


 A photograph of Sean Payton, head coach of the New Orleans Saints, wearing a black Saints sweatshirt and a black visor. He is looking off to the side. In the background, another man in a white Saints cap and a player in a gold helmet are visible. The background is a bright, hazy outdoor setting.

Sean Payton

From the B team to the A list

by Sue Strachan

It's 10:30 p.m. on a Friday night and while most New Orleanians are kicking back, New Orleans Saints head coach Sean Payton, who has spent a long, scorching 90-degree-plus day at the Saints training camp in Jackson, Miss., is multitasking in his office - while I'm speaking with him on the phone in New Orleans, a photographer from his hometown of Naperville, Ill., is busy taking photos of him. My allotted 15 minutes has turned into something between 30 and 40, and the Saints vice president for communications Greg Bensef, wants to cut me off. Why? Payton has to have his photograph taken for this magazine, and from what I understand, he has another interview after that. If he's lucky, there may even be a beer waiting for him when he's done.

It wouldn't be a stretch to say the 42-year-old Payton is a very busy man - one who has a tough, long road ahead of him. This is the Saints' year. It has to be.

A FRIEND REMEMBERS

If there is one thing that doesn't seem to faze Payton, it's a challenge. When he was a freshman at Naperville Central High School in Naperville, Ill., he was on the B team - that's opposed to the A team, which, if one remembers high-school football days, were considered the better players. Or as Payton's high-school B teammate David Eigenberg, best known as Steve Brady on *Scrubs and the City*, says, "We were the rejects." While Eigenberg's high-school football career went from B team to the guy who tapes the players - with a brief flirtation on

the starting team his senior year because coach J.R. Bishop "felt sorry for me" - Payton steadily worked his way up to become starting quarterback his senior year.

"Sean wasn't really born to the game," says Eigenberg. "He was kind of small to be a quarterback. But he had a great amount of talent and knew the game. I remember him calling his own plays."

When Payton moved to Naperville in the seventh grade - he was born in San Mateo, Calif. in 1963, then lived in the Philadelphia area - it was a community that was hanging on to its inherent small-town, Main Street sensibilities. There were still several working farms in the area (many of which have since been sold to create subdivisions and industrial parks). The town's residents were corporate men who more than likely took the train into Chicago and mothers who stayed at home. This was the case for Payton's father, Tom, who was the director of casualty claims at CNA Insurance, and his mother, Jeanne. His parents, who are now both deceased, were "supportive of me in high school, college and my career," says Payton. "I had a great upbringing."

Naperville was - and probably still is - a town in which autumn was centered around high school football. And not surprisingly, Naperville Central's football coach J. R. Bishop, has an almost mythic status to his players: "He was an incredible coach and a very influential person for someone in high school. He made a big impact on me, and instilled an interest in football," says Payton.

But what I really - really - wanted to know, as I asked

David Eigenberg, was this: Is there any good dirt on Payton from high school? "He was a straight arrow. I wasn't," Eigenberg says. So much for that.

Payton didn't change too much when he went to Eastern Illinois University - the school's assistant athletic director for special projects Dave Kidwell, who was then its sports information director, says Payton was pretty vanilla. And Payton continued his steady path upwards. As an All-American quarterback he set 11 records for the school, including a couple that still stand, such as 10,655 passing yards in a college career.

"Sean was like a coach in the field. He was exceptionally poised and a leader," says Kidwell.

At EIU, Payton was coached by Al Modle. He, along with NFL coaches Bill Parcells and Jim Fassel, among others, Payton cites as models from whom he learned how to coach. He did so "by watching and being around them."

CLIMBING THE COACHING LADDER

After graduation in 1986, he had a quick pro football career with the Chicago Bruisers (Arena Football League), Ottawa Rough Riders (CFL) and the Chicago Bears.

Coaching was better suited to Payton: First the colleges San Diego State (1988-89, 1992-93), Indiana State (1990-91) - where he met his wife, Beth - Miami of Ohio (1994-95), and Illinois University (1996). In 1997, the NFL beckoned, and he was named the quarterbacks coach for the Philadelphia Eagles, under coach Ray Rhodes. With the New York

Giants 1999-2002, under coach Jim Fassel, he was the quarterbacks coach, then offensive coordinator - a position he held for Super Bowl XXXV in 2000. The Giants lost.

"The [Super Bowl] game goes quickly," Payton says. "Losing sits with you. You think of all the hard work to get to that point."

When he was with the Giants, Payton was known to lock himself in Giants Stadium and sleep on couches on off days to study plays. David Eigenberg lived in New York City at the same time and tried to contact Payton - to no success. Payton also missed his high school's 20th class reunion, says Eigenberg, who wryly remembers winning "Most Famous" that night and asking - albeit jokingly - "If I'm so famous, why doesn't Sean Payton return my phone calls?" Payton, even then, was a busy man.

In 2003, the Dallas Cowboys, overseen by coach Bill Parcells, came a-calling. Holding several spots - assistant head coach/quarterbacks coach, then assistant head coach/passing game coordinator - Payton's work there and demeanor caught the eye of the New Orleans Saints.

UNDER PRESSURE

So here he is. In charge of taking a team with a 3-13 record last year, to one that can hopefully switch that order. Though Payton concedes that the NFC is tough - he notes the Atlanta Falcons, Carolina Panthers and Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the NFC South - his biggest challenge, he says, is to "eliminate the mistakes that beat us."

Payton refuses to make any correlations between himself and former Saints' coach Jim Haslett. "I don't know him and I've never been on one of his staffs, so it is unfair for me to draw a comparison. He's very well respected by his peers," Payton declares.

As for the Reggie Bush/Duce McAllister dilemma - two amazing running backs - he says it's an easy problem to have. "It's a long season. Both want to be featured and it's smart to do that."

COOL HAND

His wife and children, Meghan, age 9, and Connor, age 6, have settled into Mandeville. Despite the hectic schedule, he has managed to take in a few sights and embraced the city's restaurant scene, having eaten at Emeril's, NOLA's, Drago's and Impastato's. Hobbies? He plays golf, even admitting to a 15 handicap.

It's interesting to note that Payton's favorite movie is *Cool Hand Luke*. The main character played by Paul Newman is considered a rebel, an "anti-hero" or "anti-establishment." While Payton seems to have not shown a rebellious streak in his own life and career, you can say that the dogged determination of Paul Newman's Luke - a man with the odds against him - can apply to Payton.

Like the high-school freshman who started on the B team and worked his way up to starting quarterback, Payton is working methodically, this time to rebuild a team. One could even say he's rebuilding a city's confidence as well. Fortunately for us, he doesn't believe in the Superdome curse. ♣