

Lost and Found

By Douglas Fox

Epilogue

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The cornerback in white shadowed the gold and black clad receiver as the pair dashed downfield. Both players glanced back towards the QB as they ran. The big crowd fell nearly silent when the QB heaved the ball towards the pair. Receiver and defender both leapt high as the ball arced towards them. Four hands reached for the ball simultaneously. The man in white grabbed and jerked, as he twisted away from the receiver. The two men collapsed to the ground and referees whistled the play dead. He signaled first down and pointed towards the goal line my team would drive for.

“Unc!” blared in my headphones. “We got ‘em, Unc!”

“I can see that, Connor,” I replied coolly to my nephew up in the press box.

“We’re going to win the Super Bowl!” Connor exclaimed. I glanced quickly up at the scoreboard. It showed my Eagles led the Steelers, 31-27. 1:29 remained in the game and the Steelers were out of time outs.

“ANDERSON,” I shouted to my starting quarterback over the cheers of our fans. “VICTORY FORMATION! Don’t drop the damn ball!”

“I got your back, Coach,” my QB promised. He trotted out with his teammates and lined up. Our tailback was twenty yards deep in the backfield, ready to tackle anyone who came by in the event of disaster. Aiden Anderson took the snap and kneeled down immediately.

“Hell of a job, Marcus,” I exclaimed when my left cornerback danced over, still holding the ball he intercepted to clinch our win.

“We owe it all to you, Coach,” Marcus exclaimed as we hugged. Both of us were doused with ice cold water before I could reply. I turned to see DeV Vaughn Johnston and Marques Williams

grinning wildly, holding an upside down orange water cooler. Thank God the game was played inside the University of Phoenix Stadium. I wouldn't freeze after my ice water bath.

"Ed... Jeremy... you and your staffs, get your asses down here!" I announced into my headset. "It's time to celebrate!" Anderson took another snap and kneeled down and then repeated the play a third time to run the clock out.

I hugged and exchanged back slaps with every player within reach before starting across the field to meet my opposite number. Security people helped clear a path through the cohort of reporters and photographers and the throng of players and fans celebrating on the field.

I pulled my old ball cap off and wiped the sweat off my brow as I approached the Steelers' head coach. The faint '82' was still visible on the underside of the brim. I had marked my hat or helmet every season to remind me of my long ago high school teammate, Greg Harrison, since the season after a drunk driver killed him.

I spotted the familiar face of the Steelers head coach. He gave me a wistful grin as we met. He pulled his cap off and mopped the sweat from his thinning blond hair. I saw the number 82 inscribed on the underside of his cap bill.

"Hell of a game, Coach," he said as we shook hands. Automatically my left arm went around my friend to give him a hug.

"I didn't know if we could stop you at the end, Zack," I insisted as he returned my hug.

"Marcus Hill is the best cornerback in the league," Zack Hayes insisted. "You earned this win, Kyle. You and your team deserve it."

"Thanks, Zack," I replied.

"Tell Jeremy he did a hell of a job adjusting today," Zack commented. "I thought we were going to roll right over you after our first two touchdowns."

"Jeremy has done a great job since 'C' [Coach Larry Czarwinski] retired two years ago," I answered.

"I've got to let you go, Kyle," Zack said. "I've got a lot of film to study and a lot of work to do if I'm going to kick your ass next Super Bowl."

“See you there, Zack,” I answered as my dear friend and mentor turned away to face the throng of reporters. I turned to find my family and my coaching staff to continue the celebration. I did a couple brief on camera interviews as I searched the field. I found Ed Fritz first.

My best friend had done a hell of a job as my quarterbacks coach prepping Aiden Anderson when we drafted him five years ago after Mr. Lurie hired me to resurrect the Eagles franchise. Aiden had blossomed under Ed’s tutelage into one of the top quarterbacks in the league. Ed stepped up to be my offensive coordinator when the Rams hired Ryan Reynolds, my first offensive coordinator, away from my team. My buddy did not let me down.

We were still exchanging congratulations when Jeremy arrived with our family contingent. Ed’s wife Rosario hugged her man while Ed Junior, fifteen, and Justin, eleven, huddled with their parents. I made my way through the crush of bodies to greet Jeremy, who had his arm around his wife Kathy, who was congratulating him for a job well done. Katie, more properly Katherine, their sixteen year old younger daughter, gave her “Uncle” Kyle a hug. Jeremy and Kathy’s older daughter Allison was in Syracuse. She was a sophomore in college and a key player on Notre Dame’s women’s basketball team. They won their game earlier that afternoon before our game started.

I spotted my family as I was talking with Jeremy, Kathy and Katie. I waved for them. My eighteen year old son Danny and his older brother David plowed the way through the crowd for the rest of my family to reach me. Danny had my height and build. David was a couple inches shorter and sleeker in body, as suited a serious sprinter. Sara Baker, Dave’s fiancée and soon-to-be-wife, followed behind the boys with my twenty year old daughter Jessie. Twelve year old Robbie bounced alongside his mom behind the girls.

I accepted handshakes, hugs and back slaps from everyone. Penny came last. We hugged and kissed for a moment before letting each other go. “Congratulations, honey,” My wife declared. “It took three decades but you have a championship to call your own.”

“I know... finally,” I replied as I hugged my wife.

“You aren’t going to give me nonsense about this one not counting because you couldn’t play, are you?” Penny insisted.

“No, I’m not,” I answered. “This one definitely counts.” I thought back to all the near misses in my long football career. My high school team had won the state championship when I was a junior. I spent two thirds of the season in the press box, out of the way, with a blown knee. No matter how much Ed, Jeremy, my brother Andy and my other friends insisted I was a part of that

championship team, I never felt that it was my win. I was so banged up that season that I wasn't safe standing on the sidelines for fear someone would plow into me and tear my knee up worse.

I missed two opportunities in college. Zack and I missed one chance together when I was a sophomore after Ohio State miraculously completed a Hail Mary pass in the final second to defeat us. That was the only game we lost all year. Everyone on the team knew we would have gone to the BCS Championship game and beaten USC, LSU or whoever the BCS put in front of us. We knew we were the best team in the land that season.

Two seasons later when I was a senior and a team captain we came even closer to our goal of a national championship. We played Texas in the BCS Championship game and came up inches short of our goal. If our kicker had shifted just a couple inches over, the field goal would have been good and we would have tied the game. Our quarterback Chip Brinton was hurt earlier in the game. He was back and driven like a madman to salvage the game. Everyone on the team knew he and I would have found a way to win, given an opportunity in overtime. The field goal to tie the game doinked off the goal post. No good. Game over. My mind drifted back to my career since that evening in Phoenix in this very stadium twenty-three years ago.

I was that fastest man coming out of college in 2013. I held nearly every receiving and return record in the NCAA FBS. The fans in Denver nicknamed me 'Amish Lightning' and expected me to be the savior who would lead the Broncos to respectability and then the playoffs. The team already had a dominating defense, led by future Hall of Famer, Antwaan Booker. The Broncos offense was pedestrian before I arrived.

I wasn't personally responsible for the renaissance of our offense, but I did my part. Our offensive linemen had been together two or three seasons and finally jelled. Simeon Thomas was a quick, elusive tailback who could make you miss. Simeon could get you the hard yards too, if that is what you needed. This was Brady Rasmussen's third year in the Broncos' West Coast offense and he blossomed. My speed forced the defense to cover the entire field every play. The spread out defenses couldn't stop Simeon.

Coach Baldwin lined me up in the slot more often than not, but I would be at flanker or split end just as easily. Kellen Brown, our nine year vet, was Mr. Steady. He got the hard catches. He made sure we moved the ball on third downs. I got the deep stuff. My threat forced defenses to overcommit to stop me, freeing up Omar Harris, our third year vet.

Kellen and Omar thrived when I drew double and triple coverage. Both guys had career years. Kellen caught 72 balls for 780 yards. Omar caught 93 passes for 1218 yards. I led the league with 112 catches, 1787 yards and 18 touchdowns.

We blasted the Raiders in our first game, 44-13. That loss must have been hard for Al Davis, the Raiders owner, to take. He had coveted me in the draft. Before the draft I informed Mr. Davis and Coach Jackson, their head coach, that I would skip playing football rather than play for their dysfunctional team.

My determination not to play for the Raiders was prescient. Penny sent me a telling clip of the CBS coverage after the game. We were already up 24-0 when the cameras caught the Raiders QB, Pete Cochrane, on the sidelines berating Darius Heywood-Bey for some perceived mistake. Two minutes later they showed Brady, Omar, Kellen and me together on the sidelines studying Polaroids of the Raiders' formations and calmly plotting our next offensive series. The contrast in demeanors was stark and telling.

I received some teasing from my teammates before the first game when my college and pro teammate Brendan Hayden reported that my first touch as a collegian was a punt return for a touchdown. My teammates told me that they expected my pro debut to be equally good.

I took the opening kickoff and nearly pulled it off. I beat everyone except the kicker. He managed to grab a shoelace and bring me down as I leapt over him. My team had to settle for 56 yard kick return to open the game. I did return a punt for a touchdown later in the game and caught two passes for TDs to contribute to our victory.

We travelled east to Philly for the second game of the season. I got to spend time with Penny the night before the game. That was great. The game didn't go as well. We got caught in a shoot-out with Michael Vick, Shady McCoy, Brent Celek, DeSean Jackson and Jeremy Maclin. Shawn Byrd covered me for much of the game. I got better than I gave against Shawn but we still came up short in the end after Antwaan got dinged up early in the game.

The papers in Denver reported we were the same old Broncos from before. We showed them by going down to Jacksonville and blasting the Jaguars, followed by us hosting and destroying the Chargers at home.

Our bye week was early that season. I loved spending six days in Landenberg with Penny, Will, Abby and Rose. The summer house was still being renovated so all of us shared the big house. I loaded up my iPad with video for games to come. I studied during the day while Will, Abby and Penny were at classes.

The Broncos went on a tear after our break. We beat the Dolphins on the road, the Bengals at home and then the Chiefs in Kansas City. We were a little worn by the time we headed for Oakland in the beginning of November. Pete Cochrane played the best game I ever saw him play to squeak out a close 31-30 victory for his team.

It turned out to be a minor bump in the road. We took down a strong Colts team at home and did the same to the Texans the following week. I got to meet Matt Schaub, the West Chester East guy, who played great against us. Thankfully Brady played even better.

We had a short week to prepare for our Thanksgiving game in Dallas. I enjoyed meeting with their captain, Sean Lee, before the game. Sean was a dynamite linebacker and fellow Penn Stater. Sean was about the only good thing going for the Cowboys. We walloped the 'boys 41-17 in prime time while the whole nation was watching.

I flew home to Landenberg after the game. Coach Baldwin gave us four days off before our next game. Penny was very pregnant by the time I arrived home. Hormones were driving her crazy. Penny's big belly forced us to use the cowgirl position. I did my best to satisfy my sweetie over our long weekend.

I was starting to wear down by the time we hit our ten day break after Thanksgiving. The break helped us to recharge our batteries some, but maybe not enough. Maybe we got cocky with our flashy 9-3 record. Anyway, the Giants come out to Mile High Stadium and kicked our butts on December 1st. They played keep-away. We were down 14-0 after the first quarter. We had the ball for three plays. It was 24-3 at half time. Our team regrouped and got serious after that. We rallied to come within four points by late in the fourth quarter when I caught a long TD. The Giants were ahead 31-27. We tried an on-sides kick with 3:52 left in the game. The Giants recovered. We never touched the ball again that afternoon.

We took our frustrations out in Nashville the following week by smashing the Titans, 45-20. We were flying high again. We hosted the Chiefs ten days before Christmas. We were ahead 24-21 late in the fourth quarter when disaster struck. Brady tossed a screen out to Omar, which he bobbled. The Chiefs' Brandon Flowers snatched the bobbled ball and raced to the end zone untouched. We weren't able to make up the deficit in the time remaining.

The loss to the Chiefs stung. Antwaan and Brady called a team members only meeting to lay things on the line. They demanded every one of us step up our game. We were 10-3 and a near lock to make the playoffs. Making the playoffs wasn't good enough for our leaders. They

demanded we finish our season on a high note and storm into the playoffs rather than limping in with 1-4 record for our final five games.

We rededicated ourselves to practice, workouts and film study. The Redskins tried the same strategy that the Giants used to beat us a few weeks earlier. Vaughn Gilbert, who had the dubious honor of QBing the Redskins, was no Eli Manning. We were ahead 31-9 by halftime. Antwaan, Marcus and the rest of our defensive line had a field day. Antwaan had seven sacks that afternoon, tying Derrick Thomas' NFL record for sacks in a game.

Penny was supposed to come out to Denver for Christmas. She wasn't feeling up to the trip. Testing showed our son was going to be a big boy. She stayed at home in Landenberg. Abby's and my family ended up celebrating Christmas day at our Landenberg house.

Coach Baldwin worked us on Tuesday, Christmas Eve. It was our normal day off. We had Christmas day off. Brady invited me to celebrate the holiday with Casey and her family. The surprise announcement of the holiday was that Casey was expecting. She was due June 21st. Everyone congratulated her and Brady.

The Jets (12-3) led the AFC East, the Ravens (9-6) led the AFC North, the Texans (11-4) led the AFC South and we (11-4) led the AFC West. The Steelers (9-6), the Patriots (8-7), the Chargers (8-7) and the Colts (8-7) were in competition for the two wildcard slots.

The Jets faced the woeful Dolphins for their final game. They were a near-lock to keep home field advantage throughout the playoffs. The other first week playoff bye was between the Texans and us. The Steelers and Ravens were playing in Baltimore the last Sunday of the season. The winner would get the division. The loser most likely would get a wildcard slot. The Texans were playing the Colts. If they won and we lost, they got the bye. If we won, we got the bye even if the Texans won too, thanks to our victory over them earlier in the season.

The coaches and team leaders drove us hard to study and prepare for our final game in San Diego. Our work paid off. We started fast, jumping to a 17-3 lead in the first quarter. Coach Baldwin pressed the accelerator to the floor and we kept going. We led 41-17 midway through the fourth quarter when coach let up on the pressure. Jake Washington, my college teammate and the Chargers' star defensive end, never laid a finger on Brady that day. We won the game 48-20.

The Ravens knocked off Pittsburgh. The Texans lost to the Colts. The Jets destroyed the Dolphins. The Patriots beat the Bills to take the other wild card slot with the Steelers. Coach

Baldwin had us come in to review film of our final regular season game on Monday and then gave us the rest of the week off.

I was vaguely aware of other things going during the fall and early winter. John Waters and I stayed in touch. His Pioneers finally beat Strath Haven and made it into the playoffs. They drew West Chester Rustin and lost in the first round.

My Paradise Wolverines made their usual playoff run. Jason Turner started Jake Baughman at quarterback and had the team run an option oriented offense. Ryan Newswanger, the tenth grader backup with a rifle arm, got playing time each game. That was excellent planning. Jake went down in the fourth game with a concussion. Ryan took over and the team finished the season 9-1.

Their only loss in the regular season was to Central, who went undefeated. The Barons were loaded for bear. My high school was knocked out of the playoffs the day after Thanksgiving when Ryan threw three picks in the Central vs. Wolverines rematch. Central lost in the state semi-finals to Thomas Jefferson High School. I'm told Coach Cherpak was out in shorts, but no snowstorm this year.

Chip Brinton and my Nittany Lions had a spectacular fall. They nearly ran the table, defeating every team on the schedule except Nebraska. The two teams faced off again in the first Big Ten Championship. Penn State won.

Ed Fritz and the Gators had a great season too. Ed's team lost a single game to Arkansas, early in the season. All the other major college powers lost at least a game too, so Penn State and Florida climbed back into contention for the BCS Championship by the beginning of December. Ed's team faced LSU in the SEC Championship game. Ed played brilliantly, rallying his team to a fourth quarter victory.

Ed and Chip both were Heisman finalists. They were beaten out by Oklahoma's excellent running back, Trey Washburn. Ed edged out Chip for the Davey O'Brien Award for the top quarterback in college. Brian Henson was in the running for the Biletnikoff Award, but wasn't a finalist. Dave McCall did make the trip down to Orlando with Chip and Brian for the ESPN awards announcement show. He was edged out for the Thorpe Award.

I would have enjoyed going to the BCS Championship Game out in Pasadena, but my teammates and I were hip deep in preparations for our game the following Saturday with the Ravens. Zack Hayes attended again, working as an unpaid grad assistant for Coach Burton.

The game was exciting. It was hard to root against Ed, but I went with my school loyalties and rooted for Penn State. The game was back and forth all evening. The lead changed half a dozen times. As the game wound down in the fourth quarter, Chip hit Bruce “Squirrel” MacCauley in the end zone to cap a seven play drive. It gave Penn State a 31-30 lead. 1:03 remained on the clock.

Ed was brilliant in the clutch. He worked his team down the field, gaining yards with underneath routes, taking what the defense was giving. Ed hit Demetrius Russell, the hotshot sophomore receiver that he told me about last summer, for a dozen yards. Jeff Knox missed the tackle and Russell picked up an extra dozen yards before Dave McCall pushed him out of bounds. The ball was on Penn State’s 27 yard line with 0:26 left on the clock. Coach C flooded the edges of the field with seven defensive backs - Matt Frye, Dave McCall, Jeff Knox, Chris Richardson, Troy Davis, Kevin Giordano and Dan Murphy. Ed took a shot at getting closer to the goal line, incomplete.

The Gators tried a delay draw. Kenyatta Jackson bull rushed and blew the play up, dropping the running back for four yard loss. 0:16 remained on the clock. Coach C ordered Mark Markovich, our (PSU’s) dime defense linebacker to blitz Ed on third down. Mark flushed Ed from the pocket. My friend scrambled ahead, picking up about eleven yards before Dave McCall, Mark Markovich and Kevin Giordano converged and dropped him.

Ed hopped up and rallied his guys to the line of scrimmage as the final seconds ticked away. Ed got his troops to the line as the clock passed 0:03. He took the snap at 0:02 and drilled the ball into the ground. The referees blew the play dead as Ed clocked the ball – false start on the Gators. The referees announced a ten second runoff for the foul, ending the game without the Gators having a shot at a field goal.

I would have loved to be on the field to celebrate with my former teammates. It took an extra year but the Nittany Lions completed the quest we started two years ago. I sent off e-mails to my friends congratulating them on their victory. I sent an e-mail off to Ed too. He was heading back to Florida and spending the next three months at All-Stars Sports Camp so he could prepare for the NFL Combine and draft.

I flew home Tuesday morning to Landenberg to spend my playoff bye week with Penny. My sweetie was cranky and feeling bloated. I did my best to help out where I could. We discussed ideas for names but didn't choose one. Our son was due in two and a half weeks. Hopefully my playoff run would not interfere with me getting to watch the birth of our son. Will thoughtfully had been Penny's Lamaze partner this fall. He would be a lot more available than me when the time came.

Penny and I had one more thing to celebrate during my short visit. The NFL announced the Pro Bowl selections two days after the season ended. I made the AFC team, just like Brady had told me from mid-season on. Brady, Antwaan, Javonn Smith (left tackle), Christian Powell and I all made it. Simeon Thomas was an alternate.

I flew back to Denver Friday night, our son no closer to birth than when I came in to visit. I managed to focus my attention onto football again. The Ravens beat the Patriots on Saturday afternoon. The Steelers upset the Texans. We would face the Ravens. The Steelers would face Rex Ryan's Jets in the division playoff round. In the NFC the 49ers and Eagles had byes in the first round. The Saints beat the Bears. The Vikings beat the Falcons.

Denver was psyched for our team to have a playoff appearance for the first time in eight seasons, especially since it was a home playoff game. The guys at the Valero store where I got coffee each morning always wanted to talk football and asked me to encourage the rest of the team. The fans were great.

Our game was the primetime game on Saturday evening, January 11th. Coach Baldwin planned to exploit the center of the Ravens defense. He felt that would be their weak point, now that Ray Lewis had retired. Brady took a few deep shots with me but mostly we worked the middle. Lucas Madsen, Gabe Reed, Simeon Thomas and I ran a lot of curls and slants.

Antwaan Booker and our defense kept Joe Flacco and the Ravens offense off balance. I contributed a punt return for a touchdown, my fourth of the season. It was a hard fought game but we pulled it out, 34-30, when Billy Wilson picked off a Flacco pass with three minutes to go. Simeon bashed ahead to run out the clock.

We found out the next day that we would be heading east next Sunday to face the Jets, who dispatched the Steelers with their brutal running game. It was going to be an interesting game. The #1 defense (the Jets) faced the #2 defense (us) in the NFL.

We expected to Jets to assign Darrelle Revis to cover me one on one during the game. Revis always covered the Jets' opponent's best receiver. No one could be certain how I would fare on "Revis Island", the term the media gave the unlucky receiver that Revis covered.

We expected Revis could shadow me step for step on straight up coverage. He was just as fast as me. I had a ten pound and six inch height advantage over him. I was a great leaper but so was he. If Brady had time, he could hit me with pinpoint passes too high for Revis to stop. That was the big question, how much time would Brady have before the ferocious Jets pass rush got to him?

Coach Baldwin planned to have me face Revis straight up to start the game. We'd test him (and me) and find out if I could take advantage of him the way I had done to most of the d-backs in the league. We secretly practiced another twist to our offense, but only in our indoor, closed-to-media practices.

I lined up as a second tight end on the left side of our line. This new position was not a token place to hide me. If we lined up in this formation, I was expected to block, just like any other tight end. We'd run on the Jets if we used this formation. Coach Dave Reilly, our tight ends coach, worked extensively with me to get my blocking technique up to NFL standards. I tried to remember what Damian taught me about attitude too.

The adjustment wasn't really about running the ball using me as an undersized blocker. We knew Revis would line up opposite me for some plays, expecting I would still be a pass catcher. We also expected Rex to tire of using his best cornerback as a run stopper after a few plays. When Revis moved over to cover Kellen or Omar, we planned to run a time or two more and then hit them with a play action pass.

I would "whiff" on my block on the right outside linebacker and then sprint downfield, covered by the free safety and maybe a nickel back. We counted on this play to be a big play, possibly even a touchdown.

My coaches proved prescient. Rex Ryan did stick me on "Revis Island." Revis did limit my effectiveness in the first half. I had four catches for 53 yards and no TDs. We were behind 13-10 and the Jets would get the second half kickoff. We were being forced to play Jets' smash-mouth football instead of Broncos' high flying football.

At halftime, Antwaan and our defense were pissed at the way the game was going. They took their frustrations out on the Jets to open the second half. Antwaan sniffed out the running play on first down and stuffed Shonn Greene for a four yard loss. He sacked Mark Sanchez on

second down for a nine yard loss. The Jets were faced with a ridiculous third down and twenty-three yards to go on their 7 yard line. Antwaan flushed Sanchez out of the pocket, nearly caught him for a safety and forced him to throw the ball away.

I lined up at midfield while the Jets punter lined up a yard from the back of the end zone. He got off a decent punt, which I fielded at their 45. Coach Kovacevic had a great play called. We managed to wall off a lane to the right side of the field. I sprinted right and dashed down the sideline untouched. Touchdown, Broncos! We led 17-13.

Our defense shut down the Jets again. I managed a 12 yard punt return this time, putting our team at our 41 yard line. Coach Baldwin called for our two tight end set with me as the second tight end. Revis lined up opposite me, assuming I would still be running pass routes.

Our first play was a sprint draw. I managed to block Bryan Thomas, a linebacker who matched my height and weighed fifty pounds more than me. Thank God he was thirty-four years old. Javonn Smith, our left tackle, chipped Trevor Conwell, the Jets right defensive end, into the backfield. He proceeded to pancake Revis and take out a safety too as Simeon Thomas sprinted ahead for a thirteen yard gain.

“So, you’re going to play some real football finally,” Trevor teased as we regrouped for the next play.

“I just do what the coaches tell me,” I allowed. “They tell me to block, so I do.”

Coach Baldwin called the exact same play again. Trevor lined up wider, so I chipped him away from the play before pancaking Revis. Javonn took Bryan Thomas out as Simeon flew by. Ten yard gain!

Rex Ryan had enough of us abusing his best cornerback. Revis switched sides of the field and covered Omar on the next play. Trevor lined up tighter this time. Bryan lined up wide of me and Bart Scott, the inside linebacker, was outside Trevor too. Wes Greenwalt, our center, changed up the blocking. I stood off Bryan Thomas while Javonn pushed Bart Scott out of the way. We couldn’t account for the free safety. Simeon went for four yards.

Coach Baldwin called for a sweep right on the next play. Simeon netted three more yards. All I needed to do was keep Bryan Thomas from wrecking the play from the backside. I managed to tie him up long enough to accomplish my task.

Coach Baldwin called our “money play” next. Everything started exactly like our sprint draw. I tried to block Bryan Thomas again as Javonn chipped Bart Scott and then get after the safety. Brady handed the “ball” to Simeon, who blasted into the hole.

I “slipped” as I tried to take out Bryan. He hurdled me and went to tackle Simeon. The free safety took the bait too. I hopped up and sprinted down the middle of the field, wide open. Brady produced the missing ball and lobbed it down to me about fifteen yards down the field. I sprinted the rest of the way to end zone, getting tackled by Revis but falling into the end zone as he took me down. Score: 24-13, Broncos’ favor.

Our defense held through the rest of the game. The final score was Broncos-30, Jets-20. We were going to the Super Bowl! Ironically, our team wasn’t going anywhere. The NFL, in its infinite wisdom, scheduled Super Bowl XLVIII at the Meadowlands Complex. Hopefully the weather in two weeks would be as nice as that day’s balmy (to us) 47 degrees.

Our team planned to stay on the east coast, if we made it to the Super Bowl. Coach Baldwin worked his old Eagles connections and lined up a stay in Philadelphia for us for a week. Coach had worked for Andy Reid for four seasons as Andy’s wide receivers coach back in 2002-2005. We would work out at the Novacare Complex and stay at a hotel nearby. Earlier in the playoffs Coach Baldwin had approved me taking a day or so off when my son was born. Now he gave me permission to live in Landenberg while we practiced.

The Novacare Complex was available because the Saints upset the Eagles in Philly last weekend. The 49ers handled the Vikings easily. Our team stayed the night in North Jersey after our victory to relax and watch the 49ers and Saints decide who would join us in the Super Bowl. My good friend Aaron Morano had two interceptions in the game, including one for a touchdown. The 49ers ground game pummeled the Saints into submission. In a two week span, I would play against to two best cornerbacks the NFL had.

I had been on pins and needles for the past week, waiting for my son’s arrival. He stubbornly stayed in his mom’s womb. Will picked me up from the team hotel Monday on his way home from Princeton. My sweetie was happy to see me but was in a generally grumpy mood otherwise. I didn’t blame her. She was three days overdue and desperately wanted our son out in the world.

I commuted to practice each day during the week. The team monitored my cell phone for me during workouts so I would be available. Marilyn Edwards came down and stayed with Penny.

She had asked off from work in anticipation of helping after the baby was born, but her presence was useful as we waited for the baby's arrival.

The holding pattern in our lives was frustrating. Penny went into HUP (Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania) for a checkup on Wednesday. The doctor said everything was fine but he would induce labor if the baby didn't show up before Saturday.

Coach Baldwin gave me Saturday off so I could be with Penny for the birth. It turned out to be unnecessary. We were in middle of special teams practice Friday afternoon and I was fielding a punt from Troy Windsor. Coach Kovacevic blew the play dead while the ball was in the air. I fielded it anyway and looked over to see what was up.

Coach was waving a cell phone over his head. "Kyle, get over here." I tossed the ball to Marquis Lewis, who was one of the gunners trying to tackle me, and trotted over to my coach.

"Your mother-in-law is on the phone," Coach announced. That drew cheers from my teammates. They knew my baby was due anytime.

"Kyle here," I said when I got my phone.

"Penny's water broke a few minutes ago," Marilyn reported. "Don't come home tonight. Go straight to HUP."

"Is everything all right?" I asked nervously. "Is Penny OK?"

"Everything is fine," Marilyn reported. "Can you call Jim and your family? I want to get on the road. My family has a history of dropping babies quickly."

"You got it," I agreed. Marilyn said good bye and I clicked my phone off. "Wahoo! We're going to have a baby!" My teammates let out a cheer. The guys around me shook my hand or slapped me on the back. I scanned the field for Coach Baldwin. He gave me a big grin when I spotted him.

"What're you doing standing around?" he demanded. "Get out of here! I don't want to see you until Monday, 8:30 am, sharp."

"You got it, Coach," I shouted as I dashed for the locker room. I took a thirty second shower and dressed. The phone calls could wait until I got to the hospital. It was only fifteen minutes away.

I got to the hospital long before Penny and Marilyn. I called Mom, Dad, Jim Edwards, Will and Andy. Will would pick up Liz and bring her along from Princeton. I didn't need to search down Abby. By no coincidence, she was doing her obstetrics rotation this month. She was already there. I paged her to let her know Penny was on the way. I started the paperwork while my wife traveled to the hospital.

I was surprised thirty-five minutes later when a police car pulled up to the birthing center door with the siren wailing. Abby, a doctor and two nurses flew outside and returned with Penny in a wheel chair.

Penny managed, "Hi, honey," before gritting her teeth for another contraction. They wheeled her by.

Abby called back, "Her husband and mom will take care of the paperwork."

"It done already," I announced. "What's going on?"

"The contractions increased quite a bit around Media," Marilyn reported. "I called 911 and got a police escort."

"Everything's fine?" I managed through my intense bout of nervousness.

"Everything is fine," Marilyn responded. "Now get in there and watch your son's birth." I hustled to catch up to Penny, the doc, the nurses and Abby.

Things didn't move quite as fast as Marilyn had feared when she drove Penny to the hospital. I was there and managed not to faint two hours later when our son appeared into the world. Words cannot do justice to the miracle as I watched him appear from his mother's womb. I was proud and relieved when my son let out his first wail and announced to the world that he was here. He was born at 6:37 pm, weighed in at 9 lbs., 12 oz. and measured 21 ³/₄ inches.

Penny and I chose the name David Zachary Martin a few days ago, and not because it was my middle name. Penny always liked the name David and I had no objections to it. Zachary needs no explanation. That was to honor his godfather.

I went out to the waiting room to let our assembled families know that our son and my wife were in excellent condition after the ordeal. All of us got to look at my son after the nurses had time to clean David up. I got to visit with Penny and David after Penny had time to rest up.

My son was a marvel. He was a big boy but not plump. He had an almost full head of wispy blond, almost white hair. His hands and fingers were impossibly small and delicate. I understood to my core that evening what my brothers Andy and Will, and my dad had tried to tell me about being a father. I would do ANYTHING for this beautiful boy to make sure he grew up healthy, happy and safe.

I led a parade of vehicles back to Landenberg around ten o'clock that evening. Will, Abby and I managed to put up everyone in our two houses. Saturday morning we all returned for visiting hours. My family and Penny's family got to meet their grandson, nephew or cousin. Nikki and Adrian made it up from Charlottesville to visit.

Penny had a room full of distinguished NFL visitors too. Zack and Leigh Ann Hayes came down from Lancaster to visit their godson. Zack's season hadn't gone as well as mine. He managed to rally his 5-8 team with three end of season wins to an 8-8 record. It was an improvement over his previous seasons but didn't get the Packers into the playoffs.

Ed Fritz flew up for a couple days. He had graduated from college in December and was working full time at a NFL prep gym to get ready for the Senior Bowl, NFL Combine and the draft.

Aaron and Tania Morano flew in a day ahead of the rest of the 49ers so they could visit before heading back to north Jersey. Aaron and I kept the Super Bowl talk to a minimum. There was time for that next week. Brady and Casey Rasmussen came by to visit too. The Broncos thoughtfully had rooms available for players' families at the team hotel in Philly.

Penny wasn't ready for discharge when the doctor did rounds Saturday morning, so she wasn't discharged until Sunday morning. I proudly brought my wife and son home to Landenberg that morning. Our house bustled during the day, with all the family and friends visiting. Things cleared out by evening as everyone headed back to Lancaster County, Virginia or Delaware. Liz did stay until Monday morning, when Will took her back to Princeton.

My first night at home with my wife and newborn son reminded me of something I had forgotten from four years earlier – exactly how noisy and disruptive a newborn can be. I was pretty bleary eyed when I got up at 6:00 am to get ready for practice. I managed to get through the meetings and practices without falling asleep.

I was secretly relieved on Wednesday when our team moved from Philly to northern New Jersey to complete preparations for the Super Bowl. Coach Baldwin remembered how hectic things were when he went to the Super Bowl with Andy Reid and the Eagles in 2005, so he kept us

isolated and focusing on game prep for as long as he could. The league may have been upset with him for delaying our arrival so long, but most of the players appreciated it once we joined the media circus at the Meadowlands.

Our team's preparation time got cut shorter on Thursday when the league announced the MVP honors. Antwaan Booker won league MVP for the second year in a row. I took rookie of the year honors, beating out William Johnson and Tre Benjamin. William played well, helping the Redskins defense improve dramatically. Tre became Tampa Bay's feature running back, running for 1688 yards on 359 carries and 15 touchdowns. I guess the fact that my team made the Super Bowl and William's and Tre's didn't let me slip ahead of them for the rookie honor.

Antwaan's and my honors only added to the already intimidating media crush. I thought I would be prepared for this since I played for the BCS Championship last season. The media for this event was ten times bigger than last January. Our team met our media obligations while trying to finish our preparations for the game.

I arranged for tickets for Penny, Mom, Dad, Andy, Liz, Will, Abby, the twins, Hunter, and Jim Edwards. Marilyn Edwards volunteered to watch Rose and David for the weekend. I didn't get a lot of time to visit with my family, only breakfast on Sunday morning. After breakfast, I headed over to the stadium and used the time to prepare for the game.

The wait for the game to begin seemed interminable. People know the Super Bowl ceremonies and pageantry are over the top, but you really don't get full impact until you are waiting in the locker room, the tunnel or on the field for just how much time is wasted before the game actually starts. I will grant you that the ovation from the 82,500 fans was cool when I was introduced at the start of the game.

I was stiff and not quite limbered up for action by the time it was time for me to take the kickoff. I didn't mind when Andrew Perkins, my former teammate and the 49ers' kicker, boomed the ball eight yards deep in the end zone. I kneeled down and accepted the touchback.

The Broncos offense was discombobulated during the first quarter. All of us were in a sort of daze, finally realizing the enormity of playing in front of millions of people world-wide. The 49ers didn't seem at all concerned about the situation when they took our punt four plays later. Alex Smith handed the ball to Frank Gore and their offensive line pounded out holes for Gore to run through.

Antwaan Booker is the best defensive lineman in the league but couldn't be everywhere. The daze of our offense seemed to grip the defense too. We were down 10-0 at the end of the first

quarter. The 49ers had two long drives. We had two three-and-out series. We settled down in the second quarter.

The 49ers assigned Aaron Morano to cover me one on one. Why not? He was one of the best cornerbacks in the league and he had the speed to run with me step for step. We are close friends off the field. On the field... it was all business. Early in the game Aaron tried to jam me on the line a couple times. I did not hesitate to retaliate, just like I would with any other cornerback. Aaron didn't try that again.

Brady and I had trouble hooking up deep. Aaron didn't give me much room when we tried deep. Brady rarely got time to wait for me to complete my deep routes anyway. The Niners' pass rush was fierce. Their defense doubled Omar and put Chris Jackson, the extremely capable cornerback opposite Aaron, on Kellen. Brady often was forced to throw the ball away or dump it off to Simeon Thomas or Lucas Madsen.

I could make the out and hitch routes work against Aaron, but he always tackled me for minimal yards after the catch. My team managed to sustain our first drive in the second quarter, thanks to a play action pass. Aaron bought my "hitch" fake when Brady pumped the ball at the same moment. I flew by my buddy and hauled in the pass. Aaron pursued me but couldn't close. I would have scored, except the free safety hadn't bought the fake to Simeon at the start of the play. He pushed me out of bounds at the 49ers' 27 yard line.

"Good one, Kyle," Aaron commented as he helped me off the ground. "Don't expect it to work again."

"I got to try," I countered.

Our team needed five more plays, but we managed to stuff the ball in the end zone for our first score. The Niners reeled off another long drive against our defense, upping their point total to 17. We managed a moral victory before the half ended, driving sixty-seven yards for a field goal before the half ran out. Score: 49ers-17, Broncos-10.

Coach Holt preached to the offense that we needed to play smart, error free football in the second half. We could move and score but we couldn't be greedy and try to go for it all on one play. It wasn't going to be that kind of evening. Coach Salas worked on some adjustments with the defense to slow down the 49ers' running game.

Ted Ginn took the second half kickoff and skittered through our cover team, gaining 44 yards to put his team at their 42 yard line to start the second half. Coach Harbaugh and his staff messed

with our coaches' minds again. They did five straight passing plays to confound our defense. They ran three times after the passes, burnt Antwaan and company with a screen pass and then threw a fade into the corner of the end zone. Score: 49ers-24, Broncos-10.

Coach Baldwin talked with Brady as the 49ers finished their drive. I took the kickoff from Andrew Perkins six yards into the end zone. I noticed the Niners weren't as aggressive with their coverage as the first half. I decided to take a chance and sprinted out of the end zone. I dodged one gunner and then the other as I skipped forward. Brendan Hayden and Ryan Jones, the Auburn rookie we took in the fourth round, split their men apart. I shot through the gap. I dodged one would-be tackler before being confronted with Andrew. I faked left and went right, only to collide with the 49ers' #27. Andrew and the other player put me down hard.

"Thank God for C. J.," Andrew said as he helped me to my feet. "I knew I wasn't going to stop you by myself."

"You made a good effort," I allowed my friend.

"Not too many guys run out when I put the ball that deep in the end zone," Andrew said. "I guess we're lucky we stopped you at midfield. You made that juke and I thought this was going to another one of your touchdowns." Andrew gave me a wink. "They don't look nearly as much fun when you're wearing blue and orange as they did when both of us wore blue and white."

Brady was fired up when we huddled. "Play smart football," my friend declared. "Be patient and take advantage of what the Niners are giving us. Make no mistakes and we will stuff this God damned ball in the end zone!"

We did exactly what our leader demanded. We didn't get any big plays, we just played smart, careful football. Eleven plays later our offensive line opened a hole and Simeon dashed into the end zone. Score: 24-17.

Our fired up defense managed to stop the 49ers next drive after seven plays. Our offense tried the patient offense that got us our last score, but a false start penalty threw us out of synch. Our defense managed to keep Frank Gore under control, which allowed us to get more pressure on Alex Smith.

My team managed to move the ball better next time but got stymied in the red zone. We made a field goal to narrow the 49ers lead to 24-20. The Niners reeled off a long drive but our defense blunted them as the Niners approached the red zone. Antwaan personally saw to it. He blasted

into Smith a split second after the ball went out on one play, sacked Smith the next play and then bull rushed into the pocket to force a third and ten incomplection.

The 49ers lined up for a 39 yard field goal try. Antwaan bull rushed into the center of the line as the Niners started their attempt. He leapt and swatted the ball with his big paw, knocking the attempt wide left.

This was a great opportunity for our team. If we scored this possession, the Niners would chasing us instead of the other way around. The Niners defense made our offense work, but we managed to put the ball in the end zone on the ninth play of the drive. The pressure got to Brady on the play and he scrambled to the right. I was supposed to catch the fade pass in the corner of the end zone. I worked my way back to the ball the way I'm supposed to do when he scrambled.

Brady spotted me as I stepped out of the end zone. He fired the ball to me. I nestled the ball into my belly and spun as I went backward. Aaron glanced off me as he went for the tackle and I fell into the end zone. Touchdown! We now led the 49ers 27-24.

"Nice move, Kyle," Aaron said as he offered me a hand to get up. "How many times am I going to have to face you?"

My answer was lost as I was engulfed by teammates, celebrating our first lead of the game. My team's defense held firm when the 49ers got the ball back. The Niners made a couple tweaks on defense when we got the ball back, making it harder to dink and dunk our way down the field. We were forced to punt the ball back.

Things continued indecisively into the fourth quarter. I made a fair catch on our 21 yard line when we got the ball back with about eight minutes left in the fourth quarter. Three plays later we had a first down and had moved out to our 34 yard line. We tried a deep pass. I drew Aaron and the free safety deep. They had me covered so Brady checked the ball down to Omar, who was running an out route.

Tarrell Brown, the cornerback on his side, tried to undercut the route. Tarrell managed to get a hand in as Omar went for the ball. The ball popped up and away from the pair. The Niners' excellent linebacker and Penn State alum, Navarro Bowman, snagged the ball out of the air and dashed for the end zone. Brady and Simeon pursued, but weren't able to stop him before he scored. Andrew Perkins made the extra point to give the 49ers a 31-27 lead.

Andrew put the kick off deep into the end zone. I was forced to down the ball. We managed to move the ball downfield, albeit slowly. Brady's leadership on this drive was inspirational.

Everyone in the huddle was determined that we would succeed and regain the lead. Four plays into the drive a holding penalty nearly killed us. I managed to catch a fifteen yard pass over top of Aaron on third down and 14 yards to go.

We pushed down into the red zone. The compressed field didn't leave me much room to work. The Niners blanketed Omar, Lucas and Kellen. Brady twice was forced to dump the ball off to Simeon, who picked up four yards on the two plays. It was third down and six to go from the Niners' 12 yard line. Brady threw a fade to me in the corner of the end zone. Aaron had me pinned in the back corner. I leapt, grabbed the ball as it sailed out of bounds and then fell. I desperately tried to get my toes down in the field of play before I landed out of bounds.

I held onto the ball as I crunched to the ground. Aaron landed on me. We both rolled over as the referee held up his arms to signal touchdown. The Broncos fans in the stadium erupted in cheers as my teammates surrounded me, offering the congratulations. Two of Aaron's teammates frantically waved their arms, signaling I was out of bounds when I made the catch. It was a scoring play, so there was a two minute pause while they reviewed the play upstairs and confirmed my TD.

The referee came out to the center of the field and announced, "The call on the field is overturned. The receiver's left toe was beyond the end line. Incomplete pass." He held up his fist and signaled, "Fourth down."

The offensive players were on the sidelines. Our kicking team was out on the field, anticipating the extra point attempt. We all turned towards Coach Baldwin for the play call. He hesitated for a moment before holding up three fingers. We would try a field goal. Dan Sellers drilled the 29 yarder right through the middle of the uprights. Score: 49ers-31, Broncos-30.

This had to have been a tough call for Coach Baldwin. We had a great defense. I suppose he figured they could get a stop in the next couple minutes and give the ball back to our offense with three or four minutes left in the game.

It didn't work out that way. The 49ers put in two tight ends, a fullback and their big, short yardage tailback. They pounded the ball at our defense, starting at our 20 yard line. Fifteen plays later time ran out on the clock. They had driven to our 12 yard line. Jim Harbaugh showed class. The final three plays were kneel downs. They probably could have scored, if they wanted to.

Losing the Super Bowl when we thought he had it won was pretty devastating, emotionally. We were a young team. The Broncos had an amazing run that season. All of us vowed we'd come back next season and fix this... next year.

My friends and former Nittany Lions teammates did well in their first season in the NFL. Christian Hunsecker became a starter midway through the Chiefs' season. Jeremy was installed as the Bears starting middle linebacker during preseason. He had a standout season. Damian Thompson spent half the season on the practice squad. My friend was called up to take over when Matt Forte's backup, Marion Barber, got hurt. My friend fit the big, short yardage tailback role perfectly. Marion Barber was let go when he recovered.

Shawn Byrd started the season as the nickel back for the Eagles. Injuries gave him four starts in Asante Samuel's place. Asante was thirty-three and in the final year of his contract. I expected the Eagles to not resign Asante and give his spot to Shawn.

Trevor Conwell had a good first season with the Jets. He started every game as a defensive end. He had thirteen sacks on the season. Josh Bruno moved into the strong side linebacker spot for the Texans in the fourth game of the season. He missed a couple games at the end of the season but he established himself as a starter next to Brian Cushing for quite a few seasons to come. Greg Nowicki earned a spot as a backup center for the Falcons. He stood an excellent chance of getting a starting spot next season, replacing thirteen year starter, Todd McClure.

Tanner Riggs made the Rams practice squad. He got picked up by the Cincinnati Bengals when they lost three wide receivers in two weeks. He was on the Bengals roster for four weeks, but was never activated. The Bengals cut him when one of their receivers was ready to play. No one picked up my former teammate.

The Cowboys cut Mitch Jackson at the end of pre-season. He got called back in December when their punter got hurt. In the last four games, Mitch did well, averaging 45.3 yards/punt and 41.1 yards net. That was a 1.1 yards/punt and 4.9 net yards/punt improvement. Mitch might have a chance to stick next summer.

I have to credit one more Nittany Lion teammate for making it into the NFL, but you already know he did it. Few rookie free agents ever make the practice squad, much less the 53 man roster on a team. Brendan Hayden managed to impress the Broncos coaches enough make the team. My friend was small and slow for a linebacker, though he made up for his deficiencies with smart play.

Brendan approached training camp with a “what the hell do I have to lose?” attitude. He knew no one expected him to last past training camp, so he played full speed, damn the consequences. He impressed our coaches enough to stick on September 1st, the final cut down day. Brendan became one of our special teams aces. He was fearless running downfield to cover punts and kicks or blocking to get me lanes for my returns.

I was disappointed at how the Super Bowl ended. We would come back and get it right the next season. I was looking forward to having time with Penny and David. I applied to work as a substitute at about a dozen school districts within twenty miles of our home. I averaged about two days a week in the classroom between mid-February and the end of April, when our team’s OTA’s started up again.

I outfitted one of the spare rooms in our house in Landenberg with top quality workout equipment so I could do my daily workout throughout the off season. I never took time off from workouts in the past nine years. I saw no reason to take time off now that I was playing football at the highest level possible. I found a well-equipped gym in Newark, Delaware, where I could work out with a personal trainer. I set things up so I would go in three days a week with him and continue working out at home.

Penny and I attended with a lot of weddings once the season was over. Christian and Bev Hunsecker, Jeremy and Kathy North, Hal and Tammy Long, Shawn and Jada Byrd, Dakota and Katie Shepherd all got hitched.

I settled into my off season role easily – house dad, workout and football study fanatic, and part time substitute teacher. Married life and fatherhood suited me even if I did have to take my turn with the dirty diapers.

There was one dark cloud on the horizon in my life. Omar Harris was beginning his fourth season in the NFL and was eligible to get a new contract. Omar always felt he should have been a first round draft pick and was extremely underpaid given his estimation of his abilities. His excellent performance last season confirmed that belief. He announced that he would boycott OTAs and mini-camps until he got the contract he deserved.

I headed out to Denver before the newly drafted rookies showed up for their first mini-camp. I got our Lone Tree home set up for the summer. Penny and David would join me a week and a half later when Penn’s veterinary classes concluded.

I watched the first round of the draft with Brady at his house. I cheered as the Arizona Cardinals selected Ed Fritz with the fifth pick of the draft. Two picks later, the Miami Dolphins picked Chip Brinton. Brady and I were surprised when the Broncos traded Omar Harris and their first round pick with Green Bay so we could take Jesse Morgan, the excellent cornerback from Alabama.

That was just what Zack Hayes needed – a prima donna wide receiver to watch his back. I felt for my buddy. Thankfully the Packers used the 31st pick of the first round to take a big tackle from Wisconsin. Hopefully that would get Zack more time to get the ball downfield to Omar. The Buccaneers picked Dave McCall a few picks after we took Jesse Morgan.

My team took Tyler Royer the next evening in the second round, the excellent receiver from USC. Brady knew Tyler from college. Tyler ran on the scout team at 'SC when Brady was a senior. We took him out to breakfast and gave him a good introduction to the Broncos when he flew into Denver.

I welcomed our third round choice to Denver when he arrived on Sunday – my former and now current teammate, Charlie Taylor. Charlie was outstanding as Penn State's feature tailback in the run to the BCS championship. He was going to be a good complement to Simeon Thomas.

Penny and I grew to love summers in Colorado. Penny worked part time at the veterinary clinic at the entrance to our development. We took a four day backpacking trip into the mountains with David. Penny carried our son. I carried all the gear. Our boy seemed to enjoy his first taste of nature.

Penny and I visited Casey Rasmussen when her and Brady's son was born. Ethan Jacob Rasmussen was born on July 14th. Hopefully Ethan and David could get to be good friends as they grew up.

Penny and David stayed through Labor Day. My wife insisted that I had to balance football and family once preparations for the next season started in the end of July. I couldn't leave at 6:30 or 7:00 am for Dove Valley and not return until 10:00 pm every night. I didn't disagree. My first season had been a long haul. I could do my film study in September after Penny and David moved back to Landenberg.

I wasn't too lonely during the season. I got a few days in Landenberg with the family during our bye week. My family came out for Thanksgiving and for Christmas break.

Penny and I had decided it was time for David to have a brother or sister, so we got busy when they moved to Denver for the summer before the start of my third season. My birthday present from my wife that year was the news that we were going have a second child. Jessica Sharon Martin, a.k.a. "Jessie," was born on March 8, 2016. Jessica honored my mother-in-law, whose middle name growing up had been Jessica. Sharon honored my mother.

Penny and I made damn sure when we were ready for our next child so we'd time things better so my wife didn't miss classes or intern time at New Bolton Center. We had planned to start working on our next one in October when I was home for my bye week. We took advantage of the Broncos schedule when we came east to play the Philadelphia Eagles on September 24th, 2017. We celebrated my team's victory with a bit of Bronco and mustang role playing.

Daniel James Martin, a.k.a. "Danny," was born the day before his Uncle Hunter's birthday on July 2, 2018. He was named for his grandfathers. Danny's arrival coincided with my family's permanent move to Denver. Penny wrapped up her four years of veterinary school and her year of internship at New Bolton Center that spring. I was married to a bona fide doctor of veterinary medicine.

I wasn't letting my wife get too far ahead of me in schooling. I took internet courses from the University of Colorado in season and in person at Penn during the springs. I finished my Masters in History the previous year. This past spring the Broncos, the NFL and NFLPA sent me to the Wharton School for the executive training program.

Penny and I kept the house in Landenberg, so we had a Pennsylvania base of operations when we were in the east. Most all of our family was there. We planned to use it for holidays and summer vacations before football started up.

My brother Andy was the exception to my family being based in the east. Andy had excelled in football his final two years at Delaware and impressed scouts, coaches and team officials at the NFL Combine. The St. Louis Rams picked my brother in the first round. My brother signed a fully guaranteed \$13.4 contract.

My brother's first year in the NFL was tough personally. Mom, Dad and Andy agreed that there was no way he could take care of his six year old twins and learn everything he needed to learn to play professional football. The boys stayed back in Paradise. Noah, Connor and Andy all missed each other terribly. Things got better the next year when Andy finally found a serious

girlfriend. They were married after his second season. The twins moved out to live with Andy and their step-mother – but all of that is a story for another time.

My football life was going well too. The Broncos made the playoffs my second season, getting knocked out of the playoffs in the division round by the red hot Buffalo Bills. The Bills went on to win the Super Bowl that season.

Brady and I made a great tandem. Tyler Royer proved to be an excellent possession receiver, augmenting my deep threat with a second reliable option for Brady. Year after year our team ranked among the top five offensively and defensively. The league kept putting me in the Pro Bowl each season too. Penny, the kids and I didn't mind the February Hawaiian vacation each year.

The day after the start of the league year, March 5, 2016, the Broncos called Max Solomon and me in to receive their contract extension proposal. They offered me \$120.2 million over six seasons with the first three seasons guaranteed. Max and I didn't spend much time considering. Three days later, after my attorneys reviewed the deal too, I became the highest paid receiver in the league.

Jeremy joined me at the Pro Bowl a couple times in our first few years in the NFL. Penny and Kathy enjoyed the time together. Jeremy established himself as a dominating middle linebacker directly in the tradition of Dick Butkus, Mike Singletary and Brian Urlacher. The Bears signed him to a seven year, \$56.5 million deal before he finished his initial four year contract.

My former roommate, Damian Thompson, excelled in his assigned role with the Bears. He was a dynamite blocker when he lined up as a fullback. The Bears also used him as their short yardage back. Damian scored ten touchdowns in his first season, becoming a fan favorite. My buddy played six years, finally retiring when his knees went bad.

Damian had one other accomplishment of note in his career. He became the first openly gay NFL player when he married Billy Robinson after he finished his fourth season. The team's fans and the league in general, with the exception of a few haters, went 'ho... hum.' Damian opened a restaurant after retirement. He now manages a very successful chain in northern Illinois.

Hal Long was not as successful as some of my friends in his quest for a full time job in the league. Carolina cut him at the end of training camp in 2013. He got a try-out with the Falcons in the summer of 2014. My friend got his real estate license and worked for a broker in the off season while Tammy finished her masters.

The Broncos brought my friend in as a second kicker in the summer of 2015. Penny and I let him stay with us while he tried out with the team. Hal did a good job, going 4 for 4 on field goals in the preseason, including one 52 yarder. The Broncos decided to keep Dan Sellers at the end of preseason. They told Hal to keep himself in shape. They would call Hal back if anything happened with Dan.

The unexpected happened during our week 10 game against the Chiefs. Dan got caught up in a pileup on the kick return. He tore the ACL on his non-kicking leg. Hal flew out from New Jersey and joined our team the next day. I put my friend up in my house as long as he had a job with the team. Hal did well, making 13 of 18 field goals and all 19 PATs. Hal competed for a job again the following summer, but the Broncos chose to stay with Dan Sellers since his knee was fully healed.

Hal decided he had enough of chasing a football career. He and Tammy moved to Harrisburg, Pa. when she found a job there. Hal got his real estate broker's license a couple years later. He has a very successful agency of his own. Hal and Tammy have two kids, Harold IV, seventeen, and Elaine, fifteen, at the time of my Super Bowl victory.

Ed Fritz sat on the bench and learned from Kevin Kolb his first season in Arizona. The sad sack Cardinals fired their coach after Ed's first season. The new coach allowed Ed to compete for the starting job the following season, but Kolb won the nod. Turmoil and bad offensive lines kept the Cardinals at the bottom of the NFL.

Ed was still the backup when he started his third season. Kolb got hurt in the third game and Ed rallied his team to finish that game. My friend started three more, winning one and losing two games. His team ended 4-12 on the season. The head coach was fired.

The new Cardinals head coach came in and drafted a hot shot quarterback from the University of Miami to become the starter. The coach put the kid in immediately as starter. Ed was treated as old news and too big a part of the discredited previous coaching regime.

Ed bounced around the league for five more years as a journeyman quarterback. Ed's one break came in his eighth season when he was backing up a young kid in Jacksonville. The kid got hurt

halfway through the first game of the season. He was put on IR and did not to return at all during the season. Ed took over and led the Jaguars into the playoffs.

I would like to say my Broncos beat Ed when we faced them in the division round of the playoffs, but we didn't. Antwaan Booker was slowing and was dinged up from the season. Ed took it to us, 38-30. His team faced the Buffalo Bills steam roller the following week. Ed's Jaguars lost, 33-31.

The following season the Jaguars decided to stay with their kid. He was 6'-4", 235 pounds, had a rifle for an arm and was 24 years old. Ed was 6'-1", 195 pounds and 31 years old. It wasn't a difficult decision for the head coach. Ed stayed on for a final season as the kid's backup.

Christian Hunsecker's Chiefs and my Broncos faced each other fifteen times over the seven seasons of Christian's career. Christian was still an effective wide receiver, but he felt the call. My friend retired from the NFL and went off to seminary to become a minister. He and Bev live in Juniata County, Pennsylvania where he ministers to a small Mennonite congregation. He and Bev have three children, James, 17; Zachary, 14; and Sarah, 11 years old.

Aaron Morano and I only faced each other two more times in our NFL careers. He remained the best cornerback I ever faced, high school, college or professional. Aaron could limit my ability to go deep, tackled surely and limited my yards after the catch to small gains. He and I were perennial Pro Bowlers. Penny and Tania as well as our kids got to be good friends. Aaron Junior was a year older than David. Jessie and Meredith Morano hung together. Jessie was a year older than Meredith. Aaron runs a couple businesses out the Bay area now that he is retired.

Chip Brinton won the starting spot with the Miami Dolphins halfway through his first season. He is successful, getting the Dolphins into the playoffs three times in his nine year career. Chip and his wife, Claire, bought a farm in Unionville, Pennsylvania, not too far from my house. He works as a gentleman farmer and part time TV commentator for college football games. Chip and Claire have two kids, Elizabeth, seventeen, and Winfield Ellsworth Brinton IV, fourteen. Ells and my son Robbie are close friends.

My close friend Trevor Conwell played for the Jets for seven years, having a solid though not great career. Trevor and Stephanie bought a home in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania after his retirement. He tends his business and real estate interests. Trevor and Stephanie have three kids – Alexander, nineteen; Grace sixteen; and Logan, fourteen.

My friend Jake Kring took the Syracuse Orangemen to 7-5, 9-4 and 10-3 records in his three seasons as a starter. They were ranked #14 in the nation his last season. Jake was considered too small and wasn't drafted. He hooked up with the Kansas City Chiefs. My friend bounced around with the Chiefs, Bears, Colts, Panthers and Texans over his nine year career. He took a job as a grad assistant and later as a QB coach at the University of Pittsburgh. He married and has three daughters.

Shawn Byrd had an outstanding career with the Philadelphia Eagles and Atlanta Falcons. He played cornerback and free safety over a fifteen year career. Shawn married his longtime girlfriend Jada. They live in Atlanta with their two children – Robert, 19 and Emily, 16. Shawn is a successful business man.

I was teaching an AP U. S. Government class at Unionville-Chadds Ford High School one day in May, after my seventh season. It was just before lunch when my phone buzzed in my pocket as I was delivering the lecture. I checked it after I dismissed the class. It was a call from Max Solomon.

“Hey, Max, what’s up?” I asked cheerily when my call was answered. “This is Kyle.”

“Kyle, this is Thomas Solomon, Max’s son,” the voice replied. I knew of Thomas but had never met him. He was a surgeon and had no part in his father’s business. “I am calling all of my dad’s clients to pass on the news. Dad passed away last evening.”

“Oh!” I gasped. “I am so sorry to hear that. What happened?”

“Dad suffered a massive myocardial infarction last night,” Tom explained. “He was on a trip out to LA to start negotiations for L.J. Green’s contract with the Stars. The doctor I spoke with from Cedars-Sinai said Dad was dead before he hit the floor.”

“Your father was a good man, Tom.”

“Thank you for saying that, Kyle,” Tom answered.

“Are arrangements set for the funeral?” I asked.

“Most likely it will be Thursday morning,” Tom said. “I will forward you the details when they are set.”

“Can I help you with any calls?” I offered. “Have you spoken with my brother or with Trevor Conwell?” Andy was a Max’s client too.

“I spoke with Andrew a few minutes ago,” Thomas said. “I have not spoken with Mr. Conwell yet.”

“I will give him a call,” I said. “He and I probably will travel to the funeral together since we live a few miles apart. Is there anything else I can do to help you or your mother?”

“No, but thank you for offering,” Tom said.

I gave Trevor a call and delivered the sad news before I went down to lunch. Penny and I conferred with Trevor and Steph in the evening. My hunch was correct. Penny and I would share a ride up to Connecticut for the funeral and to pay our condolences to Max’s family. I spoke to my brother Andy too. He would fly out for the services. His wife would stay in St. Louis and look after the kids. She had a big project due in a couple days and couldn’t afford the time off from her job.

The services were interesting. It was odd to see all these burly football players and coaches crowded into the synagogue wearing yarmulkes. We were well briefed on the proper protocol for a Jewish funeral. The rabbi made it easy for us non-Jews to follow the service. We kept quiet during the service and then followed the family out to the cemetery for the interment.

The Penn Staters among the crowd decided to go out for lunch together after the interment and before we headed to the Solomons’ house to visit the family as they sat shiva. It was good to see my friends. Aaron Morano and I hadn’t spoken in a few months. Zack Hayes and John Schroeder made it up from Pittsburgh. I hadn’t talked to John in half a decade.

He posed an interesting question while we were eating. “Are you ready to coach yet, Kyle?”

“I think I have a few playing years left, Coach,” I replied.

“Don’t forget to call me when you retire,” John responded. “There will be an opening on my staff when that time comes.”

“You’ll have to fight Bob Burton for me,” I answered. “He says I have a standing offer at Penn State to coach when I’m done playing.”

“I think I can take him a wrestling match,” John teased. “Which level would you prefer – pros or college?”

“Right now I’d like to win a Super Bowl,” I said.

“That was a close one,” John said, referring to the Broncos’ loss in the AFC Championship Game a few months earlier. “The Ravens kicked our asses too this year, didn’t they Zack?”

“That they did, boss,” Zack Hayes agreed.

It was an intriguing discussion about me becoming a coach. Starting out as a coach at the pro level with the Steelers would be a coup. Still, I wasn’t ready to quit playing just yet. Brady Rasmussen, Antwaan Booker and I had come so close to going back to the Super Bowl a few months ago. Everyone knew whichever AFC team won the right to play in the Super Bowl was going to pound the NFC’s Detroit Lions. They were a bit of fluke to make it there in the first place and didn’t have the defense to stop us or the Ravens. Next year... next year we’ll get back and finally win the damn Super Bowl.

John Schroeder’s rise in the coaching ranks had been meteoric. He coached Miami of Ohio for four seasons, turning a laughing stock team into two time Mid-America Conference champions. The University of West Virginia hired John to resurrect their program in January, 2015. He managed a fast turnaround there too, coaching the Mountaineers to a BCS Championship sixteen months ago.

The Steelers grabbed the Pittsburgh native immediately after the BCS Championship Game. The Steelers missed the playoffs for the past three years and that was simply unacceptable to the Steelers faithful. John’s first hire when he hit Pittsburgh was an assistant coach he stole from Penn State’s staff – one Zachary Hayes.

Zack’s career in Green Bay hadn’t gone the way he planned it. Coach Jim Bauder never could get Green Bay’s offensive line put together properly. Omar Harris, the team’s big acquisition after Zack’s third season did not help at all. Omar was unable to stretch opposing defenses. He recorded a paltry 57 catches his first season with Green Bay, a huge step down from the 92 he had in Denver with me a year earlier.

Zack continued to get knocked down and beat up as he tried to make the Packers’ West Coast offense work with minimal protection. Coach Bauder was fired when his team regressed from

their 8-8 2013 season to a 4-12 record in 2014. Zack endured a new head coach and a new offensive system but the same old rat-tag offensive line.

By his sixth season in the NFL, Zack had suffered five concussions. Leigh Ann was adamant that she wanted him to retire and take up coaching at the end of the season. Zack said it was not a hard decision when Coach Burton called and offered him a spot coaching quarterbacks at Penn State.

The Nittany Lions' 2017 season opened with Matt Sauder, a red shirt junior, starting at quarterback for the Lions. Josh Hunsecker, Devin Kerr, Jeremy Carter and Jake Meyer were all seniors. Matt knew the Lions' system, played fearlessly and threw the ball all over the field. Josh Hunsecker played the Wes Welker role, catching balls short and scooting away for big yards after the catch. Jeremy Carter's and Devin Kerr's speed stretched the field and kept the defenses guessing. Jake Meyer's 1210 yards rushing, 822 yards receiving and 597 yards returning kicks beat my Penn State all-purpose yards record of 2301 yards by an amazing 328 yards.

The Nittany Lions crushed Michigan State in the Big Ten Championship Game and cruised to the BCS Championship in Phoenix. My Lions dismantled the LSU Tigers on January 9, 2017 to win Bob Burton his second national crown.

I wished I could have attended the game. My team was coming off a wildcard win over the Titans and was preparing for a game on Saturday against Houston. I had to satisfy my rooting interest at home cheering on my alma mater.

Matt's senior season started off well. My friend was considered to be a candidate for the Heisman, even though he was breaking in a new group of young wide receivers. Disaster stuck Matt and the team in the fifth game. On a routine screen pass, Matt lobbed the ball over the head of an onrushing lineman and backpedaled to avoid a hit. He backed up over and tripped on a fallen Illini defender just as the other lineman launched himself at Matt. My friend's cleats caught in the turf as he went down. Being sandwiched between two 300 pound linemen when your ankle is at an awkward angle is a good way to get hurt.

Matt's ankle was shattered. Surgery and months of rehab managed to get him back on two feet. He would never play football again. My friend's dream of playing in the NFL was done. He finished his Bachelors in Education in the spring and took a job at Liberty High School in Allentown. He teaches and coaches football. Matt married his college sweetheart. They have two kids.

Zachary David Hayes, Jr. was born while Zack and Leigh Ann were living in State College. Laurie was in school. Leigh Ann loved being back in State College. Even so, when John Schroeder called in January, 2018 and offered Zack the job as his quarterbacks coach, Zack jumped at it. It was weird the next season when the Broncos played the Steelers having Zack coaching while his college roommate, JT Hill, lined up and played at center.

My Broncos teammates chose me to be the team's NFLPA representative in my fourth season. Personally, I think it was a case of me missing the wrong meeting at the wrong time. My teammates looked around the circle and saw I wasn't there and said, 'Hey, let's stick Kyle with this job.' I exaggerate. The job wasn't that bad. I made some good contacts with the NFLPA and the league. We managed to successfully negotiate the next collective bargaining agreement in 2021 without the necessity of a strike or any of the ugliness that had happened a decade earlier. The owners, the NFLPA and the commissioner all worked together to keep the NFL popular and running at peak efficiency. Who wants to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs? None of us, that's for sure.

My brother Andy was selected for the Pro Bowl after his third season. The other guys in the Pro Bowl teased us that it was a good thing Andy and I were in different conferences. Otherwise, the league would just set aside the wide receiver Pro Bowl slots for the Martins and tell the rest of the league's receivers to forget about the Pro Bowl.

It didn't work out that way for Andy. He did attend as an alternate in his fourth season. Andy never finished his fifth season. In one of those Joe Theismann moments where you didn't want to watch unless you had a strong stomach, Andy got taken down after a catch with an illegal horse collar tackle and then got rolled on by a linebacker. The human leg is not meant to bend that way.

Andy's fibula was shattered and his football career was over. Dr. James Andrews of Atlanta, the noted surgeon, took care of my brother. Andy needed two surgeries and a year of therapy to get a semblance of mobility. He could get around but will always have a limp.

Both Andy and I had other goals for our lives than playing in the NFL. When Andy was recovered enough to be mobile, he teamed up with his best friend Eric Connell to form the computer game company they had been planning since they were teens.

No one was surprised when Eric married Samantha Hoover weeks after he graduated from MIT. Eric got a job as a programmer for one of the big game software companies. His rise was

stunningly fast. He worked as a programmer for a couple years before being promoted to a team leader. Two years of seasoning brought a further promotion to lead developer for a game. Eric was ready to handle the technical end of things when Andy called and asked Eric to get their dream company underway.

My brother took a perfect mix of business management, financial planning and marketing courses at Delaware to make him an entrepreneur. Andy used a substantial portion of his NFL money to launch the game company. Both Dad and I advised my brother against betting so much of his family's financial future on a single startup venture. Andy, his wife, Eric and Sammy were certain they could succeed and went ahead.

The company produced two moderately successful niche games in the first year, helping get them into the black. I got a call from Andy one snowy February afternoon a month or so after my season ended. Andy wanted me to take a business meeting with him and Eric.

I was reluctant since Max Solomon and all the NFL and NFLPA financial advisors recommended that we not get involved in financial matters with our close family. He was my brother, so I agreed to the meeting. I offered to let them stay with us. I knew my kids wouldn't mind sleeping on the floor in the family room if it gave them an extra chance to see their Uncle Andy. Anyway, I had been working on my doctoral thesis and had a bad case of writer's block. The break would be welcome.

Andy refused. This was strictly a business meeting and he and Eric wanted to conduct it as such. We met over lunch two days later at my favorite Mexican restaurant. I expected to be hit up for a substantial loan to help their company. Nothing could be further from their minds.

Andy presented a detailed business plan he had worked up for the planned latest offering from Conestoga Software, their company. They had developed a new football game model and they wanted my input, not my money. The idea sounded somewhat interesting.

After lunch we went back to my house so they could demonstrate the prototype. I was unimpressed when Eric launched it on his laptop. The players were bare wire mesh figures on a green field with no crowd or stadium in the background.

"Name any two football teams, Kyle," Andy challenged. "Inside of thirty minutes, Eric and I will put those two teams onto the field using this football engine."

"Give me the 2007 Paradise Wolverines against the same year Central Barons," I suggested. That was the first Wolverine team to win the state championship.

“No problem,” Andy agreed. “I may need a little help from you with names and stats, in case I can’t remember everyone.” I agreed. “The beauty of this engine is how easy it is to customize. Eric and I see the big market for this game will be the ability for purchasers to create customized teams with our company’s assistance. I believe we can break even with a \$5 cost for two custom teams.”

“How are you going to break even if it takes someone half an hour to create the customization?” I queried.

“That one of the beauties of this,” Andy countered. “The buyer does most of the work for us. They collect the player names and stats and enter them on-line for us. All our company needs to do is create the skins for the wire mesh players. That takes five minutes.”

Eric showed me a fully skinned Wolverine figure wearing my number 87 jersey. The tall thin build and bit of shaggy blond hair hanging out of the back of the red Wolverine helmet looked authentically like me at age 16.

Less than half an hour later Andy and Eric had the two teams assembled and on the electronic version of Harrison Field. It was amazing to see my personal avatar standing on the field across the line from the digital Christian Hunsecker, just like we had been a decade and a half ago. The image of Greg Harrison lining up beside me for the Wolverines as eerie. The game play was pretty good too. I was sold on the product.

“Eric and I are prepared to offer you a ten percent stake in our company for your football expertise, narration, name...” Andy explained before chuckling, “... and your connections. I understand the NFL and players association is reevaluating their relationship with Madden Football.”

My brother still had connections in the NFL. He had become close friends with Sam Bradford, who was the Rams player rep and most likely was the source of Andy’s information. The NFL and the NFLPA had indeed been considering if we wanted to stay affiliated with the three decade old football program. It was showing its age and wasn’t bringing us as much revenue as it used to. Some owners felt we should consider other offers before resigning with EA.

I had to discuss the idea with my financial planners and with Penny. The main cost to us would be my time. My work for my doctorate in history was wrapping up. Both of us felt that this project would be a good way for me to keep busy off season and might be quite lucrative too, if we could get a deal with the NFL.

I had the initial discussion with the league's marketing department and the NFLPA's executive committee about Andy's game. It was promising, so a full presentation was scheduled with the NFLPA representatives and Commission Goodell and the owner's licensing committee. Brady Rasmussen took my place as the Bronco's representative at the meeting.

Andy gave an excellent presentation. I answered a few questions about my role in the company. The league and the NFLPA asked for marketing and usability studies. They came back a couple months later with positive recommendations. The owners and the NFLPA agreed to license their names and images to Andy's company.

My brother was a shrewd business man. The league and players' association wanted a cut of the gross for all sales related to the game. Andy negotiated the agreement to give them a percentage of the gross for all NFL related sales only. The league didn't expect Andy's and Eric's customizations to be a big seller, so as long as the customizations didn't represent NFL teams, those sales were exempt.

"Kyle Martin's NFL Challenge" was released that Thanksgiving. It became the hottest item for the 13-35 males demographic. It made for a really excellent Christmas for me and my family. Over the decade and a half since its release, "Kyle Martin's NFL Challenge" has made me and my family more money than everything I earned playing football. Money will never be a concern.

It was interesting watching my younger classmates behind me try to make it into the NFL. Jay Nicholson played two more seasons at James Madison University. He suffered ACL/MCL injury midway through 2014 season. Jay went undrafted and hooked up with Argonauts in the Canadian Football League. He played three seasons for them, helping the Argonauts win the Grey Cup, representing the CFL championship. Jay went into broadcasting as he had planned back in college, working play by play for Fox Network. Jay married Allison Ross, the girlfriend he brought to my wedding. Allison is a descendant of one of Virginia's founding fathers. Jay and Allison live near Round Hill, Va. and have two children, Jason Jr., 17, and Sean, 14.

Brian Henson made it into the NFL two seasons after me, being drafted in the first round by the Seahawks. His career lasted three seasons. He and his wife live outside Seattle and have three kids. Jon Stafford was picked in the sixth round of the draft by the Patriots. He never got a chance to start professionally. Jon married Bob Burton's daughter Ashley. Jon went into coaching after serving as a backup for the Patriots for three seasons. He currently is the

offensive coordinator at Boston College. Jon and Ashley have two children – Bobby, 14, and Emma, 10.

Mike Johanson made All-American at Texas as a senior. The Cincinnati Bengals drafted him in the first round. He played well for six years, but for some dreadful teams before retiring. Mike and his college girlfriend, Amanda, live in Lubbock, Texas. They have two daughters.

Josh Hunsecker was one of the stars of the 2017 Nittany Lions championship team. He was drafted by the Minnesota Vikings in the fourth round. He was on the practice squad for a year and played spot duty for two more seasons before being cut. He tried out for the Redskins the next summer but didn't make the squad. Josh took up professional scouting. He has served as a district executive, senior district executive, program director and field director at various councils in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. He currently serves as the council executive at the Hawk Mountain Council in Reading, Pa. Josh married a Minnesota girl and brought her back east. They have three kids.

Devin Kerr was a second round pick of the New Orleans Saints after starring for the Nittany Lions. Too much partying prevented him from reaching his potential. He was cut after three seasons. He played one more year in Oakland before being let go. He returned to the Lehigh Valley. He got sober, married an old girlfriend from high school and sells real estate. He remains close friends with Matt Sauder and Josh Hunsecker.

Dave Mitchell had a good career at Temple but was not drafted in the NFL. Dave tried out for the Eagles, the Bills and the Texans over the next three summers but never made the squads. Dave teaches and coaches football in Wyomissing, Pa. He married a fellow teacher and they have one child. Dave remains close friends with Josh, Matt and Devin.

Gary Harrison made all-state at tight end in his senior high school season. He chose Boston College over Penn State, Syracuse and Temple. Gary had a good career with the B.C. Eagles but was not considered a prospect by the NFL. Gary fell for a girl from upstate New York while they were in college. They married and live in Corning, New York. Gary works as a manager for the Corning Company. They have three kids.

Mark Markovich made his granddad proud, serving as a Nittany Lions team captain in the 2016 season, just like his namesake had done over four decades earlier. Mark was drafted in second round by the Steelers. He helped man the middle of their line for eight years before going into coaching. He married his college sweetheart, Alexis Wolfe. They have one child. Bob Burton took Mark in at Penn State when he finished playing. He coached linebackers, special teams and

finally became the defensive coordinator in 2030. Mark was promoted to head coach of the Nittany Lions in January, 2034, when Bob Burton retired.

I had an interesting experience at the 2021 Pro Bowl. Ken Garver, the young receiver from the Jacksonville Jaguars, was attending for the first time. I knew Ken slightly since he was from Pennsylvania and attended Penn State. I met him a couple times when I visited campus and Walt Caffrey raved about how good he was.

Ken took me aside after practice one afternoon. “I owe everything I achieved to you, Kyle,” Ken declared.

“I think you’re exaggerating,” I replied modestly.

“No, the advice you gave me at football camp set me on the course that got me here, Kyle,” Ken retorted. “Don’t you remember?”

“Football camp?” I answered, shaking my head.

“You worked with me at my first Penn State football camp after I finished eighth grade,” Ken explained. “I asked you how much of your success was your talent and how much was luck. You told me talent was a small part of it and that you made your own luck by working hard. I dedicated myself to following your advice. Look where it got me.”

I stared at the 6’-2” receiver for a few seconds before I remembered what he was talking about. I did remember that scrawny, 5’-3” kid named Kenny that I worked with a decade earlier. I allowed a smile as I recognized him.

“Kenny?” I gushed. “I’m glad you used the advice. Still, don’t give me too much credit. You did the hard work that put you here today.”

I turned thirty on July 6, 2021. The clock was running for the core of the Broncos team to produce the Super Bowl win we were all striving to achieve. Most of us had been with the team eight to eleven years. The Broncos had been one of the dominant AFC teams for the past eight seasons. Brady and I had hooked up for close to 800 passes and over 9,000 yards receiving. We were still considered the top quarterback/wide receiver duo in the league.

We dedicated ourselves to hard off-season workouts and film study. We needed to have a superlative season if our Broncos were ever going to produce the win we and our fans wanted. Brady and I convinced nearly all the skill players to do off-season passing drills at Dove Valley.

Our team came out of the gate and went 9-1 to start my ninth season. Optimism was sky high. The team flew to Pittsburgh for our next game. The Steelers put us through a grinder that cold snowy Sunday night. We lost 20-16 and limped home. I know Zack Hayes and John Schroeder fed their defense every shred of information they knew about covering me.

Antwaan and our defense were pretty beat up from the Steelers' brutal running game. Brady, the other skill players and I managed to help the team win a bunch of shoot outs to close with three wins and two more loses. Our 12-4 record got us a week of rest while the other teams fought it out in the wild card round. The upstart LA Stars came to our house the next weekend. We beat them, but at too high a cost. Antwaan suffered a high ankle sprain and was unavailable for the AFC Championship Game. I pulled a groin muscle stretching out for a catch. It hurt like hell but I played on.

The following week the Titans took advantage of us. With Antwaan watching in civvies and me hobbled, our team went down 31-21. Antwaan's contract was up after that season. Antwaan and his agent expected the Broncos to pay him like the almost certain Hall of Famer that he was. The team didn't feel that a thirty-four year old, banged up defensive lineman was worth \$23.5 million a year. The 49ers offered our friend \$25 million a year for a five year, non-guaranteed contract.

Antwaan went west after Brady and I made a last appeal for him to accept less and help us finish what we started with the Broncos. Todd Rosenbaum, my agent since Max Solomon died, had negotiated a three year, \$45 million deal for me. Brady was still signed up with the team. He accepted a ten year deal eight years ago.

Coach Holt took the head coaching job in Green Bay. Coach Franks stepped up to take his place. Coach Baldwin asked me if I would consider being a player/coach with the team.

"Hell, you're always in here off-season working out and studying film," Coach teased as he tried to recruit me. "You might as well attend the coaching meetings and give your input too."

I was willing to give it a try but the league nixed the idea. I needed to be either a player OR a coach. They didn't want me doing both jobs. I chose to stay a player. Coach Kovacevic suggested a guy from our Penn State past to fill the job – Ryan Reynolds. Ryan had jumped from college to professional ranks three years ago, serving as the special teams coach for the

Carolina Panthers. Ryan stood a better chance someday of reaching his professional goal – a head coach with a team of his own – if he worked as a regular assistant rather than a special teams assistant.

Brady and I soldiered on for two more seasons. We had a young defense now that forced us to air the ball a lot. We won a bunch of shoot outs in my eleventh season, just enough to sneak into the playoffs as a wild card team. The LA Stars made short work of our playoff run.

I was covered by Joe Eberly, the little seventh grader I had picked for our Wolverines spring scrimmage back in Paradise eleven years earlier. Joe displayed the talent that Mike Johanson foresaw back then. I had five catches for 61 yards and one TD. We lost 34-21.

The 2024 season was the most difficult of my tenure in Denver. We had a couple new kids on our offensive line. Things weren't jelling the way Brady and I would have liked. At age 37, Brady wasn't as nimble as he used to be getting out of trouble when the pocket collapsed. A defensive end hammered Brady in our third game. My buddy ended up with three cracked ribs. He was forced out of the game and had to sit out three games until he was well enough to take snaps again.

Tristan McDonald, our sixth year journeyman backup QB, took over for Brady. He was a decent quarterback though there was a good reason he hadn't won a starting job at any of the three teams he was on. His pocket presence wasn't quite as good as Brady's. He threw the ball late too often, forcing me and the other receivers to pause or backtrack to get a shot at catching the ball. It opened us up to big hits by the d-backs and linebackers.

I couldn't really blame Tristan too much. Brady and I had eleven years of working out and practicing together to get our timing down. Tristan and I had four practices together before his first start.

We went 2-4 before Brady came back. I was getting pretty banged up from hard hits. Brady and I managed to rally our team and win the next four games. Our next game was a tough one in the crazy Oakland Coliseum. Brady banged his hand on the helmet of one of the Oakland linemen when he followed through on a pass to me. Our trainer pulled Brady and took him inside for x-rays. My friend had a hairline fracture in a bone in his throwing hand. Tristan took over.

We ended up losing the next three games while Brady healed. This was by far the toughest season I had in football. Brady and I called a players only meeting and talked about what we needed to do. The team rallied and we won the next two games. In the final weekend we faced a so-so Chiefs team at home in Mile High Stadium. Our record was 8-7. The Raiders had a half

game lead on us and were playing a tough Jets team in New York. They were 9-6. If the Raiders won, they would win the division and we went home. If we won and they lost, we would squeak by them, having split our two games against each other and with us having the better conference record.

Our game was a late afternoon game. The Oakland vs. Jets game was the Sunday night prime time game. Our team had to rally in the fourth quarter from 24-21 down. Brady found me on a crossing route and hit me in stride. I dodged one tackler and sprinted for the end zone. I might have been getting a little gassed in the last few yards but I got the ball into the end zone. Our defense managed to protect our lead through the last five minutes of the game.

When our game was done, our team was reduced to watching in our locker room to see if the Jets extended our season or if we were finished for the year. Three and a half hours later we learned our season was over. Everyone came into Dove Valley on Monday to clean up our lockers at the end of the season.

Our whole football world turned upside down before we arrived that day. The Bowlen children, owners of the team since their parents' deaths, ordered John Elway to fire Coach Baldwin. Fifteen seasons without a Super Bowl win had worn out my coach's welcome with the Denver fans.

Brady was at the end of his contract. The media had been after him all season, asking him if he planned to return next season. Brady continued saying throughout the season that he would decide at the end of the season. I received some of the same questions.

I might have lost half a step. I didn't run a 4.25 second 40 yard dash anymore but I was still under 4.30 seconds. My health was amazingly good for someone who had played twelve seasons of professional football. I might not be the top wide receiver in the league but my 88 catches, 1,074 yards and 15 touchdowns put me among the top five receivers. I knew I could play another year or two at a high level. Did I want to?

Penny and I had some long talks about my future. Could I learn more as a player to help me prepare for my coaching career? That was doubtful. My 1,178 receptions and 16,492 yards put me firmly ahead of Anquan Boldin, Marvin Harrison, Chris Carter and Larry Fitzgerald on the all-time receiving list. If I played another year I probably could pass Tony Gonzalez for career receptions too. I was 22 catches behind his career record.

I had absolutely no chance to catch Jerry Rice, the career leader with 1,547 receptions and 22,895 yards. I had no intention of playing for 20 seasons the way Jerry did. I had other things I wanted to do with my life.

Brady and Casey Rasmussen came over to visit us a few days after the season ended. Brady wanted to tell me personally that he was announcing his retirement the next day. My friend's decision pretty much clinched it for me. I had no desire to break in a rookie quarterback and learn a new offense. Penny and I talked about the decision for half the night. She agreed with my analysis of our situation.

I gave John Elway a call the next morning and informed him of my intention. John asked me to sit down with him. He tried to change my mind, without success. John asked me to wait a couple days so the team could organize a proper press conference for my send off.

My final press conference in Denver was more of a love-in than a question and answer session. The Denver fans had always been great to me. I tried to let them know how much I appreciated playing for such a great city throughout my career. It felt weird as hell to turn in my ID, ePlaybook and key to the building. I made a point of saying good bye to every employee and staffer I could before I went home that afternoon.

I had a lot of decisions to make now that I was retired. Would Penny and I stay in Denver? I could get a teaching certificate and go to the classroom to teach and work with high school kids to help them learn football. I loved working with kids and this was an appealing option.

I had my doctorate in history. I probably could teach at the college level if I wanted to work with older young people. I wouldn't need to get a teaching certificate for that.

I was conservative with my investments and our family was careful with our money. "Kyle Martin's NFL Challenge" had been a boon for our family. I never had to work another day in my life, if I didn't want to. I could devote my time to charitable causes, if I wished to.

John Elway hinted that I should keep my options open until after the team picked a new head coach. John was going to recommend the new coach hire me as one of his assistants. Would my other coaching options – Bob Burton and John Schroeder – develop into real job offers?

I got an answer three days later. The Jets beat the Steelers in one of the wild card games. The next morning, John Schroeder took time out of what had to be a busy day to talk with me.

“Do you remember the offer I made a few years ago, Kyle?” John asked. “I was serious. Are you interested in coming back to Pennsylvania and working for me?”

“What do you have in mind, John?” I asked.

“I am losing my OC [offensive coordinator],” John explained. “That isn’t public knowledge yet, but he is going to Chicago. I am promoting Zack to OC and shuffling some of my other coaches around. The wide receiver coach position is open and yours, if you want it.”

“I’ll have to talk with Penny and my family,” I responded. “It’s flattering that you would consider me for a position when I have no coaching experience.”

John laughed at my answer. “Kyle, you have been coaching all your football life. It’s time you got the title to go with what you have been doing for so long.”

Later the same day Bob Burton called with the same offer. He wanted me to return to State College and coach his receivers. I promised him I would discuss it with Penny and get back to him within a few days.

Penny and I talked things through for a couple days. The biggest drawback to taking either job was our kids. Davey was in fifth grade, Jessie in third and Danny was in first grade. I would be hopelessly behind in either job if I waited to move until school let out. If I took the Penn State job, I needed to get to work on recruiting... yesterday! If I went to Pittsburgh, I needed to get involved in evaluating the talent of potential draftees.

I could wait a year and do charity work until the summer and then move the family back to Pennsylvania. I was pretty sure the offers would be open for the next season too. In the end, my son Davey helped me make up my mind.

“Dad, you’ve talked about being a coach as long as I can remember,” Davey declared at dinner one night. “You got to go work for Uncle Zack in Pittsburgh. It’s where you belong.”

After some soul searching I came to the conclusion that the opportunity to start half way up the coaching ladder was too good to pass up. While Penny and I were trying to choose between Pittsburgh and State College, I got a third job offer. Coach Holt wanted me to come up to Green Bay and work for him.

In the end two factors determined my family's destination: 1) I would love to work with Zack Hayes again. 2) Pittsburgh provided the best opportunity for career advancement. Bob Burton had been head coach at Penn State for fifteen years. Most of his assistants were there equally long. Coach Caffrey was still wide receivers coach after thirteen seasons on the job. The Pittsburgh Steelers were one of the most stable franchises in the NFL. John Schroeder was only the fourth head coach for the team in six decades. Stability is a good thing to help a team be successful. Still, the opportunity for advancement was there. Zack Hayes was advancing to offensive coordinator after six years as a position coach.

Penny and I brought the kids together to explain our decision to move to Pittsburgh. Surprisingly, Davey had no problem with the idea of moving. Penny and I expected the most resistance from him since he had lived in Colorado longest. Jessie was upset that she would leave behind her good friends Kaylee and Grace. Danny was fine even though the Lone Tree house was the only home he had ever known.

I called John Schroeder after the family meeting and let him know I would accept his job offer. Things happened fast after I agreed to take the job. I accepted Friday night. I was on a plane Sunday afternoon heading for Pittsburgh. To my surprise, the team had a press conference lined up to welcome me to the team.

"John, position coaches do not do press conferences," I protested.

"Most position coaches aren't locks to go into the Hall of Fame," John answered. "Do the conference. The media will drive our PR guys crazy if they don't have access to you."

John was right. Fox, ESPN, the NFL Network and all the local stations showed up to cover my arrival. I gave them my usual spiel about 'just being here to help out however I can.'

I got the tour of the Steelers facilities, met the other coaches and met some of the Rooney family. Quite a few of the coaches had Penn State connections. I liked the Rooneys. Art II was president of the club. His cousin Art, Jr. was vice president.

I was given an office which I shared with our tight ends coach, Mickey Shuler. Mickey and I knew each other in passing from our shared connections with the Nittany Lions. Mickey had graduated a year before I started at Penn State.

The team gave me time to go house hunting my first week there. Meantime I lived out of a hotel near the team's training complex. Zack Hayes suggested looking in the Fox Chapel section of

the city. I found three or four interesting houses for Penny to look over when she flew in the next weekend.

One of the first tasks Zack assigned me was to review this year's film of current NFL receivers and update our evaluations of them. The information would be used if they became available as free agents or by trade.

I had to laugh when I found my own evaluation in the binder. Under the 2025 season update I wrote, "This guy is old as dirt. Give him a rocking chair. The Steelers have no use for this receiver."

John Schroeder apparently was paying close attention to my work. A couple days later he popped his head in my door, gave me a wink and held up my evaluation of myself. "Are you certain this guy can't help our team? How about in a pinch if our team is shorthanded at receiver?"

"Nope. He'll be no help, especially on the playing field," I replied. "Anyway, if you coaxed me out of retirement, the Broncos still hold my rights for two more years. Do you think they'd be inclined to give us a break?"

"No, probably not," John agreed.

Penny and I picked out one of the houses over the weekend she was in town. It was on Evergreen Drive just off the fairway of one of the local country clubs. That would be handy for Penny. Who knows? Maybe I'll take up golf now that I'm retired from playing football.

Penny headed back to Denver to begin organizing our move. I stayed on in Pittsburgh. I headed in to work on Monday to get settled and get started on the planning for the coming year. I was tired when I got home after ten hours at the office. I headed for the bathroom for a shower before dinner. I flipped the TV on to the evening news, hoping to pick up what was happening in the world before dinner.

A reporter was talking about a house fire in Jefferson Hills when I got out and started to dry myself. 'Damn, that voice is familiar,' I thought as I dried myself. I didn't place it until the sign off.

“This is Kelly O’Keefe reporting for KDKA,” my ex-college girlfriend reported. “Back to you, Dan.” I stopped drying and stared when I realized who the reporter was. Kelly’s hair was shorter than when we dated, but it was the same shade of red I had loved back then. My ex looked fantastic, every bit as beautiful as in college. It looked like Kelly had reached her professional goals. I wondered if she was married or was still single. I knew how to find out.

The next morning I queried Zack. “Have you and Leigh Ann stayed in touch with Kelly O’Keefe?” I asked.

“I knew that subject would come up sooner or later,” Zack replied. “Yes, Leigh Ann and I have stayed in touch with Kelly. She and her husband Troy have two kids, Troy Jr., who is eight and William, who is five. I’ll have to invite all of you to a party sometime.”

“That would be cool,” I asked. “How did Kelly end up on KDKA?”

“Do you remember she got a job at a TV station in Lexington, Kentucky after the two of you graduated from college?” Zack replied.

“I did hear that from Christian and Bev,” I answered.

“She worked there for a year and a half,” Zack explained. “She did well on air. Kelly jumped at the chance to come back to Pittsburgh when KDKA offered her a general reporter’s spot at the station. She met Troy Donahue a few months later. It didn’t take long for them to fall for each other and get married. They’re great together.”

“I’m glad things worked out for Kelly,” I said. “I’ve always had a soft spot for her, even after we broke up. Did she give up drinking?”

“Hasn’t had a drop since that ugly incident back at the end of junior year in college. She still attends AA meetings even though it’s been almost fourteen years since she had a drink.”

“I’m glad for her,” I responded. “It is good that things worked out for her.”

Kelly and I did meet up later that spring at a party Zack threw at his house. Her husband Troy seemed like a nice guy. Penny renewed her acquaintance with my ex-girlfriend. All the old bitterness was long gone. Over the next few years the four of us got to be good friends. Her son William, age five, and my son Danny, age six, got to be friends too.

We got our family organized for the move at the beginning of February. The boys settled into their new school easily. Davey made friends with our next door neighbor's daughter, Allison Bennett. They were in the same fifth grade class. Jessie was pissed off at me from the time the move was announced until a couple weeks after we arrived in Pittsburgh. She made friends with a couple girls in her third grade class and I went back to being the cool daddy again.

My professional life was fascinating. I got to participate in the coaches post mortem of the Steelers last season. I got a lot of grilling from our defensive coaches when we got to the game against the Broncos.

One of the conclusions of the review was that our receiving corps needed to improve. The Steelers survived the last few years with a strong running game. Our QB, Kofi Nichols, was older. He was an excellent game manager who did a good job with play action passes and rarely turned the ball over. John and Zack did not feel Kofi was up to running the wide open style of offense they or I preferred. My job was to get our young receivers ready so when we picked a young QB in a year or two, the receivers would be ready to go.

We made one other significant change to our lives the year we moved to Pittsburgh. Penny and I decided we wanted one more child. Our son, Robert Justin Martin, was born December 2, 2025.

One of the stranger things I experienced coaching in Pittsburgh was working with JT Hill, my former team captain back in college when I was a freshman. JT was the consummate professional. He had no problem treating me as a coach rather than the kid I was back when we played together.

I was able to help my receivers tighten up their route running and improve their yards after the catch during my first season in Pittsburgh. Our team had a decent season, though not great, based on expectations in Pittsburgh. We made the playoffs, winning in the wild card round and losing the next week to the Texans.

Our defensive coordinator, Mike Keller, who used to be Penn State's linebacker coach when I was at Penn State, was hired to take over the Seattle Seahawks. The Steelers allowed him to take one Steelers coach with him. Daryll Clark, our QB coach, went along to be Mike's offensive coordinator.

Brian Farley, our own linebacker coach, stepped up to be our defensive coordinator. Dan Conner, another in a long line of top PSU linebackers came aboard to coach our linebackers. We didn't fill the QB coach slot immediately.

A group of the coaches, including Zack and John, were brainstorming in the team cafeteria at lunchtime.

“What’s Ed Fritz up to?” Zack asked.

“He’s been working at University of Florida,” I answered.

“I know that,” Zack replied. “He coached Trevon Williams.” Trevon won the Heisman a couple months earlier. “Do you think he would be interested in stepping up to coaching as a pro?”

“I don’t know,” I answered. “If you and John want me to, I can feel him out see if he has any interest.”

“Do that, Kyle,” John directed. “My sources in the SEC tell me that he’s doing a hell of a job for the Gators. I’d like to bring him up for an interview, if he has any interest.”

Ed was interested. He was one of four candidates interviewed by John Schroeder. John offered the position to Ed after John finished his interviews. Penny and I helped Ed and Vanessa get settled in a place a mile or so from our house.

March, 2026

It was early March and I had finished my first year in Pittsburgh as John’s wide receiver coach when we heard the news of Coach Paterno’s death at age 99. The legend’s death was remarked upon but little noticed outside the extended Penn State football family, which certainly included the Steelers’ staff. Half of us had coached or played at Penn State. I imagined the thousands that would have turned out for the funeral, if not for the old coach’s misjudgment half a dozen years before I arrived on campus.

The college football world was shocked eleven years ago when Coach Paterno’s long time assistant coach Sam Jankowski was arrested, tried and convicted of molesting young boys back in the Nineties and early Two Thousands. I had met Jankowski a couple times at Penn State but never really knew him. He retired a decade before I started at Penn State. Coach Paterno heard about one of the incidents in 2002 and did not call the police when he got a report of the sick bastard sodomizing a boy in our locker room. What was Coach Paterno thinking? As a dad with three boys, I’ll never understand why he didn’t call the police immediately. Grandpa Martin

tried to explain that was how things were done in the “day.” Certain things just were not spoken of – ever. He supposed that is the reason for Coach’s inaction. I don’t know.

I bought into Coach Paterno’s whole “doing college football right” attitude. I really was a student athlete and I was proud how Coach Paterno and Coach Burton insisted we take our academics seriously. Does this one lapse in judgment invalidate everything Coach Paterno preached? I think not. Even so, it will take more than the intervening years to allow people to judge his contributions soberly. Penny and I sent flowers to the funeral but did not attend.

My eldest son, Davey, proved to be much too precocious for his own good. When Penny and I moved the family to Pittsburgh we moved next door to the Bennetts. They had an eleven year old daughter Allison, who turned out to be in Davey’s fifth grade class. Allison took Davey under her care and helped him fit into his new school. The two kids became best friends.

About a year later, a few days after Davey turned twelve, I got a frantic call from Cindy Bennett, Allison’s mother. She called me at work because Penny was in surgery and was unavailable. Zack Hayes gave me the rest of the afternoon off. I rushed to the Bennett’s house to help her with our mutual problem.

She came home early from work and found Allison and Davey naked, playing with each other. Davey’s sperm covered fingers were stuffed in Allison’s tight little pussy while she played with her little clittie. After many tears and a lot of coaxing we got the story from the two kids.

It seems they started to play “doctor” together a few months earlier. Allison was the first to learn that it felt really good to play with her “kitty.” Allison taught Davey how to pleasure her. Davey is smart. He figured out if it felt good for Allison to play with herself, it might feel good for him too. The first time he tried it he was shocked to shoot white goo. He proudly showed what he could do to Allison the next afternoon.

Allison and Davey loved the slick feel of Davey’s goo. It made their playing much slipperier and more enjoyable. They had used Davey’s dangerous lubricant for almost two months.

The Bennetts took Allison to the doctor immediately. Thank God, the news was good. My pre-teen son hadn’t gotten his best friend and playmate pregnant. The Bennetts forbade Davey from seeing their daughter anymore.

David and I had a long series of talks about human anatomy, reproduction, sexuality and love. Penny and I adopted my parents' open attitude about our teen's sexuality. We encouraged them to talk with us. We made sure they had protection when they were ready to be sexually active. We also made sure our other three kids had a very graphic and detailed description of how babies were made before they were capable of creating one. We weren't interested in any more near miss accidents like Davey's.

Our openness helped the kids communicate with us about nearly everything. David proudly told me the evening he lost his virginity to his girlfriend de jour when he was fourteen. He had listened to our safe sex lessons. She was on the pill and he had used a condom.

Coaching could prove to be an extremely stressful, high intensity way of life. John Schroeder drove himself harder than anyone. My wife insisted I make time every day for my family. I did not get to disappear into the Steelers training center for days on end to prepare for games or the next season.

I accepted my wife's rule. She was right. I took the lesson Coach Paterno taught me years ago about prioritizing my time. I managed to make it fit without killing myself or estranging myself from my family.

John Schroeder didn't do that as well. We could see how worn and drawn he looked by my third season with the Steelers. He soldiered on. John had a minor heart attack near the end of the 2027 season. Zack became acting head coach for the month, until John was medically cleared to return to work. John finished the season but retired shortly after we lost the AFC Championship Game. John's wife Katherine insisted that at 65, John had spent more than enough time coaching. It was time to travel, enjoy life and their grandchildren.

The Rooney family lost no time arranging John's succession. Two days after John retired, Zack Hayes was introduced as the new head coach for the Steelers. I stepped up to be his offensive coordinator.

The team chose Trevon Williams with their first round pick two years ago. This past season was his first season as the full time starting QB. Ed and Trevon made an excellent team. We had picked up some good wide receivers and had guys with speed. Zack and I were ready to unleash on the NFL the offense we had envisioned three years ago.

I was surprised when Zack delegated play calling to me for the next season. I rehearsed during the off-season and was ready when my turn came. Our offense worked just the way we planned. The Steelers ended the season ranked #1 in passing and #3 overall on offense.

I returned to Mile High Stadium for the first time in my fourth season with the Steelers. The Broncos celebrated my return by inducting Brady Rasmussen and me into the Ring of Fame. The Broncos paid for my parents, Penny and my kids to come out to participate in the ceremony. It was a class move by a great organization I still respected... and then I helped my current team go out and trash our hosts 34-21. Hey... that's my job now.

2028 had been a big year for my family. Both Noah and Connor earned starting spots on the Nittany Lions team. Both boys red shirted their freshman years and came out ready to play as red shirt freshmen. Noah was a slot receiver. Connor was a cornerback for the team.

My younger brother Hunter had a pretty good year too. He tried out for the USA Swimming Olympic team. He didn't make it which wasn't really surprising. He hadn't been nationally ranked very long. These Olympic trials were mostly a chance for Hunter to get comfortable with national competition. His soon-to-be college coach felt Hunter would have a much better chance at making the 2032 team. My young brother was heading Stanford in September on a full swimming scholarship.

My brother-in-law, Chris Sanders, was promoted to executive assistant district attorney for Montgomery County, Pa. Liz and Chris met while they were undergrads at Princeton. They planned careers in the law, both attending law school at the University of Pennsylvania. They married just before graduating. Liz worked in private practice for a law firm in West Chester. Liz and Chris had two kids – Madison, born in 2025, and Gabriel, born in 2028.

My brother Will made tenure at Princeton. He was a full-fledged professor of physics at the university. Will and Abby were comfortably settled in the house they purchased in Princeton in 2015, when they moved out of the summer house Penny and I owned in Landenberg. Their family had grown to include Kathryn Rose, born in 2012; Daniel Travis, born in 2015; Charles Lee, born in 2018; Chad Michael, born in 2021; and Mackenzie, born in 2025. Abby worked as a pediatric surgeon at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

My professional life was going well. I loved the work I was doing. I especially loved the end of season brainstorming sessions where Zack, Ed and I sat down and plotted the direction for our offense next season. Ed was very helpful. Zack and I had played in the same systems our entire professional playing careers. Coach Bauder learned Green Bay's West Coast offense from Coach Bauder's time working for Mike Holmgren. My Coach Baldwin had learned his offense from Andy Reid, who in turn was a Mike Holmgren disciple too.

Ed had seen half a dozen different offensive schemes in his nine year career. The coaching churn had not helped my friend's playing career but it definitely helped his coaching career. Zack, Ed and I analyzed various schemes and tried to distill that into a Steelers system that borrowed the best from half a dozen coaching lines.

Our off-season brainstorming paid off as we started the next season. Trevon Williams led the Steelers to a 6-0 record to start our season. Disaster struck when we were down in Baltimore facing the Ravens for the first time that season. One of their defensive linemen rolled up on the back of Trevon's leg, tearing his ACL and MCL.

Zack had taken a chance on our backup QB that season. Our backup from the previous year was a former starter who thought he still should be starting somewhere in the NFL. He left for the chance to start (and big bundle of money). We had a fifth round draft pick out of Iowa and thirty-eight year old journeyman available.

Frankly, the team would have been better off sticking Ed in uniform and sending him out to finish the season, but that wasn't an option. The NFL didn't let coaches switch back to being players. Our choices were the old guy who couldn't complete half the passes in our system or the kid who didn't know $\frac{3}{4}$ of the passes in our system.

We went with the kid, Darius Howard. Ed and I slimmed down our game plans to the point where he could learn them. Through smoke and mirrors, we managed to limp to an 11-5 record and into the playoffs. The Ravens unceremoniously knocked us off in the wild card round that season.

The Steelers fans gave Zack and the team a pass for missing the Super Bowl, though they were getting hungry for another title. I guess my performance had impressed the NFL. I got mentioned as a possible head coach for half a dozen openings. I interviewed with the Titans but did not get the job.

Ed and I spent the off-season teaching Darius our full offense. Trevon Williams rehabbed in Pittsburgh and chose to sit in on the sessions too. By the start of the 2030 season, we had a

starter that was 95% rehabbed and ready to play. His backup knew our offense stone cold now and would be ready if Trevon's knee wasn't ready for action on September 8th.

We went on a tear out of the gate, going 8-0 before dropping a close game to the Dolphins. Trevon got dinged up a couple times and Darius came in and performed flawlessly. We went 7-0 after our only loss. We got a bye in the wild card round of the playoffs and locked up home field advantage throughout the playoffs.

We beat the Patriots 38-13 in our first playoff game. The Ravens beat Denver and Tennessee to force their way into the AFC Championship Game with us. It was our third game that season and the third time wasn't the charm for Baltimore. We won 41-27 to take a berth in the Super Bowl.

We would face the NFL's other behemoth, the Washington Redskins. The Redskins had dominated the NFC, going 14-2 on their way to New Orleans and the Super Bowl. They relied on a nearly impenetrable defense, a dominating run game and superlative special teams. It was an old formula for winning, but it was effective.

The media were billing this game as, 'The unstoppable offense against the immovable defense.' Two of our players that we picked up as free agents had played in the Super Bowl. None of the coaches had coached one before. A few of our front office staff had been around the last time our team went. I did my best to prepare everyone for the circus I remembered from sixteen years earlier when I was there as a rookie.

I suggested to Zack that we minimize our time in New Orleans but the league didn't permit it. To add to the confusion that week, I was named to the Hall of Fame a few days before the game. That added to the media chaos and cost me time that should have been used to help the team prepare. I don't know if the guys spent too much time on Bourbon Street instead of studying the playbooks, but we came out flat to start the game. The Redskins took the opening kickoff for a score. They played keep-away throughout the first half. We were down 17-3 when we came back to the locker room.

Zack gave a short speech about taking advantage of the opportunities we had that day, but I wasn't sure if they listened. Heads were down and guys were looking at the floor instead of each other. I decided to see if I could wake the guys up.

"Coach Hayes, how many Super Bowls did you play in as a player?" I challenged.
"None," Zack answered.

“Coach Fritz, how many did you play in?” I asked.

“None,” Ed answered.

“Coach Shuler, how many did you play in?”

“One,” Mickey replied. “We won and it was great!” My former officemate had won it with the Vikings in 2016. Mickey understood where I was going with my questions. “How many did you play in, Coach Martin?”

“I played in one and lost,” I answered. “Would my Broncos have played harder if they’d known that we wouldn’t get another shot at it? Maybe. We were down at halftime just like you guys are now. Every day I regret my team didn’t pull it out in the second half. We figured after the game that we’d fix the problem next year... or the year after that. It never happened. I’d give anything to win when I had the chance.”

“This is from a guy who just got selected to the Football Hall of Fame,” Zack barked. “You’d give that up for a Super Bowl win, Coach?” I smiled and nodded agreement.

“For many of you here today, this is your ONE shot at winning a Super Bowl,” Zack challenged. “Are you going waste your ONE shot? What are you going to do with it?”

Heads were up again. The guys understood the urgency of our situation. Trevon Williams led the team in a cheer and they stormed out to the field. He led the team down the field for a TD to start the half. We fought and clawed our way back. We were down 27-24 with eight minutes left in the fourth quarter. I did my best with my play calling to make sure we scored AND used as much time doing it as possible.

Trevon did a fantastic job running the offense on the drive. We did it with screens, short passes and draws, but we drove the 80 yard length of the field. The Redskins had been keying too much on our tailback, so I called a fake sweep right. Trevor faked the handoff and drifted away, watching the Redskins defense track and follow our tailback. Trevon watched for a second until the Redskins were committed. He sprinted to the left and danced into the end zone untouched.

1:27 remained on the clock after we kicked the extra point to give ourselves a 31-27 lead. Our kicker put the ball eight yards deep in the end zone. The Redskin’s excellent kick returner ran the ball out anyway. All I could do is watch as he did to my team what I had done so many times to other teams. I yelled to our kicker to get ready for a juke as the returner approached. I doubt

he heard me over the bedlam in the stadium. Our kicker whiffed and the Redskins returner danced into the end zone.

1:09 was left on the clock when we got the ball back after their successful PAT. I expected a blitz from the Redskins' DC [defensive coordinator]. That was their modus operandi all year. I called a screen to capitalize on their defense. The Redskins laid back and played cover instead. The outside linebacker dropped our tailback for a four yard loss. Trevon was flushed from the pocket and forced to throw the ball away on second down. He was sacked on third down. We were reduced to a fourth and 21 yards to go desperation pass. I sent three receivers deep and two short of the down marker.

The Redskins lined up eight d-backs fifteen to twenty-five yards down field and left three pass rushers on the line. My deep guys were blanketed, so Trevon dumped the ball off to Randy Michalski, our tight end, about fifteen yards downfield. Randy rumbled forward but was swarmed by Redskins defenders. They put him down hard three yards short of the down marker.

Two kneel downs took care of the remaining time in the game. The Redskins won 34-31. It was a tough loss to take. The coaches consoled each other that we'd fix the things exposed today and finish the job next year.

I never got the chance. The end of the Super Bowl marked the end of the "hands off" period for me and the other coaches on the Steelers staff. I fielded six calls from team owners trying to hire me to be their head coach. I interviewed with the Chiefs, the Bears and the Eagles. My heart said, 'go to Philly,' but my head said it would be the biggest challenge of the three teams. After much discussion with Penny and my family, I took the Eagles job. The chance to move back to our Landenberg house and live in the Philly area was too tempting to pass up.

Zack and the Steelers allowed me to take one of my assistants with me. Naturally I chose Ed. The quarterback cupboard was bare in Philadelphia and I knew I would need someone to help me coach up whoever I picked in the next draft. I offered Ed the offensive coordinator's spot but he chose to be the quarterbacks coach.

My other key hires were Ryan Reynolds as offensive coordinator and luring Coach Larry Czarwinski out of retirement to coach my defense. Ed and I talked Jeremy North into leaving his beloved Notre Dame and coming to Philly to coach our linebackers. Brendan Hayden came in to coach special teams. I convinced Zane Bell to coach my defensive line. JT Hill would handle the offensive line.

I was glad I convinced Coach C to come out of retirement. The rest of the coaching staff, all in our thirties or early forties, enjoyed teasing him about being the only grown up in the group. He countered that he was just an old fart. C's decades of experience at the college and pro levels was invaluable to the rest of us as we worked to bring the Eagles franchise back to glory.

Our first order of business was evaluating what the team had. That wasn't too hard for Ed and me. The Steelers had played the Eagles twice, once in preseason and again in the regular season. Our quarterback was serviceable, barely. He wasn't going to win us many games. He also had a tendency to toss the ball up under pressure. He had way too many turnovers for my taste. We would need a better ball handler for the next season.

The rest of the players weren't going to be staying around long. There might be four to six of value as we rebuilt the franchise but most would be departing as soon as we could get young, high character guys to replace them. Wholesale roster turnover would make changing the culture and expectations around easier.

The most important task Ed, Ryan and I had was to select our future quarterback from those available in the draft. There were half a dozen good candidates. We studied film, interviewed coaches and attended the Senior Bowl. We were allowed to interview three of our candidates at the Senior Bowl. None impressed us all that much. The team and my staff's future rode on this decision. The fastest way for a coach to get fired was to screw up and take the wrong guy for your franchise quarterback. That kind of mistake could cripple a franchise for a decade.

February 11, 2031 – Novacare Complex, Philadelphia, Pa.

I got a call from my brother Andy about a week before the Combine. "Have you looked at the QB from Cornell, Kyle?" my brother asked.

"Cornell?" I responded, crinkling my nose. "Why would I look at a quarterback from Cornell?"

"I'm not trying to tell you your business, but I think you may want to take a look at this guy," Andy explained. "One of my techs was generating a set of Ivy League teams for our game. You know how those well heeled alumni can be about spending money on things from their alma mater."

"Yeah," I agreed.

"He was concerned that he did something wrong with the profile for this kid, Aiden Anderson," Andy said. "The ratings looked out of whack, at least compared to the rest of the QBs in the Ivy

League. The stats we have say he's 6'-3", 220 pounds, has completed 62.3% of his passes and thrown 1.7% interceptions. His TD/Interception Ratio is 3.9. Does that sound like someone you should be looking at?"

"Yeah... it does," I agreed. "Thanks for the heads up, Andy. Give your sweetie a hug and a kiss for me."

"Will do, Kyle," Andy agreed.

I went on-line and found stats for the Cornell team from the last couple seasons. Anderson's numbers looked impressive. I called Ed into my office. "What do we know about the QB up in Cornell?"

"Nothing," Ed answered.

"Andy came up with some interesting information when his company was doing Ivy League teams," I explained. "This QB from Cornell was through the roof when they rated him."

"We're not staking our coaching careers on a computer game, are we?" Ed asked skeptically.

"No, we're checking out a decent sized quarterback from a smaller school who posted some intriguing numbers," I responded. "What's it cost us to have one of the interns get some film and study this kid further?"

"Not much," Ed admitted.

"Let's keep our interest in this kid quiet, OK?" I suggested.

"You got it, Coach," Ed agreed. He went off to task one of the interns with digging up the info. He came back to me a couple days later.

"Aiden is an Economics major with a 3.89 GPA," Ed reported. "He is minoring in International Trade and Development." He handed me a memo to review.

"He's smart," I commented. "We suspected that. He didn't get into Cornell on his looks or skills with a football. Is he attending the Combine?"

"He is," Ed confirmed.

“We probably won’t get to steal the guy, if he’s any good,” I commented.

“The rest of the teams will do their due diligence on the guy if he shows up at the Combine,” Ed agreed.

“Maybe we try to peel Darius Howard away from the Steelers,” I said. “Do you think Zack would be willing to let him go?”

“Not a chance,” Ed replied, “... now we might be able to get Brandon Evans cheap.” Brandon was the second year, third string quarterback we’d worked with at the Steelers. “I could work with him for a year or so if we decide to start rebuilding with our offensive line. You know how I feel about that.”

“I know,” I agreed. “Protection first and worry about the quarterbacks later. You and Zack both.”

“I feel it in my bones, Kyle,” I responded.

“I know you do,” I said. “I don’t disagree with you. If none of the QBs this year are the guy we want, we go o-line.”

“It’s one way to go,” Ed agreed.

My perspective at the NFL Combine was a little different even though this was my eighth time there, nine if you count my visit as a player. This year I was a decision maker, not just someone supporting the process. Troy Vincent, president of our team, attended, along with our VP for Football Operations, Matt Lurie.

Troy Vincent was an Eagles player I cheered for when I was a kid. He worked as an executive for the NFLPA, the NFL and the Eagles steadily since he retired from playing. I had known him from NFLPA dealings with the league. Troy made a great boss.

Matt Lurie, team owner’s son, was impressive. He was a couple years younger than me. Matt didn’t get his VP’s job strictly through nepotism. He started out after college doing scutwork in the scouting department. He was promoted through the ranks as he proved himself and his capabilities as a football man. One of these years he would be taking over the team from his nearly eighty year old father.

Troy, Matt and I had equal say in the drafting decisions. Troy and Matt didn't sit in on many interviews with potential draftees. They networked with other team executives and watched the workouts.

Ed, Ryan and I came away unimpressed with most of the highly touted quarterback candidates. Aiden Anderson did impress us when we interviewed him. He was smart, engaging, knew football and displayed great enthusiasm. His workouts weren't quite as good. He ran a 4.93 second 40 yard dash. That was a lineman kind of time. His throwing mechanics looked awkward.

"I can fix that," Ed commented as we sat in the stands watching the workout.

"You're going to risk a high pick on being able to fix THAT delivery?" Ryan asked skeptically. "I think we go with one of the big tackles with the first pick."

"I agree," I added. "We are not using our first pick to take Anderson. We can get that big tackle to shore up the line with the first pick. We can take Anderson with our third or fourth round pick. I don't think he's shown the rest of the league enough to get him taken with a high pick."

"Probably right," Ed agreed. "That would make picking up Anderson a low risk, potentially high reward pick."

We had some excellent interviews with offensive linemen. Two of the candidates blew our socks off. We had the fifth pick in the draft, so we had an excellent chance of getting one of them.

The team managed to attract and sign free agent Marques Williams, a four year veteran of the Indianapolis Colts. Marques was an excellent young offensive tackle. JT Hill was excited to have someone his caliber on his offensive line. Marques chose us over other teams for two reasons: 1) Troy Vincent and the Luries offered him a boatload of money and 2) he grew up in Trenton, rooting for the Eagles. We were lucky to land him. That was one less position I'd have to worry about.

My team passed on Cornell's Pro Day, such as it was. Yes, they do occasionally send players to the NFL. Ed, Ryan and I wanted to work out Aiden Anderson somewhere totally off the NFL radar. We scheduled a private workout at a high school over in Corning, through my contact

there – one Gary Harrison. Gary was a football booster in town and volunteered as a coach for the football team during summer training camps.

Ryan and Ed instructed Aiden as he threw balls to Gary and me. I'm sure we were a sight – two middle aged men catching passes from the twenty-two year old kid on an empty high school field on cold, clear winter morning. I noticed as the workout went on that the balls came in crisper and more on target. That was an excellent sign.

I thanked Gary for helping out when we finished. He headed for campus. I huddled with Ryan, Ed and Aiden.

“Coach Martin, it was an honor to throw passes to a Hall of Fame receiver,” Aiden said when we met up. “Who is Mr. Harrison? He seemed pretty sharp for... uh...”

“...an old guy,” I answered. “Gary was all-state as a tight end in high school. He played at Boston College for four years. He wasn't fast enough to be a wide receiver and wasn't big enough to be a tight end professionally.”

“He looked pretty good to me,” Aiden responded.

“We appreciate you coming down here to Corning to work out with us,” I said. “Someone from the team will be in touch if we have any further questions for you.”

Ryan, Ed and I waited to discuss Aiden further until we were in the car and heading back to Philly.

“What's your evaluation, Ed?” Ryan asked as Ed turned onto I-86 to head for Binghamton.

“I like him,” Ed answered. “He's coachable. Did you see how he adjusted his delivery when you and I gave him suggestions?”

“I noticed that too,” I commented. “The balls I caught at the end of the workout were much better than at the beginning of the workout.”

“Do you think he's the guy long term?” Ryan asked. “Is he the one we're looking for?”

“Maybe,” I allowed. “I think we can get him cheap. If he doesn't become ‘the guy,’ we can use him as a backup. I'm not worried about him learning our offense. He's got the brains for that. Hopefully he stays under the radar with the rest of the league.”

We used our first round pick to take DeV Vaughn Johnston, the excellent offensive tackle from the University of Alabama. Larry Czarwinski got a big defensive tackle to coach up with our second pick. I grabbed the best available running back with our third pick. We worked a draft day trade with the Steelers. We sent them our starting left cornerback for their fourth pick and Brandon Evans, the Steelers' third string QB.

We grabbed a tall but very raw cornerback named Marcus Davis from Hawaii with our first fourth round pick. The second fourth pick, compliments of the Steelers, was used to take Cornell's Aiden Anderson.

I got rid of a team problem when I shipped our old cornerback out to Pittsburgh. He quit on his last coach as the season went down the drain. I was told he was disruptive in the locker room and a general pain in the ass.

The trade neatly solved my short term and long term problems at quarterback. I hadn't snookered Zack Hayes or my old team. They got a good cornerback that needed strong team leaders to set him straight. The Steelers had that and the Eagles didn't... at least not yet. I took a third string quarterback from them that was never, ever going to start in anything but the direst emergencies. He'd get a chance to start in the NFL for a year or so and he'd get paid like a starter for that time.

Brandon knew our offense, so that would be one less person making mistakes executing the Steelers based offense we were installing. I would have Ed and Ryan spend extra time with Aiden this season. By the end of the season we should know if he had what we wanted for our long term QB or not.

I tried to grab a certain wide receiver and cornerback late in the draft. The Vikings grabbed my nephew Noah, a wide receiver, a round before I planned to take him. Tampa Bay took Connor too before I could get him. It was probably best for the boys. If they played for me they'd never know if they earned a spot on the team because of their talent or because I was playing favorites when I played them.

I knew my first season was going to try my patience. I had winning seasons throughout my career – high school, college, playing with the Broncos and coaching with the Steelers. The

team went 3-13 last season and I proposed to gut that team and bring in a bunch of young kids and free agents no one else wanted. My head told me we were going to lose big as we started rebuilding.

My staff and I spent a lot of time teaching the players what we expected. It was good that I was trained in teaching. The guys made some progress through OTA's and mini-camps. I got a break from work for a week in July when my extended family went down to the shore.

Mom, Dad, my brothers and sister, spouses and all the kids headed for Rehoboth Beach. We had been doing this family trip for eight summers, since Will and Abby quit working at scout camp. Mid-July was the only time we could gather the whole family without conflicting with someone's sports, school or work schedule.

My experiences with training camps before I joined the Eagles was mixed. The Broncos always stayed at their permanent facility for training camp. The players went home each night. The Steelers always headed to Latrobe and lived together for three weeks. The team felt it promoted bonding between the players. The Eagles had gone to camp at Lehigh University in the past. I decided to let things as they were for the first training camp.

A few days into training camp I had to turn the team over to Coach C while I made a trip to Canton, Ohio. I asked Coach Burton to be my presenter for the Hall of Fame ceremonies. My mentor looked good, even at sixty-six. The bright red hair I remembered from my youth was now totally white. The bushy mustache had grown into a full beard, also white. I quizzed him about his future plans. He allowed that he had a few more good years of coaching in him before he retired. He figured three or four seasons would be enough and then he and Betty could do the travelling they had talked about for half a lifetime.

I was moved almost to tears as they put the yellow jacket on me. I managed to give a brief speech thanking the many people who helped me to get to this spot. I noted that I doubted my second place position on the career receiving list would stand. A couple current players were closing in on my 1,178 catches. Records were meant to be broken, though I doubted anyone would ever surpass Jerry Rice.

I headed back to Allentown after the ceremonies and got back to work molding a team. A lot of veterans from the previous year's Eagles team got cut during training camp. My message was that I expected more of the players than what was expected last season.

We went 0-4 in preseason. The last cut downs were tough to make. The kids I was letting go worked their hearts out to make the team. I ended up with a team made of ten vets from last year's team and 43 new members. We were the youngest team in the league by almost a year.

We went 1-7 to start the season. The only team we beat was the sad sack Bengals, who were even worse than our team last season. I gave the team the whole bye week off. They were to go home and forget about football. I remembered how much it helped me recharge my batteries when I was a player.

Maybe the time off helped. The team came back and upset heavily favored Dallas at Lincoln Financial Field. It was a great win but it did not presage a resurgence by my team. We lost the next three games.

I could see improvement in the team as the season progressed. We managed a split in the final four games, winning two and losing two. I was most proud of our last game, against the world champion Washington Redskins. We beat them 31-20. I will admit they had less interest in the result of the game than my team.

The Redskins had already locked up a first round bye and home field advantage in the playoffs before the game started. They did play their starters at the beginning of the game, but pulled them in the second quarter when they saw how fired up my guys were. My guys were flying around the field, hitting and making great plays. This game was as close to the playoffs as we were going to get.

I unveiled Aiden Anderson in the second half of the game. He made smart decisions, didn't turn the ball over, managed the blitzes the Redskins showed him and threw two touchdowns. We had ourselves a quarterback.

The crowd at the Linc had a good time. They cheered their Eagles and enjoyed seeing the Redskins put down, for once. A 4-12 season isn't good, but we did manage to end on a high note. It was a promise of things to come.

My nephew Noah had a good season with the Vikings. He wasn't a starter but went in frequently. He made 32 catches for 452 yards and 6 touchdowns. It was a good start. Connor was pressed into service as the nickel back for the Buccaneers. He played OK. He allowed three big TDs during the season. He also lost three weeks when he got a concussion trying to stop the Redskins' oversized, 260 pounds fullback.

Connor married his high school sweetheart after he finished his last game of his first professional season. Lauren Gerlach and my nephew had dated and gone steady since ninth grade. Lauren chose to go to Penn State too, though not just because Connor went there. Both her parents were Penn Staters too.

My brother Hunter continued to excel at swimming and in class at Stanford. He got a bronze in the 200 meter medley and a silver in the 200 meter breaststroke at nationals in December, 2031. Hunter graduated from Stanford with a bachelors in economics in the middle of the following June. He went straight from college to the Olympic trials, where he did not do as well as the previous winter. My brother missed out on a spot on the U.S. Olympic team by 0.02 seconds on the breast stroke, his best event. He headed home to Pennsylvania to work for Dad and to continue training. He was determined to give the Olympics a real shot the next time around.

We had a good draft my second season with the Eagles. I picked up that big, speedy receiver everyone knew I coveted. I got a couple good defensive linemen and a linebacker to keep Coach C's defense improving. We bagged another free agent offensive lineman to get JT's unit better too.

Aiden Anderson beat out Brandon Evans for the starting QB job in training camp. Our team went on a tear to start my second season, winning its first four games. We cooled down some. Mistakes were to be expected from a team as young as ours. The guys were enthusiastic and flew around the field. We made the playoffs as a wildcard with a 10-6 record but were unceremoniously dumped by a strong Bears team.

Ed, Jeremy and I tried to explain to our team how the tempo picked up in a game once you reached the playoffs but they didn't understand. The loss to the Bears stung, but it provided my team with a valuable lesson. We'd come back better and smarter after that.

Aiden Anderson was recognized as a rising star in the league. He wasn't selected to go to the Pro Bowl, but went as an alternate when a couple guys ahead of him dropped out. It was a good omen for the young man. Ed, Ryan and I knew we had the quarterback that could take the team all the way.

Every year my team improved and came closer to our goal of winning a Super Bowl. The Luries and the Philadelphia fans were great at supporting us. We went 11-5 my third season and won a wildcard playoff game before going home.

My Eagles were noted as one of the offensive powerhouses in the NFL. Ryan Reynolds got two interviews to be a head coach but didn't get either job. I had a heart to heart talk with Ed. The next time he was offered the offensive coordinator job, he damn well better take it. I asked Ryan to involve Ed more in play calling and planning, to get him ready for the almost inevitable day Ryan got his head coaching job.

I had one other significant staff loss before our 2033 season. Coach Larry Czarwinski turned seventy. He and his wife, Katherine, decided it was time for him to retire. C recommended that Jeremy take over as defensive coordinator. I had already planned on that transition at some point in time when C was done.

We were 12-4 in my fourth season and won our division. We faced the Redskins in our divisional playoff game. People were going down all the time with injuries as the two teams bashed and pounded each other. It was bloody but we won, but at too high a cost. The Vikings kicked our asses in the NFC Championship game. It was bittersweet to see my nephew Noah run wild though my battered secondary. The Vikings' run ended two weeks later when Zack Hayes' Steelers beat them in Super Bowl LXIX, using the high powered offense Ed and I helped him install.

Noah's career had taken off. He made the Pro Bowl after the 2034 season. It was a treat to finally coach my nephew when my team's coaching staff was called on to coach the Pro Bowl after we lost the bid to go to the Super Bowl.

Connor did not do as well as his brother. He was an aggressive tackler and worked hard at run support. It wasn't the best thing for his health. He suffered his third concussion in the 2034 season. Lauren convinced Connor it was time to retire and take up coaching, as he had planned since he was sixteen. It may have been nepotism, but I hired him as a defensive quality control coach.

The Rams hired Ryan Reynolds as their head coach between the time we lost the NFC Championship Game and the Pro Bowl. I promoted Ed to be offensive coordinator. I hired Ryan Williamson to coach our quarterbacks. I knew Ryan from my early days with the Broncos.

Ryan had made our practice squad when we were rookies. The Buccaneers had scooped him up halfway through our first season when they ran short on QBs. Ryan bounced around the NFL for a few years, learning his trade but never getting a chance to start. He went into coaching with the University of Cincinnati and later rising to offensive coordinator at Central Michigan. He contacted me a couple years earlier to see if I had any openings. He wanted to get into the pro

game. I didn't then but I promised to keep him in mind for the future. Ryan compiled a good record at both colleges, so I hired him when I had a need.

Pundits rated my Eagles team the best in the NFC East as preseason approached in 2035. Ed had a year in as my offensive coordinator. Jeremy had two as my defensive coordinator. Aiden Anderson was twenty-seven, and beginning his prime as an NFL quarterback. We had some studs on defense. We had speed on offense.

Ed, Aiden, Ryan Williamson and I had spent significant time off season developing a fast break version of our offense. Aiden had the arm and experience now to call some plays on the line of scrimmage. He had the brains to do it well.

The league was not ready for what we unleashed when the season started. We buried them with an offensive avalanche. We went 14-2 in the season, losing a close one to the Redskins early in the season and losing a fluke game to Seattle in the last game of the season. We had home field and the first round bye wrapped up as December started.

We dispatched the aging Redskins in the divisional round of the playoffs. My nephew, Noah's Vikings were harder to beat, but we sent them home too, to capture a berth in Super Bowl LXX in Phoenix.

My family enjoyed the move to Landenberg when the Eagles hired me. Penny took a job at New Bolton Center when we moved "home." She loved working with the large animals there. Jessie got to reunite with her summer friend who lived next door to our house. We had spent most of July in Landenberg each year since the kids were little.

Danny didn't mind the move too much. He was a year short of finishing middle school in Pittsburgh and would be dealing with a whole new group of friends anyway when he started high school. The Avon Grove High School had a well-regarded football team, so he was fine with coming east.

Robbie, my six year old at the time of the move, loved the idea of moving to the country. He loved to play in the creek at the bottom of our property. He loved the large pool we had built inside the old barn ruins. He thought he died and went to heaven when we moved into the big old stone farmhouse.

My eldest son was the lone holdout for staying Pittsburgh. David, not Davey anymore, would absolutely die without his girlfriend du jour. His good looks and charm got him into bed with a quite a few girls before I took the job in Philadelphia. David came east with the rest of the family under extreme protest.

David found out what romance really was when we moved back to our house in Landenberg. He found “the girl” as a junior in high school. David and Sara Baker dated through the rest of high school and into college. Both teens chose to go to Penny’s alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania.

David and Sara announced this past Christmas day that they did not wish to wait until after they graduate in the spring to get married. They wanted to marry as soon as my season was over. We settled on the last Saturday in February for the wedding. The kids had been sharing an off-campus apartment throughout their senior year, so a wedding wasn’t a huge surprise.

David and Sara revealed why they didn’t want to wait a couple weeks later. It turned out that David took after me a little too much. Sara was expecting. Penny and I would be grandparents in six months. He became the third generation of Martin men to jump the gun with his bride to be. Our first grandchild would be a happy accident just like I was and David was.

David took after me in another way. He loved running. He never was terribly interested in football, but he went out for track in school. He developed into an excellent sprinter. He went to the state finals twice in high school. He broke the twenty-three year old 100 meter sprint record when he was a senior by 0.05 seconds. I was delighted to cede my record to my son.

David attended Penn on a track scholarship. He hoped that his senior college season would get him an invitation to the Olympic try-outs. I believe his dedication and drive would get him there. Wouldn’t it be amazing if Hunter and David both made the U. S. team?

We searched out the Boy Scouting opportunities for my family when we moved back east. We found six scout troops within a few miles of our home. David and Danny chose the troop in New London after we visited all of them. Robbie joined the Cub Pack associated with that troop.

Jessie had tried and disliked Girl Scouts back in Pittsburgh and wasn’t interested in checking out the local troops. That changed in the fall when she started high school. The girls who became her two closest friends, Emily Morgan and Lily Price, were in a Venturer Crew in Avondale. Jessie tried a couple meetings and was sold. She convinced her big brother to try out Venturers too.

Before I knew what was happening, David, Jessie and I were signed up for a trek at the Philmont Scout Ranch the following summer. The trip was from June 27th to July 10th, so the trip fit into my tight work schedule. Two weeks of backpacking the mountains in New Mexico was a tremendous experience. It was especially good spending two weeks with my son and daughter.

Penny and I turned the crew onto Algonquin Provincial Park. The crew headed north the following summer. Jessie loved the wilderness trip.

Danny took to scouting just like his older brother had. Danny was different from David in many ways, none more than their attitude towards football. David played but without great enthusiasm. Danny loved football with a passion. He started as a junior pee-wee in third grade and played ever since. By middle school my son had settled in at defensive back and wide receiver, much like I had.

Robbie insisted on starting football as a mighty-mite when he was in second grade. Robbie had a strong personality, undoubtedly from dealing with three older siblings. His coaches tried him at quarterback and he thrived. I'm sure some coaching from his "Uncle" Ed helped too.

Jessie played soccer throughout middle school and high school. She was accomplished enough a player that she probably could have gotten a scholarship somewhere. She wasn't interested in sports in college. My daughter had her heart set on becoming a doctor like her Aunt Abby. She followed David to the University of Pennsylvania two years after her brother arrived.

Danny excelled at football and drew the attention of the Avon Grove head coach, an old friend of mine. Jake Meyer had been a standout tailback for the Red Devils and I knew him from his recruiting visits to Penn State and the brief overlap of our college careers. Jake did well in college and managed a couple years in the NFL but he never made it big.

Jake found a job teaching and coaching football in central Pennsylvania after his playing career was over. He met an old friend of his father's when he came back to West Grove for his father's funeral. The friend happened to be on the school board. The district was looking for a physical teacher and football coach. It didn't take long for the district to consummate a deal with Jake.

Jake turned the Red Devils into one of the best teams in southern Chester County. My son, who had spent his life in locker rooms hearing about the high powered Broncos, Steelers and then Eagles' offenses, took to Jake's Bob Burton inspired offense.

Danny was 6’-3” by the time he graduated, nearly as fast as his brother David, and could hit like freight train on defense. Major colleges started inviting my son to their summer camps when he was fifteen. He was a hot commodity by the time he finished his junior season. He whittled down his college choices to Penn State, Ohio State, Michigan, Notre Dame and Virginia Tech.

Penny and I went on unofficial visits to all the campuses during my off season. I never pushed or made a recommendation. My son chose Penn State over the others on his own. I don’t doubt the fact that his cousins Noah and Connor and I had all attended that college helped him make that decision. He announced his intent to play at Penn State last spring, just before he finished his junior year of high school. He and I will sign his official letter of intent next Wednesday, a few days after the Super Bowl.

“Hey, Coach! You ready to start the ceremony?” a voice demanded. I shook my head to clear my brains from my reverie and return it to the present.

“Yeah, Jay... I’m ready,” I announced to my good friend Jay Nicholson. I was glad Fox was broadcasting the Super Bowl this season. Having Jay and his partner, Brian Wright, broadcasting the game was poetic, at least for me and the other Penn Staters on my staff.

Jay was waving for me from atop the podium they erected a few minutes earlier in the middle of the University of Phoenix field. NFL Commissioner Michael Beckwith was on stage too. I turned to assist Jeffrey Lurie, the owner of the Eagles.

Mr. Lurie was eighty-four years old and was not in the best of health. He hobbled with a cane as I steadied him on one side. Matt Lurie, his son and the team’s VP for Football, steadied him from the other side. Troy Vincent, team president, climbed the steps to the stage ahead of us.

We lined up beside Jay and Commissioner Beckwith. “Please welcome the Super Bowl XXXIII MVP from the Denver Broncos, Mr. John Elway, to present the Vince Lombardi Trophy,” the PA system announcer intoned.

Trumpet fanfare played as John made his way through two lines of my Eagles players, carrying the Lombardi trophy to the stage. My players patted John on the back and touched their trophy as it went by. He carried it up the steps and stood beside Jay.

“What a great Super Bowl LXX,” Jay announced to the crowd and the TV viewers. “I want to congratulate the Philadelphia Eagles for a tremendous game.”

“Thank you, Jason,” John said. He gave the cameras a big smile and turned to face our commissioner. “Mike, here’s the Lombardi Trophy. I want to extend my congratulations to the Luries, Troy Vincent and of course, my good friend Kyle Martin for the tremendous show their team put on this evening.” John handed the trophy over to Commissioner Beckwith.

“Here to present the Lombardi Trophy is Commissioner Michael Beckwith,” Jay announced.

“I want to thank both football teams for a tremendous game and providing fans with wonderful finale to the season,” Commissioner Beckwith said as he accepted the big, silvery trophy. “On behalf of the NFL, I present this trophy to the Philadelphia Eagles and their owner, Jeffrey Lurie. This is well deserved.” Mike handed the trophy over to Mr. Lurie, who immediately passed it on to his son Matt.

“This trophy recognizes the tremendous work done by our team president, Troy Vincent, and my son, Matthew Lurie, our vice president for football operations,” Mr. Lurie croaked quietly.

“Matt did a great job putting the personnel together for this team,” Troy said as he took the trophy. He held it briefly before handing it to Matt. “You’ve shown yourself to be a true football man.”

“Thank you, Troy,” Matt said. He waved the trophy over his head. “This one is for you Philly. It’s been a long time coming!” The contingent of Philadelphia fans let out a big cheer. “The biggest credit for this win has to go to the man who turned this collection of individuals into a football team – Coach Kyle Martin.” Matt handed the trophy to me. “You’ve done a sensational job over the past five years. On behalf of my dad and me, I want to thank you for the job you’ve done.”

“How’s it feel, Kyle?” Jay asked, on air.

“Tremendous!” I gushed. “I want to thank Mr. Lurie, Troy, Matt and the rest of the front office for all the support they have given this team. I want to thank my coaching staff for the outstanding job they have done. Most of all, I want to thank the players for their efforts. Vince Lombardi said it best, ‘I firmly believe that any man's finest hour, the greatest fulfillment of all that he holds dear, is that moment when he has worked his heart out in a good cause and lies exhausted on the field of battle - victorious.’

“These players worked their hearts out,” I declared as I handed the trophy off to Aiden Anderson, “... and they’re victorious!” Aiden gave me a one handed hug as he waved the trophy to the rest of his team.

“Thanks, Coach,” Aiden whispered into my ear. “This is all due to you.” My quest of half a lifetime to be a champion was finally achieved.

The End

December 13, 2011

Boy, I never imagined it would take four years to complete this story. I want to thank my editors, BlackIrish and CouldBeWorse, for their help with various parts of the story. They have greatly improved the quality of the story. X of Dallas was invaluable researching NFL and legal topics for me and keeping the story real. He also assisted me with the statistics through much of the story. This is a much better, closer to reality story thanks to X’s help.

I appreciate all the comments readers have sent me over the past four years. I have read every one of them. I have not been able to respond to every single one, due to the volume of responses. I felt it more important to keep writing, so the story would be complete. I will respond to every comment, in time. Thank you every one for reading. I hope you enjoyed my tale.

Douglas Fox