

GAME PLAN

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I'm a football player, a quarterback with the NFL's Jacksonville Jaguars. I'm used to pain. You get hit, you get up and keep going. But I'd never felt anything like the pain that ripped through my gut that January afternoon in 2004. One minute I was sitting in my lounge chair at home watching TV, the next minute I was doubled over. Not even Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis hitting me from the blind side hurt that bad. For a few minutes, I could hardly breathe. Finally the pain went away.

I'd just sat up again when it came back, worse than before. I was sweating and shivering at the same time. "Mary, come here," I called to my wife. "I feel like my stomach's about to explode." She had to help me up from the chair.

The next twenty-four hours, the pain came and went in waves. Then it stopped. Some kind of nasty bug, I figured, and put it out of my mind. I had to focus on getting in top shape, stronger than I'd ever been. My goal that year was to finally win the starting job at quarterback, a job I'd been dreaming of—and working for—almost all my life.

I still remember the day I fell in love with the game. I was six. My mom took me to my older brother Anthony's football practice. The sunshine, the guys running around in their uniforms, the smell of the grass—everything about it was magic. *This is me*, I thought. *This is what I want to do when I grow up.*

Not only did I want to play football, I wanted to be the quarterback, the team leader. By middle school, I was. My mother might not have understood the x's and o's, but she understood my passion. She felt the same way about nursing,

lifting her patients' spirits, tending to their bodies and souls. She was always telling me I could achieve anything I dreamed if I believed in myself and in God. Not that I should expect everything to come easy. "You've got to put in the effort, then trust in the Lord. With his help, you'll succeed," she said. "Don't let anything keep you down."

Mom didn't. Not when she and my father got divorced and she had to raise us on her own. Not even when she got breast cancer. "My strength comes from my faith," she told me. I didn't really know what she meant, not then, but I know I never once saw her spirits flag. Right to the end—she died when I was fourteen—she had joy in her heart.

Her example and my brother's—Anthony put his own life on hold and moved back home to raise my younger sister and me—drove me. I dedicated myself to football in high school, picked my coaches' brains, trained like crazy, stuck to my guns about playing QB even though some college recruiters wanted me to try tight end or fullback because of my size. I didn't let up in college, at East Carolina University, where I became the starting quarterback partway through freshman year. My teammates might chill out at the dorm after practice. I studied game tape, did extra workouts. Okay, I'll admit, I didn't spend all my time outside the classroom at the football complex—I also met and fell in love with another student named Mary Knox, a tennis player who was as much of a sports nut as I was.

My extra effort paid off. In April of 2002, my senior year, the Jaguars selected me in the fourth round of the NFL draft. There were no guarantees, but their starting quarterback was nearing retirement. They drafted me expecting I'd replace him in a year or two.

I spent the 2002 NFL season on the bench, but I felt so close to achieving my dream, it was almost like heaven. I

worked harder than I had in college, training, watching game film, peppering the veterans and the QB coach with questions. I soaked up as much knowledge of the pro game as I could. “When I get my chance, I want to be ready,” I told Mary, who, by then, was my wife.

But then came the 2003 NFL draft. The Jags had a first-round pick and they chose Byron Leftwich, the most heralded QB to come out of college that year. Mary and I heard the news on the car radio. I almost drove off the road. “I guess they just don’t believe in me,” I said.

Mary gave me a look, kind of like Mom would have. “He still has to beat you out.” He did. I tried my best, but Leftwich won the starting job. The job that was supposed to be mine. I was relegated to backup again. My confidence took a hit. For the first time I questioned my ability. I wondered about the dream I’d had since I was six. What if I’d gotten it wrong?

Watching from the sidelines as Leftwich led the offense, I had plenty of time to think. What I thought about, mostly, was my mother. That inner strength of hers, I could really use some of it now. I remembered how she used to tell me, *With the Lord’s help, you’ll succeed.*

One night toward the end of that trying season, I lay in bed and prayed. Not that I’d take over as the starter, but that I could be as strong as Mom had been. I asked for faith like hers. I woke up feeling reinvigorated. Next year—2004—would be my year. Hand in hand with the Lord, I’d find my way back to the field.

That’s why I shrugged off that bout of abdominal pain in January and stepped up my workouts. But two months later, when I reported to Jacksonville for the team’s off-season conditioning program, I still didn’t feel right. The trainer sent me to a gastroenterologist. The doctor ran a bunch of tests

and took X-rays. He told me I had something called Crohn's disease.

"Just give me whatever pill I need to clear it up," I said. I figured if I'd never heard of it, it couldn't be that serious.

But it was. The doctor explained that Crohn's is a chronic autoimmune disease that causes inflammation of the small intestine, making it all but impossible for food to pass through. "No one knows exactly how or why you get it," he said. He'd put me on medication to control the inflammation, but there was no cure. It was a disease I'd have to live with.

I called Mary and told her the diagnosis. By the time I got home, she'd printed out a ton of information from the internet. She looked worried. "Dave, a lot of people who have Crohn's don't do that well maintaining an active lifestyle."

We'd see about that. The medication helped. I modified my diet. No more spicy food, roughage or sweets that would irritate my small intestine. Within a few weeks I felt well enough to go out to a Thai restaurant with my teammates. Big mistake. I awoke in the middle of the night vomiting. Mary found me curled on the bathroom floor, so wracked by abdominal cramps I couldn't move. "I'm taking you to the ER, Dave." She had to help me—her 250-pound NFL quarterback husband—into my clothes.

I was laid up in the hospital for four days, unable to eat a thing. They put me on IV fluids. Still I dropped thirty pounds. I felt weak, woozy. Mom kept floating in and out of my thoughts. Maybe it was because I was light-headed, but I swear, one night it felt like she was right there beside me. I started talking to her. "I need you to be here. Help me come through this so I can live my life the way I know you want me to—with strength, confidence and faith." Then it hit me. I wasn't talking to my mom so much as praying to my heavenly Father, trusting him

with my life the way Mom did with hers. I told Mary about my prayer. “I think I finally understand what Mom meant about strength coming from faith,” I said.

I ended up having surgery to remove a section of my diseased intestines. Six weeks later I was on the field again, practicing hard, getting back into game shape. “I don’t know what’s in store for me,” I said to Mary, “but I know in my heart I can play.” When Byron Leftwich went down with an injury in November, I was ready to step in.

On game day, I jogged out of the tunnel onto the field at Jacksonville Municipal Stadium. The roar of the crowd fired me up. We played Detroit. The game had plenty of drama. We pulled ahead early, then the Lions caught up and sent us into overtime. I threw a touchdown pass to win the game. The crowd roared even louder. It was every bit as magical as the day I discovered football.

That was five years ago. I’m the starting quarterback for the Jaguars now, living the dream God put in my heart. My Crohn’s is under control. It might flare up again, but I’m not worried. I know with the Lord’s help, I can handle whatever happens. It’s like I tell kids who share my disease: You might have Crohn’s, but it doesn’t have you. Don’t let it keep you down. Go and live *your* dream.