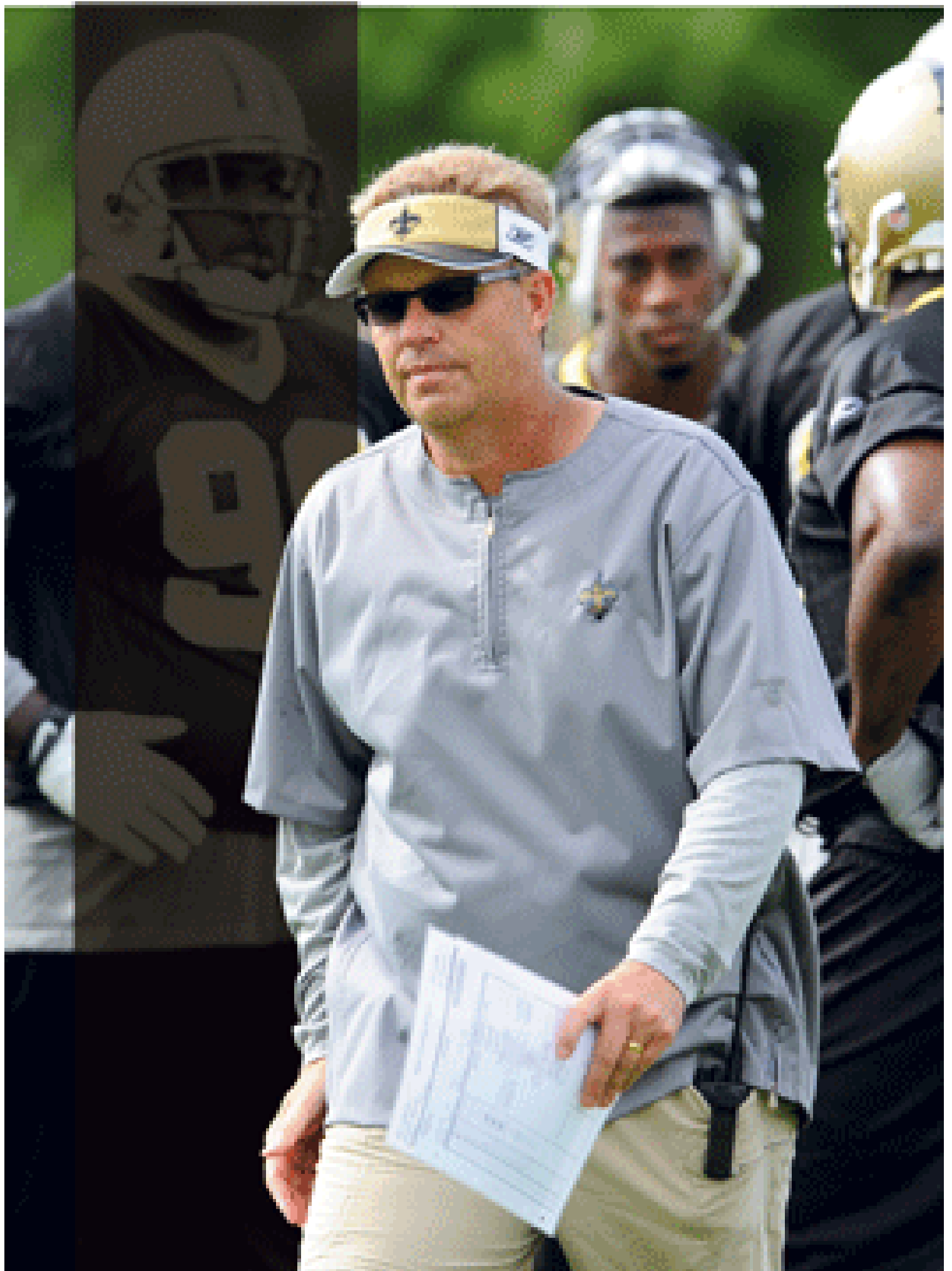


Gregg Williams

08/03/2009 by [Sue Strachan \(https://www.myneworleans.com/author/sue-strachan/\)](https://www.myneworleans.com/author/sue-strachan/)



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Gregg Williams

The New Orleans Saints' new defensive coordinator Gregg Williams is a man with a mission. A very organized mission. His office at the New Orleans Saints' headquarters in Metairie is filled with multicolored magic marker strategies – all written in very legible, concise print. It makes sense – as Williams is known throughout the National Football League for being one of the best defensive minds in the game of football. The New Orleans Saints need that – last year its defense was ranked No. 23.

“Coaching is in my blood,” he says. And for the past 30 years, it’s a profession he’s excelled in, as well as battled its demons.

Williams' career in football started in his hometown of Excelsior Springs, Mo., where his parents still live. Located about 30 miles northeast of Kansas City, Mo., this town is best known for its natural spring waters that attracted visitors who partook of the springs' restorative powers. It was at Excelsior High School that Williams excelled in three sports: football (quarterback), baseball (pitcher) and basketball (point guard).

Williams stayed in Missouri for college and for post-graduate studies, then went to work as an assistant coach at Excelsior High School, followed by coaching at Belton High School, also in Missouri. In 1988, he became a graduate assistant at University of Houston. He joined the Houston Oilers in '90 as defensive quality control coach, switched to special teams coach in '93, then linebacker's coach in '94. When the Oilers moved to Tennessee and became the Titans, he moved too, and was named defensive coordinator in '97. It was here that he experienced what only a select few do: a Super Bowl in 2000, which alas, the Titans lost.

Soon, a much harsher climate – literally and figuratively – called, that of the Buffalo Bills, and Williams entered the fray as a NFL head coach in 2001. He was 42 years old. His record as a coach was 17-31, with the final season in '03, 6-10. Williams was let go, but still in high demand as a defensive coordinator, and was hired by the Washington Redskins as assistant head coach/defensive coordinator. The four seasons he spent with the Redskins was marked by highs – the defense was ranked No. 3 in the NFL in '04 – lows – the defense was ranked 30th in the league in '06 – and tragedy – free safety Sean Taylor, one of the players he coached, was killed in '07. Though he was in the running for head coach in early '08, Williams was let go, but was soon tapped by the Jacksonville Jaguars as the defensive coordinator/assistant head coach, defense.

Soon he heard the siren call of the Saints – and coach Sean Payton. As with any good catch, Williams played a little hard-to-get – there was a meeting with the Green Bay Packers – but in the end the challenge of renovating the Saints defense and the allure of New Orleans (and a nice salary, no doubt), helped make the move.

While his career is of utmost importance, throughout the interview Williams returns to his family. “Family is a priority,” he says. Williams says he defers to his wife – his high school sweetheart – when it comes to family and home. He is very proud of his children’s accomplishments, and when you hear him speak about them, one can sense that he’s a doting father but also a father who demands only the best academically and personally. And he doesn’t expect anything less from his players.

Age: 51

Profession: Defensive Coordinator, New Orleans Saints

Born: Excelsior Springs, Mo.

Resides: Near French Quarter

Family: Wife: Leigh Ann; 3 children: Amy, Blake (an offensive coaching assistant for the New Orleans Saints) and Chase

Education: Graduate of Excelsior Springs High School in Excelsior Springs, Mo.; bachelor of science in education, Northeast Missouri State (now called Truman State University); masters in education, University of Central Missouri. And I have a Ph.D. in football.

Favorite book: Lance Armstrong’s first book, It’s Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life.

Favorite movie: A Few Good Men and As Good as It Gets.

Favorite TV show: NCIS

Favorite restaurant: Port of Call – it’s more of who I am; Commander’s Palace

Favorite music: I’m a country music fanatic: Vince Gill, Kenny Chesney, Jamey Johnson, Toby Keith and Tim McGraw.

Favorite hobby: Golf; hunting and fishing. But I don’t have much time for any of this now.

Favorite vacation: The Bahamas. It’s a place where I can decompress.

Your thoughts on what you expect from your players. The NFL off-season program is a voluntary program. I totally support this program being voluntary. If you – the player – choose to voluntarily not attend, then I will voluntarily choose to replace you! We need to improve a lot on defense and it begins in the off-season. We had 100 percent attendance and that speaks volumes to all the defensive players wanting to get better and improve.

I have access to some great people. [Yet,] the players I deal with today are different – it's a changing culture. I make them understand that being part of a team is about 'we,' not 'me.' 'Me' doesn't win team sports.

A horse trainer told me "You got to break them before you bridle them" and you have to do that to some players. And I've broken a few. Some are self-promoting and I've got to bring them back to ground zero. It's their one chance to make it. The NFL is tough and demanding.

Training in the summer can be rough on players. I'm not a fan of two-a-days [practice]. There's a direct link to fatigue to injury reports. You have to watch and see how the heat affects players, because it will affect them for the rest of the season.

Is it hard going from head coach to defensive coordinator? I work for Sean. We had coached against each other before – I was at the Tennessee Titans, he at the New York Giants – and when I was head coach of the Buffalo Bills. We have tremendous respect for each other. The Saints was just one of a number of teams that wanted to interview me. I knew in the first 3 to 4 minutes we would be very compatible and I knew I wanted to be a Saint!

How was it to experience a Super Bowl? It's what we're all about, what we work toward – to be the best in the world. [When you get to the Super Bowl,] it's one of 32 spots in the world – playing the best of the best.

Tell me about the Gregg Williams Foundation. It is a nonprofit foundation started in 2004, and it funds and supports programs for children in Excelsior Springs. The Gregg Williams Classic, which is four days of events, includes a golf tournament, reception, raffles and auctions. The foundation has donated funds to the Excelsior Springs High School and to the community projects, such as the [Excelsior Springs] Robotics Team.

How do you like New Orleans? I love it. I'm a country boy, and wherever I've coached we've managed to live in rural areas. So New Orleans is the first urban place I lived. There's no other place like it. Living close to downtown, in my free time I can walk around and explore the city. My close friends who have followed my career want to visit us in New Orleans!

Are you ready for the Saints' fans? I've experienced all sorts of fans – Houston Oilers, Tennessee Titans, Buffalo Bills and Jacksonville Jaguars – so I have a tremendous perspective, especially with the die-hard fans. Fans are like a family – it's OK to be hard on

your own family, but outsiders can't – and Saints fans will defend their team to the hilt. Expectations here are high.

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