told me where to park. He saw me in a suit and laughed.

“Brandon, you are way over dressed,” he said, only adding to my nerves. I met Tim once before for coffee in a very informal setting, and he then set up a meeting with Steve when he came to town.

As I parked and got out the car, I walked over towards Tim and saw this man outside his bus grilling steaks. His back was to me, and all I could see was his bald head and wide frame. As he turned around, I thought I was looking at a real life version of a cross between Bald Bull\(^\text{22}\) and King Hippo\(^\text{23}\) from Nintendo’s *Mike Tyson’s Punchout*. Steve also had a cross-bone earring.

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\(^{22}\) One of the boxers in the original Nintendo game Mike Tyson’s Punchout: [http://fc00.deviantart.net/fs71/f/2012/348/5/6/punch_out___bald_bull_vector_by_thechrisoffenric-d5nzfj9.jpg](http://fc00.deviantart.net/fs71/f/2012/348/5/6/punch_out___bald_bull_vector_by_thechrisoffenric-d5nzfj9.jpg).

in his left ear. I had to do a double take. I thought to myself: *this guy owns a professional football team?* Steve stopped what he was doing on the grill and acknowledged my presence, shook my hand and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He then went back to cooking. He was in shorts and a sleeveless shirt, and I was the only one there for anything formal apparently.

“Heard a lot of great things about you,” said Steve with his back to me as he hovered over the grill.

“I hope they are all true,” I responded laughing.

“So do we.”

“You shouldn’t have gotten all dressed up. You are going to sweat like a pig out here in this heat.”

“Yeah, I didn’t know that it was informal.”

“Pretty much everything you do for us from here on out will be informal, unless told otherwise. You good with that?”

“Yes sir, I got it.”

I was then introduced to Steve’s wife and led to the other side of the RV where there were lawn chairs and three little barking dogs. Steve’s wife hushed them and put them inside. She was nice, made small talk with me and let her country accent be known. Both Steve and she were country people, and they were proud of it.

Once Steve was done cooking, we sat down to eat. The steaks were sirloin, probably from Wal-Mart, but Steve swore that he got them from some upscale meat market. I really didn’t understand why Steve went through great lengths to explain to me where he got the steaks from; I couldn’t have cared less and I could not imagine any dinner guest caring all that much either. I kept on eating, talking, making small talk and learning about the game of arena football.
Both Tim and Steve talked about this player and that coach, and there were a lot of stories that started with, “You remember that time” told between Tim and Steve. Most of the time, it was a conversation between those two with me and Steve’s wife as background noise.

After dinner was over, Steve’s wife picked up all the dishes and went inside to start cleaning up. Once she was gone, the interrogation started. In long pants and a sports coat, I was already sweating. At this point, being the only one dressed for a job interview, I was just ready to get this over and done. I had probably sweated through my pants by the time we were done eating, and I was just ready to wrap this up and go on my way.

Steve pulled out a cigar, and lit it. He took two puffs and the smoke coasted right towards me. I was directly downwind from him. He didn’t give a shit, either, and he kept puffing on that cigar, as it all drifted right towards me after every exhale. There was nothing that I could do except sit there and take it. What else could go wrong, right? I showed up over dressed to a job interview for a professional football team, I sweated through my suit, and now I have cigar smoke right in my face.

“Tell me, Brandon. Are you tired of Nicholls State?”

“I mean, I like it there. I have been there for four years, so –”

“So are you ready to make the next big step in your career?”

He blew more smoke in my face. I started to wonder if this were a test, like how much smoke could I take before I said something. I talked through the cloud.

“I am always open for new possibilities to better myself. I just turned 25. I ain’t getting any younger.”

“Meaning what”

“Meaning that if I were to make a move, now is the time to do it.”
The thing that I didn’t understand was happening in that moment was that Steve was sizing me up and trapping me. He was forcing me to say that I was not happy at Nicholls State or that I was ready to leave Nicholls State. By doing that, he would then be able to justify whatever low-balled salary figure he was going to offer me. That was how Steve operated. He was a professional negotiator, and in that conversation, I found out.

“Tell me, Brandon. If I were to offer you this job with the VooDoo and say that I would offer to match your current salary, what would you say?”

I paused. What the hell was I supposed to say to that? I just answered honestly and truthfully.

“No; I would say no.”

“What do you mean you would say no? You just said that you were ready to make a move and tired of the same ol’ same at Nicholls State. Sounds to me like you have no choice.”

“We always have a choice, and I would choose this job, but I intend for this job to be a step upward from where I am at and not a lateral move.”

Steve sat there in his lawn chair, tapped the ashes from the end of his cigar and put it back in his mouth. He looked at Tim and then he looked at me. Tim had a stoic look on his face that I never understood until later. Steve then nodded.

“Touché. Touché, young man. I will offer you $35,000 with health insurance. I want you to think about that.”

I did think about it; I wanted $40,000, but still $35,000 was a $2,000 raise from what I was making at Nicholls. I was also living in Metairie and driving to and from Nicholls every day, so the $2,000 increase in salary was essentially a $4,000 raise as I was not spending part of my annual earnings in fuel.
“I was thinking about $40,000.”

“Why do you think you are worth $40,000?”

“Well I don’t think that you would have me here if you didn’t think that I am worth it. Let me prove that I am worth it.”

Steve then used my words against me again.

“Alright, if you prove you are worth it after one year, then I will increase your salary.”

I said that I would have to think about it and the interview was over. After we talked a little more about the upcoming season and some more history of the AFL, I stood up and made my way to my car. I felt the sweat run down my leg as I walked. Tim followed me as Steve picked up the lawn chairs.

Tim reiterated to me what Steve said, and said that he was hoping to work with me. He said that he would call me tomorrow.

“Hey Brandon, I never saw anyone reason with Steve like that before.”

“You think that he will give me a $5,000 raise after the first year.”

“I wouldn’t bank on it. But we will drink a lot of beer though.”

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It was the week leading up to the VooDoo’s first game of 2011. The first game was at home, and the beginning of a four-game home stand. I was in panic mode, not knowing what lied ahead. How could I? I had never been to an arena football game in my life, let alone worked behind the scenes for one. To make matters worse, we had the season ticket debacle where all of the tickets were shipped to our office, unorganized and requiring a lot of attention.
On the season home opener, March 11, 2011, we lost a lot of our fans because of the ticket disaster. Steve and Steve alone did that and there is no one to blame for that but him. Steve tried to put it on Tim, but Tim didn’t sell tickets; only the Shreveport office sold tickets, so Tim – and the rest of us in New Orleans – was free from the blame game, or so we thought.

After the ticket debacle was sorted out, it didn’t matter. We were 0-4 and probably one of the worst AFL teams ever assembled in the history of the game. I felt bad for the fans. I felt bad for us. More importantly, I started to wonder what the fuck had I done. I had a great job at Nicholls State, and I left that for this? There was no chance to turn back; my position at Nicholls had been filled by someone already. I was stuck. This was my new life whether I wanted it or not. I was going to have to find a way to live through this.

But after the New Orleans office washed its hands of the ticket tragedy and made the Shreveport office fix their fuck up, my job got a little bit easier; it was more like Nicholls State and I began to feel more at home. The team was still getting decent coverage from the local media, despite its record, and I started to have fun doing my job. It was like I had found my calling, plus I recruited all of the interns for the organization, so it was almost like I never left the college campus, but instead, I brought the college campus to me.

But there was one aspect that wore on me, and that was Steve. Steve was probably one of the stingiest and greediest people I had ever been around. Steve wanted it all but didn’t want to give anything for it, and he did accomplish just that most of the time. Steve would low-ball and nickel-and-dime every vendor that we used in the city for a service until they were practically giving away their service. And then after Steve got them to the lowest they could possibly go, he would make the vendor work extra hard to get paid. I can’t tell you how many times I heard that “I never received an invoice” or “I sent a check in the mail” from Steve to a vendor when he had
indeed received an invoice (sometimes multiple) and never sent a check in the mail. Like I said, Steve was a professional negotiator and that was what he did best. He made all of his money in the collection business, so he knew how the business worked. He was aware that he owed a lot of people money, and somehow he slept at night.

Steve also never spent his money. When we would be out all together as an office, Steve always managed to slip out of the place before the bill came. We called him “alligator arms” because he never reached for his wallet. However, the epitome of this came one day in the office with me when I was passing some proposals to Steve on purchasing some billboards. I pushed this proposal and that proposal on to him, and he glanced at each one mainly flipping to the final page and studying only the cost. I explained each proposal.

“This one would get us Metairie and Kenner, this one would also give us a static on Claiborne as well and –”

“Brandon!” Steve said, interrupting my pitches to him. “How are we going to pay for this?

“We have money in the budget.”

“We did have money in the budget, but I used that money to pay you your salary. Are you willing to take a pay cut to pay for these billboards?”

Steve was irate for no reason, to be quite frank. And he was serious with his question. If I would have said yes, I am sure that he would have tried to cut my salary. I answered honestly and direct.

“No. But there is an itemized area in the budget –”

“I don’t give a fuck what the budget says, we are not buying these billboards unless you are willing to take a pay cut. Are you willing to take a pay cut?”
Granted, my experience at Nicholls State was at a small Division I college, but I never had my boss treat me the way Steve was treating me in that moment. The question did not logically make sense to me, or what he was asking me to do. We had a budget of $100,000 for advertising of which we had spent none. Steve felt that word of mouth and Facebook was all that we needed, and considering the success the ticketing office had by just announcing the team was coming back, it made sense for him to think like that.

However, after an 0-4 start and fans distancing themselves from the franchise after their horrible experience in getting their season tickets, it was time to start marketing our product to the fans out there who were not (yet) turned off by the product. We needed a visual presence in the marketplace. Though Steve may have agreed, he wasn’t going to go for it if it cost him money, which is why he pushed it back towards me. He would be more than willing to take from me and my measly salary to not spend any more money.

After pausing for a few seconds, I answered his question.

“No. No, Steve, I am not willing to take a pay cut.”

“Then it’s settled. No billboards.”

The phone slammed down on the other end.

Tim was at the cubicle opposite of mine in our office. Tim always had a way of eavesdropping in on conversations. Not in a creepy way, but still eavesdropping. Tim walked over to me and patted me on the back.

“Welcome,” Tim said.

“Welcome?”

“Welcome to my world.”
With an office in Shreveport, far away removed from the battleground, Steve and his ticketing crew would have conference calls with the New Orleans office weekly. Every Tuesday, we would huddle around Tim’s cubicle, and the Shreveport office would be on speaker phone. Most of all the topics were of revenue generation and ticket sale opportunities. Like most hot streaks in sales, at some point, there comes a lull; there comes a standstill when a company has to reinvent its sales strategy to corner a new area of the marketplace. After the first two weeks of the 2011 season, our ticket sales had halted. There was no new money coming in and Steve, instead of finding ways to motivate his staff, gave the verbal beat down much like a coach to a player that was performing poorly. However that wasn’t the case; the sales staff had performed very well in producing revenue and their standstill was a direct byproduct of the team’s dismal performance on the field and the ticket debacle.

“You motherfuckers better start producing or I will find someone else that will,” said Steve on the other end of the phone. The tongue lashing continued.

“Are you all not on the phones down there in New Orleans? Are you all doing your fucking jobs? The answer to those questions is no, you’re not.”

At that time there were three ticket sales personnel in New Orleans and two in Shreveport. The three in the New Orleans office were all females, and sitting across from them during this conference call, I knew they were uncomfortable with the language and tone of the conversation. Hell, I wasn’t even in sales and I was uncomfortable. Steve’s rambling and yelling escalated, and as it did, so did the uneasiness in our office.

“Allyson, Meredith, Stacey, have you all made any sales today?”
All three responded; not one of them had made a sale that day. After their responses, the phone line went silent for a few seconds. No one said a word. Then out came what sounded like a loud growl, followed by what sounded like words, but mostly high-decibel yelling by Steve on the other end of the phone. All three members of the sales team slouched lower in their chairs and their faces followed. I couldn’t help but feel sorry for them. I was also unsure if Steve was attacking them the way he was because they were women; there was another member of the sales team in Shreveport that was a man, and Steve wasn’t attacking him the way he was assaulting these poor women. He kept yelling and yelling until the phone just slammed down. All of us in the New Orleans office just stared at each other.

“What the hell is going on?” said Allyson.

“Should we look for jobs? I mean, if he is going to fire us, I’d rather know now and be on my way,” said Meredith.

“No, no; all of you are fine. Steve just does this,” said Tim.

“What do you mean Steve just does this?” I asked.

Tim picked up his coffee, took a sip, and placed it back down on his cubicle, smacked his lips and looked at us.

“I worked for Steve as a coach, and I can tell you he is bipolar. You never know what you’re going to get from him. I could never figure out if he does it out of tactic or emotion. Probably both, if I had to guess.”

After that the phone rang. It was the Shreveport office. We all saw the number flash across the caller I.D. screen. An equal look of dread and fear plastered all of our faces. Tim answered and put it on speaker. It was Steve, except now he was soft spoken, almost cuddly like
a teddy bear on the other end of the phone. All of us sat around the phone confused and somewhat snake-bitten.

Steve started talking. There was no apology. There was just a different man now talking.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have to be whores for money. We have to do whatever it takes to get paid. We have to have that want mentality. We have to be willing to do whatever it takes to get money in and if that means being whores, then we’ll be whores.”

All of us in New Orleans had a stunned gaze on our faces sitting across from each other. Whores? So we are now whores for the company and for Steve? I’d never heard something so derogatory, let alone something so chauvinistic in a business meeting in my professional career. To have these three young women here in the office hear the owner of the team that they worked for tell them to be whores was appalling to me, a male co-worker. I can only imagine what was going through their minds.

“What do you mean by be whores?” asked Allyson.

“Well, I mean be whores. Hypothetically, let’s say you see a prostitute on the street corner and you tell her that you have a million dollars. She starts jumping up and down, thinking she hit the jackpot; then you tell her that you don’t have a million dollars and that all you have is a $10 bill in your pocket.”

There was awkward silence in the room. Each of us was caught off guard with the seemingly pointless pep talk.

“Steve, I think I speak for all of us here. I don’t understand where you are going with this,” said Tim.

“The point is the whore is not going to turn away the $10. You got her interest with a lie, and then you hit her with the truth. She is not going to deny the $10, so you will get at least
something. That’s how we have to be. We have to be the whore and settle for the $10 sale if that’s all we can get.”

Tim laughed; Allyson, Meredith, and Stacey sat in disgust; I was indifferent. I didn’t know how to process Steve’s approach to business. Basically, in Steve’s eyes, anything and everything was negotiable to make a dollar. That meant that our entire sellable inventory was always up for negotiation, and that selling a $100 seat for $10 was a win if it meant getting $10 that we would not have received otherwise. It destroyed the standards that we had put in place, and essentially, trumped all of our other paying customers that had paid the going rates. That didn’t matter to Steve. Steve had reckless regard for his season ticket holders, or for anyone for that matter, and all he cared about was money in his pocket. If you were putting money in his pocket, you were liked, if you were taking from it, you were dead to him. Later that same week, Meredith found out firsthand. With no new sales that week, she was fired. For Steve it was one less hand in his pocket.

Through my time with the VooDoo, I watched this repeat itself over and over again. Steve was ruthless and shrewd and no one was safe from his greed – not even his own brother, whom he fired as well for the same reasons as Meredith. I understood Meredith; but his own brother was tough to sit and watch. I knew then that I was dealing with a different kind of person (if you wish to call him that), and that I was far removed from the family-like atmosphere of Nicholls State.

At the end of the 2012 season, I was one of two people left in the front office from the original hires for the 2011 season. Steve operated in a way that only assured turnover on his staff, and after two seasons, I was fortunate enough to get an opportunity to work at my alma mater, the University of New Orleans. I was one of two that left on my own terms and was not
terminated. Steve was sad to see me go. The feeling wasn’t mutual, but I learned that no matter what happens in the workplace, it is important to know that you control your exit, and that it is important to try to leave as well as you can – even if you are fired or leave with a bad taste in your mouth.
After reading about the experiences that I had and the different people that I encountered throughout my time with the VooDoo, you may be shocked to know that I went back. For two years, I was an Assistant Athletic Director at the University of New Orleans, which was a state job, and most people don’t leave state jobs. State jobs pay decent, they have great health benefits and retirement, and the majority of the people working there are out the door at 4:30 p.m. every day. It was an easy way to make a living with no real demands or emphasis on progress; it was a job that you go through the motions for 30 years and then you retire.

I was complacent in my position. The budget cuts were always a threat to eliminate athletics, but I wasn’t really concerned with that; I just knew that I missed football, and that’s the one thing UNO did not have. After two years away from The Graveyard, I came wandering back, just like the aforementioned souls. But for me, it was a little different. The main investor, Scott Walker, who fronted all of the money for the team recruited me back, and reached out to me on three separate occasions in the fall of 2014 to see if I would be interested in coming back. Scott, by all accounts, was a good person and a legit multi-billionaire; he just didn’t want to be in the day-to-day operations, hence his just investing money into the team. Scott’s investment was controlled by Steve, and that was the relationship. All the VooDoo was to Scott was a tax write off; if we won games, great; if we lost games, who cares, just as long his financial losses were kept between $600,000 and $1 million. It seems bleak and disheartening, but that is the business side of sports; at the end of the day, it is a business just like any other business, and it’s all about profit and loss. Scott knew that he would take a loss, and needed too because he made too much money in his other companies. His logic was if he was going to lose money, why not do so in something unique like a professional football team.
In my first tour with the team, Scott and I developed a friendship. I was a young man that knew New Orleans. He was a fresh divorcee from Houston with a lot of pent up energy, and after games, we would have our nights on the town. Hanging out with Scott was like hanging out with an endless ATM machine, or like having an open line of credit that you never had to pay back. He always had a driver take us around town to wherever we wanted to go, and if there was a line or a list at the door, Scott just pulled out a wad of money and asked the door man how much. We never had any trouble getting into anywhere or anything, and for pretty much every home game during my time with the VooDoo, Scott and I bounced from watering hole to watering hole, club to club. I liked Scott, and I knew that he liked me. Scott had two daughters and no sons; when we would hang out, he would tell me that if he had a son, he wished that he would be like me. That made me feel good; it made me feel like he genuinely cared for me, and so we would always have open air talks. Most of the time, it was non-work related, and when it was, it usually was about Steve. Scott always wanted to know why I despised Steve, and even though it was easy to speak to him, I still held back. I told Scott some things, like the potential sexual harassment problems he could have with Steve and his “whore” pep talks, but I just didn’t really see the point in slamming his business partner all the time. To be honest, when it did come up, I would try to change the subject.

But now, being solicited to come back, it was my opportunity to really speak easy.

“Scott, I appreciate the consideration, but I don’t know. I don’t know –”

He cut me off on the other end of the phone.

“You don’t know what? Brandon, this is an opportunity for you to be the General Manager of a football team, my man. I know you can do this, which is why I want you.”

“I don’t know, Scott. I just have some reservations.”
Scott continued with his sales pitch. I listened. Truth be told, I was tired of my current job. Working in higher education in the state of Louisiana is constricting and somewhat frightening, and not knowing the status of the athletic department I worked in – and the university as a whole for that matter – I kept listening to Scott.

“Look, you tell me when and where, I will fly in, make reservations for us to eat and have a few drinks to talk this through,” said Scott.

“La Boca, this Thursday.”

“You got it. My driver will pick you up at 7 p.m. Thursday. See you then.”

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That Thursday, I stepped out of Scott’s chauffeured all-black, tinted-windowed Cadillac Escalade in my finest suit, fresh pressed shirt, the best double Windsor knotted tie I could make, and made my way into the restaurant. When I walked in, Scott was there at the table with his new fiancée. I was surprised to see that Steve was not in attendance.

Scott stood up, extended his hand to me, and pulled me in for a hug. We embraced like old friends that hadn’t seen each other in some time. It had been a while, too; I hadn’t seen him since I told him that I was leaving the VooDoo to go to work at the University of New Orleans. I remember him being disappointed when I left, but he understood that I was doing it to have the opportunity to get my master’s. If I stayed with the VooDoo, I wouldn’t be able to physically and financially make it work. Scott even offered to pay the tuition when I told him I was leaving, but at that time, I had had enough of the VooDoo, and without saying it, I think that he knew that. My last pay check had an extra $2,500 in it when I left, and when I called him about
it and told him there was a mistake, he told me there was no mistake and that it was a “to new beginnings” parting gift.

His fiancée was equally as welcoming, considering that I had never met her, and she gave me a hug and kiss on the cheek. She was as open arms as Scott was, and the positive energy allowed me to breathe. When I sat down at the table, there was a Sazerac waiting for me.

“Scott, I see you remember my favorite drink,” I said.

“Yeah, I don’t know how you drink that shit. I am a Coors Light guy and that’s it.”

“I see that you haven’t changed, but that you’ve added a better half, which is a good thing.”

Crystal, Scott’s fiancée, put her hand on Scott’s at the table and squeezed it.

“Yeah, she’s alright,” said Scott with a big smile on his face. I could tell that he was happy. I knew that his divorce had crushed him. We talked about it in the past. He was scorned by it and his ex-wife. He made all of his money and she divorced him, took custody of the kids and $30 million in alimony. I never thought that he would get married again, but I guess you learn to never say never.

“What about you?” Crystal asked. “I bet you either have someone or you’re out there breaking hearts.”

“No, Crystal. I am a single man. Never been married. I just haven’t found the one that can deal with me and my career path.”

“That’s a shame. Well, you will make some woman real proud one day.”

“I don’t know, Crystal.” I laughed. “But I like your enthusiasm.”

We all ate and drank and talked about everything but what we were there to talk about. The final bill came and Scott paid. Still, we had not talked about the job he was offering me, and
we were now making our way to the door. Scott then kissed Crystal, then she hugged me to tell me bye, and she was in the chauffeur’s car and off to their French Quarter condo. Scott and I just stood there in an awkward silence for a moment outside the restaurant, and he looked at me.

“You ready to go get a drink and talk?”

“Yeah, I thought we would talk at dinner, but yeah, I could get a drink.”

“I just wanted to catch up with you first before we talked business. I missed you, man. Let’s go get a drink at that dive in the Quarter. You know, the one that we used to go.”

“Harry’s Corner?”

“Yeah, let’s go there and have a drink and settle the terms.”

“Scott, I never said I was in.”

“I know. Not yet you haven’t.”

The other chauffeured car pulled up, and we got in.

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When we got to Harry’s Corner, there was a mixture of the usual suspects that one could find at the bar or any French Quarter bar. Some regular drunks, the smoking crowd, a group of hipsters, and then there was Scott and me. We sat down at the bar and ordered beers.

“Well, Brandon, no reason to keep this charade going on any longer. Steve and I would like you to be the General Manager of the VooDoo.”

Even though I had thought about the opportunity, I was still a little dumbfounded. It was like the gerbil in my head that runs on the wheel to power my brain just stopped running, and took a couple spins off. Even the gerbil couldn’t make heads or tails of the job opportunity that was being presented to me.
“Scott, that’s a nice offer, but I don’t know, I – ”

“Look man, I know you have a strong dislike of Steve. I know you two had trouble. Is that your hang up?”

“Well, I mean I have questions, but yes, Steve is a bumbling idiot and is a risk for you, and if I did this, for me as well. I am not excited about the thought of working for Steve again.”

“If you agree to do this, you will report directly to me, and I am also prepared to offer you a percentage of the team.”

“With all due respect, a percentage of nothing is nothing, Scott. The VooDoo is in dire straits and needs a lot; it needs –”

Scott cut me off, touched my shoulder and looked me in the face with kind eyes.

“It needs you,” he said still touching my shoulder. “There is one person that can get this right and that is you, a local that knows the area; that knows the people in area; that is one of the people in the area, and someone that knows the game.”

Scott then picked up a pen from the bar that someone left closing out their tab. He took a business card out of his pocket and wrote on the back. He clicked the pen, put it back on the bar, and handed me the business card. When I had it in my grasp, I flipped it over and the backside read: “75k + 1% a year.” Although there is no way of knowing, I am sure that when I saw that, my eyes jumped out of my head like a cartoon character. This was over a $20,000 raise from my current salary and I knew that the team’s base worth was around $2 million, so 1 percent of that would be $20,000. And to have 1 percent a year for every year I was the general manager? The gerbil started on its wheel again.

“What do you think?” asked Scott.
I was beside myself, but I knew that I needed to be cool. I knew this routine; it’s like getting the girl you want to go on a date with to actually agree to a date with you and you’re so excited, but can’t show it for fear of scaring her off. I knew that I couldn’t show my excitement with this offer, and that my face had to be emotionless as a rock.

“I will have to think about it, talk with some colleagues and my parents.”

“That’s fair. I will draft the employment contract with all of the terms in it and get it to you this weekend. When you’re ready, sign and send it back.”

Scott was a cool customer, confident that he had me – and he did. I couldn’t believe after all that I had gone through in my first stint with the team that I was really going to go back. But like my father always said: “Money talks and bullshit walks.”

We put back two more beers and our reunion was over. The chauffer brought me home. I sat in complete silence on the car ride home. I thought to myself, I am going to do this; I am really going to do this.

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Wednesday, October 15 was the press conference to announce our new head coach and me as the new general manager. All four local news stations were present at the Smoothie King Center and both the Times Picayune and the Advocate. Some of my closest friends were there. My parents were there. My uncle, who is the only older brother I have ever known, was there. My favorite childhood rapper, Partners-N-Crime was there – which I still don’t understand how that happened, but I will take it. My former boss at Nicholls State was there. Everyone that mattered was there; in addition to 30 other people I had never known or seen in my life prior to that day.
Scott was there, but stayed low-key per his usual. Steve did all the talking. He approached the podium and started the press conference.

“This is a great day and a huge step forward for our franchise. Ever since we brought the team back in 2011, we have not had a General Manager that is a local or a local owner for that matter. Today, we solve both of those problems. Our new GM and minority owner is someone that many of you are familiar with; he’s a blond-haired, blue-eyed all-American looking young man that is a New Orleanian – born and raised. He cut his teeth in this city and this state. He has also been with us before and was a vital part of our front office, and key to our success in 2012 both on the field with a playoff berth, and off the field in our community with many outreach efforts. I am proud of him. I know many of you all here are also very proud of him as well. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming Brandon Rizzuto back to the New Orleans VooDoo family!”

The people sitting down stood up; everyone clapped and clapped…and clapped. I, on the other hand, was stuck somewhere between a state of nirvana and a nerve-induced vomiting episode. I was about to have my own Willie Beamen-like moment from Any Given Sunday, but in the blink of an eye, I was at the podium looking out into the audience. My mother was crying. That’s what mom’s do. My dad looked as he always did: stern and observant with his poker face. I pulled my notecards out of my coat pocket and held them in my hand. The notecards were shaking and started to soak up the sweat from my palms.

I started with the “thank you’s” by scanning the crowd and thanking each person that was there I personally knew. As I did that, the notecards started to shake a little less and I started to come into my own; that is when I recognized my parents.
“…Mom, Dad, thank you for being here and thank you for raising me the way that you did. Not many of you know this, but my father is a roofing contractor, and when I was a kid, in the summers when I was out of school, he would make me – against my will – work on the roofs with him and his crew here in New Orleans. Obviously, when you are an 11-year old, the last thing you want to do with your summers is work, let alone on a roof, and also with your dad who is riding you all day. I hated being out there on the roof, and I hated my dad for making me be out there; but I am sure that was his goal. He never wanted me to think of roofing as a way of life. He wanted me to do better.”

My dad’s face had waned from its stone-like appearance and started to loosen. I could tell with each passing word that he was proud of me. I continued.

“I remember my dad sitting with me while I was exhausted on the roof on many occasions, sweating and sun burnt, and him telling me: ‘Son, don’t grow up and be like me. Go to school; do well; go to college; get a degree and get a good job doing something you love. And just remember, if you end up out here on these roofs like me; I. Will. Kill. You!’”

The room filled with laughter. Once a stone, my dad’s face cracked a smile, and a tear ran down his cheek. He knew it and I knew it: I had made it. I had done exactly what he told me to do, and there I was, standing above him in a suit and tie, not tar covered jeans and a farmer’s tan. In that moment, I understood why he did what he did. I was certain that if he had not been such a hard ass, mob-like boss to me growing up that I wouldn’t be accepting the position I was; that I wouldn’t be waking up every day doing something I loved. As a low-to-middle class family growing up in the Airline Park subdivision next to a canal, all we did is work to pass the time, and by work I mean hard work outside on a hot ass roof or in a hot ass attic. Eventually, that hard work turned profits and we didn’t live pay check to pay check.
I never forgot that. I never will.

“My father also taught me something else,” I continued at the podium. “It’s okay to take risks; it’s okay to sometimes drive fast and take chances, just as long as you where your seat belt. He also taught me that it is okay to not have all the answers, as long as you’re willing to try to find them. I was with the VooDoo for two seasons, and I know what went well and I know what went wrong; again, I am not saying I have all the answers, but I am willing to give it a shot and give everything I have to this organization to find them and get this thing headed in the right direction. Our fans, our business partners, our people in the community deserve a winner on and off the field. I hope that I can provide that opportunity.”

My rambling soon thereafter came to an end, and my second tour of duty with the VooDoo began. Even though many thought I was crazy to go back to a place with so many problems, I couldn’t pass up the opportunity. Maybe I should have been a fireman; maybe part of me likes running into burning buildings. I don’t know where it will lead me or take me; I could succeed or I could fail; I am sure I will experience both.

And like the rest, I will wander in The Graveyard.
Epilogue

My two-year experience with the VooDoo helped make me who I am today, and factored heavily in my decision to go back. Through the stress, I learned how to be a better employee, co-worker, friend, and person. My positive interaction with Chris Chauvin let me know there are really good people in the professional sports world that are the same person in the spotlight as they are out of it. My time with Damian Barnes helped me understand that everyone has a story – whether they want to tell it or not. The same goes for DJ Morgan, but DJ showed me that people can change. Tim Dalton taught me the fundamentals of how a work place should operate, and that an office that drinks together, stays together. Steve Petersen is still Steve Petersen, but having worked for him before, I understand that you have to dance with bear not try to kill the bear. Scott Walker is still my go-to, and a phone call away.

I don’t know where this is going to take me, and I can assure you that I am nervous about what lies ahead. However, I am more excited about what may come of it and the positive effect I can have on the franchise than I am nervous. The thought of failure fuels me to succeed. That may be corny, but I fear failure more than I fear dying, and I think that is why I have been able to climb the ladder in the sports profession the way I have. In order to keep climbing, I know I will have to have some success here with the VooDoo. It’s not going to be easy, but to be honest, I don’t really want easy; easy in the workplace gets old real quick. I like working hard and seeing it pay off, or not pay off. Either way, there is an end result and a status quo to improve upon. One of my childhood coaches would always say: “You never stay the same. You either get better or you get worse, but you never, ever stay the same.” I never forgot that, and live by that every day. My decision to take such an undertaking with the VooDoo is based on that mentality,
knowing that a lot of change has to take place in a short period of time to make this a viable franchise and the revenue generating business it should be.

So, here goes my tenure as general manager of the New Orleans VooDoo.
Vita

Brandon Rizzuto was born in Metairie, Louisiana. He earned his Bachelor’s degree in mass communications from the University of New Orleans in 2006. He entered the University of New Orleans graduate school in 2012 to pursue a Master’s in English with a concentration in professional writing.