1

WHY I LOVE THIS GAME

I believe it was the 1992 season while doing a Saturday College Football ESPN scoreboard show when Tim Brando decided to nickname me the "Pony." Brando's one of the more talented announcers I've ever worked with. He's full of bull most of the time, but he loves college football—and that passion comes across to the fans. I guess Tim figured that since I played for the SMU Mustangs and that my teammate Eric Dickerson and I were referred to as "the Pony Express," my new name should be the Pony. The name stuck and has paved the way for some pretty interesting conversations along the way.

Like the time I was covering a Rose Bowl, and before the game started, I made my way to the restroom. I was standing there doing my business when this fan in the urinal next to me yelled out, "I always wanted to know why they called you the Pony!" I didn't know whether to punch him or laugh! He then pointed his cell phone camera at me and took a picture. Being surrounded by tons of fans, there wasn't a thing I could do about it. As a result of that encounter, I'm a lot more careful where I go to use the restroom!

While this experience sticks out a little more than others, my years of covering college football have been extremely rewarding —in large part due to the relationship I've built with you, the fan. I've met tons of wild and crazy fans—which is part of why I love this game so much. There's so much energy, so much passion. On any given Saturday, millions of die-hards from all over the country get to see dozens of incredible matchups—with

conference and national championships on the line week in and week out. And, lucky for me, I've got one of the best seats in the house.

One thing's for certain in my life: as my Rose Bowl restroom encounter shows, I'm never lonely for conversation. Whether I'm at the grocery store, getting gas, eating out, you name the place, more than likely there will be a fan or a group of fans ready to pipe in about their school and why they should be number 1.

What I've found is that I could say nine good things about a school, and the fan will remember my only negative comment. My friend and colleague John Saunders has this theory that fans are used to seeing us all the time on TV and feel as if they really know us, so it's no big deal to come up to us and tell us what's on their minds.

That's fine with me, because when that happens, I know I'm connecting with you—and that's what I'm paid to do and what I love to do. For many years I've believed that it's my responsibility to work hard and be prepared when I go on the air. True, I do work for ESPN/ABC, but in the end, I'm really partners with the college football fan.

• • •

I've loved college football since my first day of practice as a freshman at Southern Methodist University (SMU). I didn't grow up as a high-maintenance kid *expecting* to play beyond high school, so I probably enjoyed and appreciated my playing days more than most athletes. Plus, I had the mind-set that I was going to work as hard as I could in order to maximize my God-given talent. I didn't want to ever look back on my career as a football player and wish that I'd done more to take advantage of and fully develop my abilities. It's the same thing I tell my kids about their

time in sports and the same speech I give other athletes when sharing my experiences. I often remind players that character is defined as what you do when nobody is watching.

As an athlete, it means that when you're by yourself and scheduled to run ten 100-yard sprints on a particular workout, then run ten—especially on the day when you really want to stop at eight. Now, a coach wouldn't have known if you or I had skipped out on two sprints. But the most important person would have known we shortchanged our workout: you and me! I would have known deep down inside—and it would have bothered the heck out of me. I'm a big believer that if you let the little things slide, big issues will show up to challenge you. Another example of personal discipline (and it might sound corny, but players will know exactly what I'm talking about here): My freshman year at SMU our head trainer, Cash Birdwell, told a group of us that carbonation from soda was bad for you and would cut your wind. Cash said it was better to drink a beer than a soda. Unfortunately, we took his advice to heart and tested the cold beer theory! I was eighteen years old when I heard that from Cash, and didn't have a carbonated drink until I retired from football ten years later. At some point in time I realized it wouldn't really hurt my wind while running, but it was a personal discipline that I had adopted, and I didn't want to "let up." I suppose by not letting up I was able to maximize my talents in football, creating more than a joyride for a guy out of East Texas.

The James gang comes from a small East Texas farming community: Alto, Texas, in Cherokee County, better known back in the day as the Tomato Capitol of the World. I grew up as a little boy either riding on the heater vent in the school bus next to my grandfather—the school bus driver—or sitting next to my dad on a tractor, plowing a field. I used to love riding the pastures and feeding the cows or going into the garden and picking the

biggest tomato in the patch. My grandfather called the big ones "hoochers." It sounds a little goofy now, but believe me when I tell you that it was fun—kind of like an Easter egg hunt, except all of 'em were red. So the goal was to find the biggest.

As a football player, I was lucky to have been on some really good football teams. And because of our teams' successes, I was able to achieve several personal highlights that have followed me to this day.

One of my fondest memories as a player dates back to my earliest playing days. I started playing football when I was in the third grade. I played on the Redskins. Man, we were good. I wore number 55 and was a linebacker/quarterback—when you're that age, you play on both sides of the ball, since the game isn't as specialized as it is once you get a little older. I remember the night before a big game against the Browns as well as I do the night before the Super Bowl when I played with the New England Patriots against the Chicago Bears in 1986. Trying to go to sleep that night as a ten-year-old boy was next to impossible. I was in bed, acting like it was the Washington Redskins and Cleveland Browns of the NFL about to square off on a Saturday morning in Texas—and that I was either a star running back or linebacker. Say what you want about visualization, but I can tell you that I saw myself playing in the NFL that night (of course, what kid doesn't?), and I knew that only hard work and dedication would get me there. But I will admit that at the age of ten, I'm not sure I'd have been so willing to give up soda!

From before the days of handheld video cameras, etched in my mind is a long TD run I made up the middle of the field. We played on a combination baseball/football field, so it had dirt in the middle—just like the old NFL stadiums that had dual-use fields. I thought I was the next Jim Brown that day, so you can imagine what it was like for me later in life to actually play

against the Redskins and the Browns. I scored my first professional touchdown at RFK Stadium against the 'Skins, and I was fortunate to have played the Browns in their original stadium.

Man, that Browns stadium was old—and the visitors' locker room was a *long* way from our sideline. So far away that by the time we'd get to the locker room, we had to turn around and go back. And the shower room was dirty as all get-out! I was a neat freak about showers and usually packed my flip-flops to walk around the visitors' locker room, but unfortunately I forgot to pack them that week. I showered standing on my heels so my toes wouldn't touch the floor.

I also remember singing the national anthem prior to the kickoff of those games—a rookie in the NFL, but still a little boy inside. I had tears in my eyes thinking back on my youth football game as a Redskin.

Today, the game of football is mostly about speed. Gone are the days—like in the '90s—when the Nebraska Cornhuskers could just jam the ball down your throat. Teams like the University of Florida are recruiting players who can win in space, guys who can make plays in the open field without help from a teammate. I hear coaches talk all the time about matchups and how they try to get "their guy" one-on-one with a defender. A great example is the Gators' speedy multithreat player, Percy Harvin. I don't care how good of a defensive call you make, guys like Harvin will beat you with speed and ability.

Here's another example: If you want to see pure talent and ability on display, rewatch the 2009 Fiesta Bowl between Texas and Ohio State. Buckeyes QB Terrell Pryor was bottled up time and again, yet he would escape, using his speed, to make a big play and keep the Buckeyes in the game. If not for Pryor, Ohio State would have had no shot at winning that game. As it turns out, they would have won, if not for a heroic final-minute march downfield by Colt McCoy and the Longhorns.

That was just one of the games in the 2008 bowl season that had me on the edge of my seat. The game has gotten so much more exciting lately, with much more parity in each of the conferences. No doubt a large reason for parity has come about with the ceiling placed on total scholarships per year—a school has twenty-five scholarships to give out each year. That's a far cry from the pre-1980s–era when big powerhouse state schools could sign as many players as they wanted to and give a scholarship to practically everyone who had talent. This strategy was a way for these particular schools to sign up all of the good players and thereby keep their competition from getting any decent prospects. There sure wasn't a lot of character in the coaches back then, when they'd tell a kid this and that just to get them to sign, and then kill the kid's hopes and dreams once he arrived on campus only to find out that there weren't enough spots on an active roster to go around for all the talent sitting on the bench. But not anymore.

With fewer scholarships per school, the smaller-budget programs are able to get some pretty darn nice players. So take this spread-the-love and limited-scholarships approach and add to it better coaching, and you've just described a formula for parity. No doubt, the coaching has gotten better because the money's gotten better. Heck, not long ago assistant coaches were making $30,000 to $40,000 a year. Now it's six figures for the most part and up to a half-million dollars a year just for the coordinators. I'd give you a number of head coaches out of the 119 Division 1-A schools making a million or more *per year*, but that number goes up with each new signing, so it's hard to keep the number current.

When I retired from the Patriots I could have stayed in the NFL as an assistant coach. I had no doubt whatsoever that I would have been a good coach. I knew the game and was able to

communicate well with my teammates. But my wife, Marilyn, and I didn't want to subject our family to moving around every four or five years, as most coaches have to do—not for the amount of money being paid at that time.

But I have to admit that if I were retiring today, with salaries being as high as they are, coaching would be a big-time consideration for me—just like it is for a lot of former players who've decided to enter coaching after their playing days are over.

In addition to the money and the fact that the talent pool is so deep, you've also got these assistants spending time in both college and the NFL, so they're able to learn a ton more from some excellent coaches—and that only makes them better. Great examples are Pete Carroll of USC and Nick Saban at Alabama—they've been around both and have a distinct strategic advantage over coaches who've seen only one level. The NFL is graduate school for assistant coaches. They learn how to pick up opponents' tendencies quicker, how to coach techniques better to their players, how to disguise defensive looks better—all of which, when around the college game, makes the coach and, therefore, the team better. I'm more impressed with former defensive guys who turn college than I am offensive ones. Will Muschamp is a good example of a defensive coordinator who was doing really well as a college coach. Then in 2005 he went to the Miami Dolphins as a defensive coach and, in my opinion, honed his skills even more. Muschamp rejoined the college game and during my spring tour of 2008, I watched Muschamp at the University of Texas teach his defense the art of how to time a blitz. Texas felt they'd had a weakness with their timing in previous seasons, so they were working hard to perfect it. The idea is that even before the ball is snapped, a defense is showing a particular look. It could be a very basic alignment, yet right at the snap of the ball the players scatter and run a completely different blitz or scheme

than was shown prior to the snap. By showing their hand late, the defense limits the ability of the offense to make adjustments with their blocking schemes. You see it all the time: the ball is snapped, and a defender comes flying by the offensive line and sacks the QB or tackles the ball carrier in the backfield. More times than not this is a result of great timing by the defense and by their not showing their hand too early. When an NFL QB is able to determine before the snap what a defense is running, it will be a very long day for that defense. So coaches in the NFL are forced to learn how to mask their intentions. I remember that as a running back in the NFL it was critical for me to have a pre-snap read of the defense, too. A tricky defense affects more than just the QB.

So combine scholarship limits with better coaching—and the advent of the spread offenses—and you've got parity. Spread offenses frustrate big, powerful defenses because of all of the formation changes and quick timing routes by the receivers. In short, the offense is giving multiple looks to the defense, causing the defenders to use their eyes a lot to see what the offense is trying to do. When you get defenders to use their eyes more than their feet, they aren't nearly as productive. One of the all-time upsets in college football happened in 2007. Little old Appalachian State visited the Big House and beat Michigan. It was a combination of good coaching, the spread offense, and a bunch of Appalachian State players who wanted to prove something to the big guys of Michigan, prove to them they weren't too small or slow or short as they'd been told when coming out of high school.

Because of these spread offenses, there has been a heavy emphasis on speed in the college game. Being an old man now (as my kids say), I can look back on my childhood and better appreciate the things I did as a youngster that helped develop my motor skills. I had some natural speed and was quick as a kid, and I wasn't afraid to either hit you or get hit. I wasn't afraid of anything.

I probably got that aggressive instinct from playing pickup ball in the yard with my younger brother, Chris, and friends. We'd team up with guys older than us, which forced us to either man up or go home. I tore up a lot of jeans and socks in those days and got lots of pinches from my mom for ruining my clothes while playing football. I didn't care, though. I loved playing.

Chris and I would even play one-on-one if we couldn't find anybody else. I suppose Chris would say that getting knocked around the yard was good for him, too. He was a good football player and signed a scholarship to play at SMU with me. But Chris decided that ice bags and bumps were the wrong path for him, so he chose to play baseball instead, which was a very good decision: he went on to play ten years of major league baseball. His football background stayed with him, though, as he had a reputation as a hardass. As a matter of fact, one year the San Diego Padres gave him the "Red Ass" award. Bro would get in your face in a second if he thought you were dogging it or not giving it your all. He still does, actually, and that's why baseball management loved him. Chris didn't need motivating to play hard—and his work ethic motivated and inspired teammates. He was a great clubhouse guy to have around. Incidentally, the trophy his Padres teammates gave him was a statue of a donkey.

I have to say that one difference between my brother and me is that I'm more politically correct and aware of what I should or shouldn't do—but the same competitive red blood flows through both of us.

Chris and I talk all the time about it—about how today's kids just don't seem to have that burning desire to excel. Maybe kids are more sheltered today. I can promise you we weren't protected. Up until I was about nine, we spent a lot of time in the country. Chris and I would saw off the end of a broom so we could use the stick as a bat. The two of us would stand in a field and hit rocks

into a pasture. No telling how many rocks we'd pick up and hit. Then, for a break, we'd find an old mop to use between our legs and run around the yard like we were riding a horse. Doing stuff like that at a young age is how we developed our speed and skills. There wasn't any Wii or Xbox to play with, that's for sure.

As I think back on my third-grade season (my first year of football), a couple of things stand out. First, four or five days before a regular-season game, I badly cut my thumb and had to go to the emergency room for stitches. I was sitting on the table with the doctor trying to sew my thumb up and screaming pretty loudly. Crazy, isn't it, to think a ten-year-old would cry over stitches. Well, my dad didn't like my insanity too much, so he decided to smoke me in the kisser with his fist. Dad, at 6 foot 3 and 250 pounds, told me to shut up and let the doctor do his work! Obviously my dad and the doctor didn't believe in a shot to deaden the area! I sat still and let the man do his thing.

Leaving the emergency room, I was told not to play in my upcoming football game. Goofy doctor didn't learn much after seeing my dad nail me, did he? That Saturday morning I was dressed and playing in my game. Right before halftime, I was tackled and got up to see blood all over my hand. My stitches had been blown out. Dad came over to the bench, grabbed my arm, and told me to come with him. We went to the parking lot where he reached in the tool box for his black electrical tape. Dad wound that tape around my thumb so tight the blood stopped flowing. He threw the tape back in the truck and told me to get my butt back in the game!

As you might suspect, a lot of parents thought Dad was being an idiot. I probably thought so, too. But Dad did me a huge favor that day. He knew my life wasn't being threatened by going back in the game. His lesson that day taught me a lot about playing with pain. Many times throughout my football career I thought

back on that pee wee game when I'd get banged up—like the first play of the game against the Green Bay Packers in 1985. I got hit in the chin by a helmet, and it exploded with blood. I didn't miss a snap the entire first half. And at halftime, while getting stitches without any local anesthetic, I was laughing inside at the memory of that valuable lesson I learned many seasons earlier.

Later that season, I remember playing in the city championship and losing. I don't remember much of the game—I think I blocked it out—but I do remember crying afterward. I made up some excuse like I'd hurt my ankle, but the truth was that I hated losing and we hadn't lost all year. When I got older, tears turned to determination, and every time we lost, I pushed myself even harder to make more of an impact the next time we played that team. As a youngster, I didn't fully appreciate or understand how important a competitive streak is in your journey toward becoming a professional athlete. There's no doubt in my mind that my brother and I achieved professional status due in large part to the type of upbringing we had. We were taught to work hard and to respect our elders. To say "Please" and "Thank you" and to look adults in the eye and say "Yes, ma'am" and "Yes, sir."

Heck, we still compete against each other. We both recently took up bow hunting. I harvested my first buck the first deer season. Chris didn't, and it drove him nuts that I had one and he didn't. Of course, it didn't help that I ran around calling myself Davy Crockett.

There's an old saying that you're either hard or soft—my brother and I had nothing to do with being soft. We were country tough with a lot of drive and ambition.

Hands down, the most enjoyable athletic phase of my life was during my high school days. We were a bunch of like-minded, hard-working guys who set a goal our freshman year to win the state championship. A lot of my core beliefs were born from

speeches made by our head coach, Oscar Cripps. Coach stressed how much can be accomplished when nobody cares who gets the credit. Coach was so crazy about the team concept that he hardly ever used the word "I"—and I'm not saying that to be cliché, that there's no "I" in "team." Coach really lived this philosophy, and if you weren't a team player, you had better become one or find a different after-school activity. To this day, I still pause or think about it when I use the word "I."

I'm still in touch with some of my high school teammates. We were a bunch of cutups back then, and we still are today. One of the better memories for me, and probably for a lot of my teammates, was the time I pulled a joke on our offensive coordinator, Bob French. He was a chump to most of us, a young buck who had a temper and wanted to control everything.

Well, Coach French decided that he'd had enough of a crappy practice one day, and he told us that the next player he saw with a foot on the field who wasn't supposed to be on the field was going to get his butt busted. There were probably twenty of us standing along the chalked sidelines. We were in Houston on a hot and really humid day. From a side view, all you could see were forty football cleats nudged right up next to the chalk line—make that thirty-nine shoes. I took off one of my cleats and had it six inches on the field.

"Sweet Old" Bob French ("SOB," as we called him) looked down the line to see if anybody had messed up. He came running down there to see this empty shoe. Coach SOB had the typical coach's body: skinny legs, no butt, and a big gut. French looked up at me and my laughing face and said, "Your ass is mine!"

I got three serious swats after practice. French tried to break the board on my butt, but couldn't. I sucked it up, looked him in the face, smiled, and walked out of the office like it didn't hurt. My teammates loved me for doing it. And when I got home to

check out my buttocks, it was a welt. Thirty years later, when I see French, we laugh about me messing with him and how it really was funny as heck. Ultimately, I think Coach French and I both look back on it now and realize that our team having fun was probably the key to our winning the state championship. I see it all the time with teams—they all work so hard and have so much pressure on them from their parents, coaches, and peers that they forget that sports are supposed to be fun.

Coaches weren't our only targets. I'm not sure my high school teammate Chris Jackson would agree, but one of the better pranks we pulled was on him. Jackson was a good player who started on the offensive line as a junior. He later went on to SMU and was our starting center there. No doubt he was feeling his oats, so we decided to humble him. A group of seniors ganged up on him, stripped him down to his underwear, and tied him up with tape. We then took him outside our locker room where the drill team was working out. We dumped Jackson right in front of the best-looking girls in the school. Probably scarred him for life, but we sure got a heck of a laugh out of it and it did trim his ego a little bit.

The Houston Stratford Spartans, my high school team, was the best football team I ever played on. To this day, my teammates and I stay in touch and are really close. I was named Player of the Year in 1978 for the state of Texas after rushing for a state record 2,411 yards. I also scored 35 touchdowns that year, as our team went 15–0 and won the state championship, making our freshman-year pledge a reality.

One of the first big life decisions high school graduates have to make is where they are going to college. Or what they're going to do with their life. I knew I was going to college to play football, but I had a little twist to think about during the recruiting process. The summer before my sophomore year in high school, I met this beautiful blonde named Marilyn Arps. I was whipped

from the first time I saw her, and she later became my wife. She was also the drum major on the drill team and thought I was an idiot for embarrassing Jackson. Oh, well, it served as a warning to her that I wasn't a boring stiff. Anyway, Marilyn was a year ahead of me in school—so I now say she's older than me. We've already passed the twenty-five-year anniversary mark.

Well, her sister Cindy was attending SMU, so Marilyn decided to go there, too. Needless to say, SMU had the inside track from day one. As soon as SMU offered me a scholarship before my senior season started, I jumped all over it and said yes. Head coach Ron Meyer and offensive coordinator Steve Endicott then started to wonder if I was any good. Their rationale? Why would a blue-chipper commit to lowly SMU so quickly? It didn't take Ron or Steve long to figure out why.

In college at SMU, my teammate was future first-ballot NFL Hall of Famer Eric Dickerson. Eric and I accounted for more than 9,000 yards between us. And because of those numbers, the Pony Express will live forever.

Man, Eric was a baller. He could flat-out play football. The first time Eric and I met was during our senior year of high school. We grew up thirty minutes from each other but were in different districts and classifications. Eric was in a smaller 2A district and I was in a big 4A district. We followed each other through the Houston papers, though, because we were the two highest-profile running backs in the state—a state, mind you, that is rabid about high school football. (Just read Buzz Bissinger's classic book, *Friday Night Lights*, to know what I'm talking about. That book is so good they made a movie and a TV series based on it.)

So here I am driving out to Sealy, Texas, to see the big man in person. I went by his house, and he wasn't there; they told me he was up at the car wash. I made my way through the small town and found Eric in the wash stall putting a shine to his Trans

Am—a gold one nonetheless. "Dick," as we later called him in school, was tall and skinny with a big ol' fro. His hair was almost as tall as he was. I crack up just thinking about the first time I laid eyes on Dick. And then, to top it off, Dick blares out to me: "Man, I thought you were a black dude! White guys can't run like you!"

Then he smiled, and we both started laughing our butts off. Little did either of us know at the time that we would go on to be forever linked together as the Pony Express. Nor did we know that, even more important than our football recognition, we'd become lifelong friends. I love Eric to this day and am glad to call him a friend. I was so proud of him the day he was inducted into the Hall of Fame. That tall, skinny kid at the car wash in Sealy went on to become one of the all-time great running backs in the history of the NFL. I'll never forget the run he made our sophomore year at Texas Stadium against the Arkansas Razorbacks. It was a pretty simple downhill run toward the right tackle. The defense jammed up that side of the line, so Eric stopped on a dime and cut back to the left. He went from stop to full speed straight ahead before the defense was able to even react to his initial cut. No telling how many ankles he sprained on that run. I knew then that number 19 was a special talent.

Fast-forward to our second year of pro football. Eric was playing for the Los Angeles Rams, and I was with the New England Patriots. We were out west in LA getting ready for a second-round playoff game against the Los Angeles Raiders. The Rams were playing on Saturday, and we were playing on Sunday. So I called Eric and told him I was coming to his game against the Dallas Cowboys. Imagine, if you will, me and a few of my Patriots teammates sitting in the stands at another pro football game the afternoon before we were to play the Raiders. I was like a kid cheering for his brother, and Eric nailed the Cowboys for 241 yards rushing. Unbelievable!

The next day we beat the Raiders. I called Eric, and we talked about how cool it would be if we both won our next games, which would set up a showdown of the Pony Express in a Super Bowl. We beat the Miami Dolphins to advance, but the Rams couldn't get by the Chicago Bears. Two weeks later, neither did we. I was bummed that Eric and I didn't get that chance to square off in the Super Bowl—that would have been storybook material. Regardless, it was a privilege to play with him.

For those of you too young to remember Eric Dickerson, check out YouTube. A few diehard fans have put up some tributes, and you can see for yourself just how great a runner he was.

The highlight of my professional career was playing in Super Bowl XX with the New England Patriots against the Chicago Bears. We got beat up pretty bad, but it was an honor to play on the biggest stage in all of professional sports. Two years earlier, in 1984, I made the NFL All Rookie team and was voted to the Pro Bowl as an alternate. In 1985, I started in the Pro Bowl, was voted the Patriots MVP, and was named the NFL's Offensive Player of the Year by the Vince Lombardi Committee. From day one in pro football, I never once took it for granted. It was like being on a victory tour. Each day and each game was more than a dream come true.

I've said many times that I was lucky to have played in the real NFL. I was a young pup playing with guys like Steve Nelson, John Hannah, Steve Grogan, Stanley Morgan—men who were a part of the vintage days of the NFL. I'll never forget the day I walked in the Patriots locker room and there was this veteran sitting at his locker smoking a cigarette. What? I was shocked. I'd always heard that if you smoked, you couldn't be an athlete.

Also, back then, entourages weren't a part of the rookie package. Rookies didn't show up acting like they made the league what it was. I played when you respected the game and its players.

When you were drafted by a team, you played for that team unless you were traded. Plan B free agency was just beginning when I got out of the league in 1989. The NFL is all business today. Money . . . money . . . money! It's huge today. I don't want to sound like I was broke because I was anything but. The contract I signed to enter pro football was the highest salary for any rookie to enter the game. I signed a four-year deal for $2 million. Tons of money for a guy who lived in a one-bedroom apartment while in elementary school, sharing a bed with my brother and mom. Today, my contract would have been worth $3 to $5 million dollars . . . a year!

Some say I was born too soon—not me. Thank goodness I touched and played in the original NFL.