

The new orleans saints: taking their city back



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

February 7th, 2010. Super Bowl XLIV. Four years post Hurricane Katrina. As smoke cleared from "The Who" halftime concert, Thomas Morstead, the kicker for the New Orleans Saints, set to kick the ball off to the Indianapolis Colts to start the third quarter. With the Saints down 10 to 6, and Indianapolis's Chad Simpson standing in his own end zone ready to return the kick off, Saints Head Coach, Sean Payton, called one of the gutsiest plays in the super bowl era of football. Thomas Morstead standing at his own 30 yard line executed the only on-side kick before the fourth quarter in NFL history.

The ball traveled 15 yards before being touched by Hank Basket, an Indianapolis Colts player, who could not make a clean recovery. The ball ended up at the bottom of a pile of bodies all fighting for it. It took over a minute for the officials to clear bodies out of the pile and determine who definitively recovered the on-side kick. Chris Reis, a safety for the New Orleans Saints, came out of the pile victorious. The Saints would subsequently score a touchdown, taking their first lead of the game. This play in many ways parallels the New Orleans area after Hurricane Katrina.

It took courage, fortitude, determination, help, and luck, all characteristics of the American Identity, to rebuild New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. All of these identities can be found in this play. Sean Payton had the courage to call an on-side kick, just as the people of New Orleans had the courage to repair a city that most outsiders had deemed unlivable post-Hurricane Katrina. The New Orleans Saints players had the fortitude and determination to carry out the on-side kick, just as the New Orleans inhabitants had the

fortitude and determination to rebuild their homes, and businesses after Katrina.

And the New Orleans Saints were helped by the inability by the Colts to, and were simply lucky to, recover the ball after the on-side kick, just as the people of New Orleans needed help and a little bit of luck to recover from one of the worst natural disasters ever to hit the United States. In 2005 Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast, destroying homes, families, and lives. The hardest hit was southern Louisiana, especially New Orleans, and the Lower Ninth Ward, both of which sit 5 to 15 feet below sea level.

In addition to the category 3 hurricane bearing down on New Orleans and the Lower Ninth Ward the levees, built to withstand category 5 plus wind speeds, failed and released the Mississippi river. The destruction caused by hurricane Katrina exceeded anything anyone had ever expected. People around the country sent anything they could, but many doubted that New Orleans would ever recover. The economy crippled, businesses destroyed, homes completely leveled, loved ones missing; the question reverberated throughout the entire nation- how could New Orleans ever recover?

New Orleans was a ghost town, with no hope and no spirit. But in 2006, the New Orleans Saints gave this town a new sense of hope, and a reason to cheer. The New Orleans Saints helped to instill a new found sense of the American identity back into their city, just as the people of New Orleans helped to instill the same American identity in the Saints organization. The American Identity can take many different forms, and contains many

different ideals and characteristics. The ideals of the American Identity could be love, courage, companionship, strength and many others.

However, for a city, New Orleans, in complete chaos and absolute destruction the ideals of the American identity were practically nonexistent. In the months following Hurricane Katrina the spirit of the New Orleans citizens deteriorated into a core of disaster. The New Orleans Superdome, once a great beacon of pride, became the site of murders and rapes; mass looting occurred throughout the city, and lawlessness became a standard. The question of how New Orleans would recover rang in the minds of the people of New Orleans and across the nation.

As the world seemed to be crumbling around a city, the New Orleans Saints organization returned to the city, and faced the same reality that everyone in New Orleans was already facing. The Saint coming off of a three win, thirteen loss season needed to rebuild a team just as the city needed to try to rebuild something that seemed lost. Going into the 2006 season the Saints needed dozens of new coaches, including a head coach, a quarterback, and position players. However, the recruiting ability of the New Orleans Saints was at an all-time low. The people who ended up signing with the Saints were either crazy or had very few other options.

They signed Sean Payton as head coach, and the most important signing was Drew Brees. Drew Brees had previously played for the San Diego Chargers, and had sustained a possibly career ending injury to his shoulder the year before. The Saints team in 2006 was expected to fail miserably, and possibly leave New Orleans. Their team consisted of broken down, injured, and old

players. The teams, along with their fans were down as far as the American spirit and American identity could go. But the culture of the New Orleans Saints changed.

The Saints rallied around their situation, and the hardships that the city was facing. And a team that was expected to fall flat rejuvenated a city. They reinstalled a sense of normalcy and created a new pride in New Orleans. The New Orleans Saints saved the city of New Orleans in the eighteen months following Hurricane Katrina. " In those months after Katrina, the team stood out like a beacon. "(Payton137) The city of New Orleans and the New Orleans Saints have a relationship unlike any other in sports. " Wins and losses aren't just felt on the field and by the 53 guys on the roster but by everybody in town.

There is a correlation between the success of the Saints and the success of the city unlike any other I've seen. "(Lagasse1) The love that the city of New Orleans has for the Saints and the players is unparalleled. The connection between the people of New Orleans and the Saints goes beyond the typical relationship between city and sports team. " Saints football is the heart and soul of the city. "(Layden1) Because of this unique relationship, the New Orleans Saints were able to instill a new sense of the American Identity into the city of New Orleans.

The themes that characterized this unique American Identity were reinstallation of hope, restoration of pride, the power of adversity, neighborliness, charity, community, and compassion. With these characteristics of the American Identity the New Orleans Saints helped to

save their city. I will argue that the New Orleans Saints helped to reinstall the American Identity in New Orleans by focusing on two of the major years for New Orleans, 2006 the year after Hurricane Katrina destroyed the city, and 2009 the year the New Orleans Saints won the Super Bowl, giving the city the greatest celebration and completing their comeback from destruction.

Many people have written about New Orleans in the years after Katrina, but two of the most prominent figures that support my argument are Sean Payton, the head coach the New Orleans Saints, and Drew Brees, the quarterback of the New Orleans Saints, both of whom came to New Orleans in 2006, the year after Katrina and the lowest time in New Orleans history. “The Saints and New Orleans proved to the world that neither one of us had given up” (Payton137). The New Orleans Saints reinstalled hope, restored pride, and used the power of adversity to promote the American Identity in the city of New Orleans.

The New Orleans area has always had a certain pride in their city. New Orleans is also seen as a major party town, with event such as Mardi Gras. Mardi Gras is a huge celebration with weeks of parades that lead up to an even more gigantic parade that runs throughout New Orleans and the French-Quarter, characterized by the colors green, purple, and yellow. It is also a major economic boost to the city, bringing millions of dollars into their economy. A celebration in New Orleans is unlike any other on earth. The sights, sounds, and ideas of New Orleans scream joy, excitement, and celebration.

In 2005, when Hurricane Katrina hit Louisiana the celebration stopped. When the winds dissipated, and the flood waters receded, the damages were estimated at \$110 billion. The New Orleans area lost their will to hope, had lost all pride, and no one gave the area a fighting chance to rebuild. The majority of 2006 was a loss. Some areas that were least effected by the Hurricane and flooding rebuilt, but the majority didn't. As Sean Payton recalls, as he was driving around New Orleans, " There were pockets of hope, for sure. But not nearly enough of them."(Payton 137)

As 2006 turned to fall, a year after Katrina, the spirit of New Orleans was still broken and low, just as the expectations for the New Orleans Saints were nonexistent. However, 2006 was a year of beating expectations and winning in the face of daunting odds for the New Orleans Saints and the city of New Orleans. " 2006 was a year of hope. " (Payton138) " In the midst of upheaval, the 2006 Saints help a special place in people's hearts. You could take them away from their neighborhoods, and dunk their city under twelve feet of water, but you couldn't take away the love they had for their team.

It was a bond that couldn't be broken. "(Brees146) The people of New Orleans clung to the Saints as the beacon of light in a dark and forgotten place. Whether the Saints flushed and exceeded the odds set for them, or they simply met expectations; the city of New Orleans was merely happy they were there. The New Orleans Saints played their first home game in the Louisiana Superdome on September 25th, 2006, against their division rival the Atlanta Falcons. Before Hurricane Katrina, the Dome was seen a symbol of pride.

The Superdome filled to capacity for football games, and concerts, and was always ready for celebration. But only thirteen months earlier, the Superdome was a place of refuge, the sites of murders and rapes. People who decided to stay in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina were taken to the Superdome for safety. Only thirteen months earlier the Dome had been deglorified and the pride removed. The Saints had to “chase the ghosts away” from the Superdome. The unsaintly past of the Superdome needed to be fixed, and the New Orleans Saints were back in New Orleans to do just that.

“The walls (of the Superdome) held the echoes of what this city had come through already and where it hoped to end up.” (Brees154) After fifty-six weeks football was back in New Orleans. Was it ridiculous to hope that the city of New Orleans was also coming back to life? The game was sold out, in a time when people were struggling to survive, the season tickets to New Orleans Saints football games were sold out. The Superdome shook from the roar of the crowd, New Orleans was celebrating again, before the game even started.

On the fourth play of the game the Saints rushed eight players at the Atlanta punter and Saints special teams' player, Steve Gleason, blocked the punt, it was recovered by the Saints' Curtis Deloatch for a touchdown, and the Superdome erupted. Football was back in New Orleans, and if only for a little while, that was all that mattered. The Saints went on to win the game easily, 23-3. As the fans walked out of the Superdome they left with the glimmer of possibility. If the Saints could do this, maybe the city could too.

The people of New Orleans were given the ultimate excuse to give up. “ When you’ve been beaten down, and beaten down some more, human nature tells you that it’s not worth it to try to get up again. You might as well stay down, because if you struggle to your feet you’re going to get whacked. ”(Brees149) However, instead of the crumbling under the immense pressure of hard times, the people of New Orleans found hope in a football team. The Saints played the entire season for the people of New Orleans. In some small way, it was their contribution of hope.

Drew Brees, the quarterback for the Saints, believed that for this season that “ if playing this game with all the fire and passion in our hearts can give something to this city we are going to lay it all on the line. ” The Saints fans identified with the team. And with the connection, the fans latched on to some hope and pride; Hope for a better future and pride in a city that was going to rebuild, and be better than before. The people of New Orleans looked to the Saints as a symbol of Hope, as something to lift their spirits during the trying times.

The Saints represented the struggles everyone in New Orleans was facing. If the Saints could win, then maybe they could overcome the suffering Hurricane Katrina had created. An ever stronger bond was beginning to form between the fans and the Saints, and it would carry them both, the Saints and the fans, to a place they had only dreamed of. If 2006 was a season of hope, 2009 was a year of jubilation. In 2009, expectations had fallen off for the Saints since the 2006 season. They were projected to finish nineteenth in the league. However, the Saints were still supported by their fans.

What many believed they saw on the outside was not what the Saints truly were on the inside. The Saints played inspired football. In four years they went from hurricane battered football team with an unsure future, to a football team that inspired hope in a city when they truly needed it, to a Super Bowl contender. The Saints blew past 'expert's' projection. And twelve weeks into the season were undefeated, 11-0. The New Orleans are had something to celebrate, and not just a winning football team. In the four years after Hurricane Katrina people around the country wrote New Orleans off as a lost cause.

And now, in 2009, the New Orleans area was surviving, was rebuilding, had hope, and pride. Instead of falling to the adversity blew upon them, they used it as a spring board; they took the negative and threw it back in their faces. New Orleans showed the naysayers how wrong they truly were. This all culminated in 2009. A city and a team that was broken, beaten, lost, and left without hope or pride four years earlier, was in the Super Bowl. And as the team played, the pride in New Orleans grew. And when the Saints were handed the Lombardi trophy, not only did a team win, but a city as well.

A city that was written off as drowned, was now world champions. When the Saints arrived back in New Orleans 20, 000 New Orleans Saints fans were at the airport to welcome them home. The biggest party in New Orleans history was underway, a Super Bowl parade mixed with Mardi Gras; the celebration New Orleans had been waiting for. They weren't just celebrating a Super Bowl victory; they were celebrating a city bouncing back. " When you win a championship together, you walk together forever. "(King1) The Rams can

be relocated, the Raiders moved, even the Dodgers and baseball Giants taken away from a city.

But the New Orleans Saints can never, and will never be take away from New Orleans. The New Orleans Saints mean so much more to New Orleans than simply a football team. As Americans neighborliness is innate; when family, friends, neighbors, or relative strangers go through hard time it is in the American culture to try to lend a hand in any way we can. The New Orleans Saints did more for a city than simply boost morale. They donated money, time, effort, and labor into rebuilding their hometown. The New Orleans Saints helped their community through hundreds of projects, both larger scale and small.

Drew Brees created the Brees Dream Foundation, and has currently raised and personally pledges over \$11 million, and opened 3 different charter schools in Louisiana. Sean Payton created Payton's Play it Forward Foundation, which focuses on improving the lives of children and their families across the Gulf Coast region. The New Orleans Saints made a \$50,000 donation to the Hurricane Katrina fund, and ninety people from the Saints organization helped to rebuild 5 homes in the New Orleans area. Players, coaches, office staff, and even the New Orleans owner, hammered, nailed, hung drywall, and painted, to fix homes that were badly flooded.

It was the Saints way of thanking the city that loved them so much. The New Orleans Saints and New Orleans have a relationship that is unlike any other. Instead of idolizing players and coaches, people in New Orleans thank them for being there; thank them for what they did for the city, and what they are

still doing for New Orleans. “ They were cheering for their team. They were cheering for their city. They were cheering for themselves. ” (Layden3) When you are really loved in New Orleans you know it. And the New Orleans Saints know they are loved.

Sport is a unique dynamic in America. During the hardest times, people look for hope, strength, and something to celebrate; sports have repeatedly taken that job. The New York Mets, when Mike Piazza hit a game winning homerun in the first sporting event to take place in New York after 9/11. And even now, a little more than a month removed from Hurricane Sandy. The New York Knicks alleviated some pain by winning their first game after Sandy. Sports can affect people in ways that it never intended to. It doesn't get much better than winning when your city needs you.