

HEART OF A CHAMPION

TRUE STORIES OF CHARACTER
AND FAITH FROM TODAY'S
MOST INSPIRING ATHLETES

STEVE RIACH



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

Scripture quotations are taken from

The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Cover by Jason Gabbert Design

Photos of Drew Brees, Paul Goldschmidt, David Johnson, Albert Pujols, Case Keenum, Dabo Swinney, Clint Dempsey, Dick and Rick Hoyt, Jordy Nelson, Jordan Spieth, Marcus Mariota, Benjamin Watson, Russell Wilson, Daniel Murphy, Carson Wentz, Derek Carr, Kirk Cousins, Tim Howard, Bubba Watson, Clayton Kershaw, Jason Witten © 2018 by Tom DiPace

Photos of Jenny Simpson, Kelly Clark, Brad Stevens, Simone Biles, Abbey D'Agostino, Monty Williams, Allyson Felix, Laurie Hernandez, Chris Paul, Kevin Durant, Jeremy Lin, Simone Manuel, Maya Moore, Steph Curry, Maya DiRado, Jrue Holiday, Lolo Jones, Kyle Korver © by USA TODAY Sports Images\ Part of the USA TODAY Network

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes appearing in this book are from personal interviews with the author or his team or from press conferences or other public media appearances by the featured subjects.

Heart of a Champion

Copyright © 2018 by SER Media

Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97408

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

ISBN 978-0-7369-7282-6 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-7369-7283-3 (eBook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Riach, Steve author.

Title: Heart of a champion / Steve Riach.

Description: Eugene, Oregon : Harvest House Publishers, [2018]

Identifiers: LCCN 2018008254 (print) | LCCN 2018022321 (ebook) | ISBN

9780736972833 (ebook) | ISBN 9780736972826 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Athletes—Biography. | Athletes—Conduct of life.

Classification: LCC GV697.A1 (ebook) | LCC GV697.A1 R49 2018 (print) | DDC

796.0922 [B]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018008254>

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, digital, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 /VP-CD/ 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*"Sports do not build character;
they reveal it."*

JOHN WOODEN

LEGENDARY UCLA BASKETBALL COACH

CONTENTS

Introduction	7
1. COMMITMENT	
Drew Brees	11
Paul Goldschmidt	16
David Johnson	21
Albert Pujols	27
Jenny Simpson	34
2. LEADERSHIP	
Kelly Clark	41
Case Keenum	45
Brad Stevens	51
Dabo Swinney	56
3. PERSEVERANCE	
Simone Biles	63
Abbey D’Agostino	69
Clint Dempsey	73
Monty Williams	77
4. TEAMWORK	
Allyson Felix	85
Laurie Hernandez	90
Dick and Rick Hoyt	94
Jordy Nelson	98
Chris Paul	104

5. RESPECT

Kevin Durant 109
Jeremy Lin 114
Simone Manuel 119
Jordan Spieth 123

6. INTEGRITY

Marcus Mariota 131
Maya Moore 135
Benjamin Watson 139
Russell Wilson 145

7. RESPONSIBILITY

Steph Curry 151
Maya DiRado 157
Jrue and Lauren Holiday 161
Daniel Murphy 165
Carson Wentz 170

8. SELF-CONTROL

Derek Carr 177
Kirk Cousins 182
Tim Howard 186
Lolo Jones 191
Bubba Watson 195

9. COMPASSION

Clayton Kershaw 201
Kyle Korver 206
Jason Witten 212
Notes 216

INTRODUCTION

The word “hero” is misused and overused in our culture. Dictionary.com (what happened to thumbing through the ten-pound *Merriam-Webster* version?) defines a hero as *a person noted for courageous acts or nobility of character; a person who, in the opinion of others, has special achievements, abilities, or personal qualities and is regarded as a role model or ideal; or the principal male character in a story, play, film, etc.*

Yet, as you read publications or online articles or watch the news, you find that the word “hero” gets tossed about like pennies into a fountain. Heroes, it seems, are a dime a dozen today.

Or are they?

What is it that makes a true hero? Ability? Achievements? Popularity? Power? Or is it something more intrinsic, something deeper?

I say it is.

Look back at the definition above. *Nobility of character...regarded as a role model or ideal.* Heroes are not characters, as the media would sometimes have us think. Rather, they are *people of character*. Good character. Men and women whom others admire and even want to follow because of their example of virtue and selflessness. Those who exhibit—no, embody—traits such as commitment, leadership, perseverance, teamwork, respect, integrity, responsibility, self-control, and compassion. These are true champions in my book. And, as you are reading my book...

These people are human, for sure. Fallible? You bet. Flawed and imperfect? Like us all. Yet something lies deep within them that makes them worthy of our admiration. They never give up, they treat people right,

they live in integrity, and they use their platform to impact others. This describes the heart of a true champion...or maybe even a hero.

I've had the incredible privilege of telling the stories of these kinds of true champions for more than 30 years. I've been all over the U.S. and trekked to different countries to talk with them, observe them, and then tell their stories.

The men and women on the pages you are about to read exhibit the heart of a true champion. They have been acclaimed for their records, medals, and titles, and they have been considered among the best in the world at what they do. Yet each one lives for something greater, something bigger than themselves. As you read their stories, I hope you see what I have seen, and I hope you, too, are inspired to live for something greater.

I would love your comments. Reach out to me at www.steveriach.com or <https://www.facebook.com/SteveERiach/>.

Steve Riach

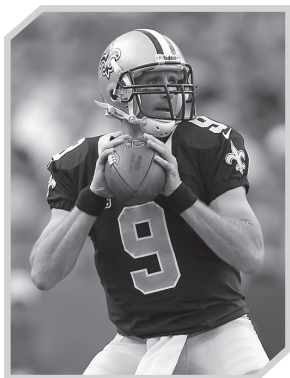
“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful
committed citizens can change the world;
indeed it is the only thing that ever has.”

—MARGARET MEAD

covenant
assurance
guarantee VOW
COMMITMENT
pledge engagement
committal charge
undertaking
agreement

“To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice your gift.”

STEVE PREFONTAINE



DREW BREES

» FACTOIDS

Drew was appointed by President Obama as cochair of the President’s Council on Fitness, Sports, and Nutrition.

His book *Coming Back Stronger* made it to number three on the New York Times Best Sellers list.

It’s been said that, in sports, it’s not the player’s size that counts most. Rather, it’s the size of that player’s heart.

Drew Brees is the epitome of that maxim. Although some considered him to be too small to be an impact player in the National Football League, Brees is one of the most prolific passers in pro football history. Only two quarterbacks have thrown for more yards and touchdowns than the future Hall of Famer.

“He’s not the biggest guy. He’s not the strongest, or the fastest,” said Brees’s brother Reid. “But he’ll still find a way to beat you.”¹

And this is what makes Brees so special. He has a competitive fire like few others. That drive has not only proved many experts wrong, but it also has sustained his success into his late thirties. He works harder than most athletes.

The New Orleans Saints star has passed for more than 70,000 yards and 488 touchdowns over his 17-year career through 2017.

He is third all-time in passing yards and, barring injury, should move into the number-one spot by week five of the 2018 season. He is tied for third in touchdown passes and should move into the second spot in 2018. His 6,222 completions rank second all-time, another mark he will surpass in 2018.

He has been selected to 11 Pro Bowls, has been named first-team All-Pro three times, and was the NFL Offensive Player of the Year in 2008 and 2011.

Brees has won at every level. In high school he led Austin (Texas) Westlake to the state title. At Purdue University, he took an underdog Boilermakers team to a Big 10 championship and a spot in the Rose Bowl in 2001, the school's first appearance at that game in 34 years. And in 2009 he led the Saints to the Super Bowl XLIV championship.

What is it that makes a winner? It's a question asked by every sports franchise in the world. They test and measure, run analytics, and spend millions of dollars trying to find the elusive answer. Yet the makeup of a winner is much more intangible than tangible. No one really knows how to find it. They just know how to spot it when they see it. And in Brees they see it.

"Drew is so committed as a player, that I think everyone in the building respects his work ethic and his commitment to our franchise," Saints coach Sean Payton told *Sports Spectrum* magazine. "He holds himself accountable to be prepared, both physically and mentally, and he sets the bar high for his teammates, and that is crucial to that position."²

While Brees may not have always looked the part of a pro quarterback prospect, he has always played the part. In fact, some have labeled him an overachiever. Yet that label doesn't do Brees justice. He may not have the big arm of some other quarterbacks, but his talent is undeniable. His talent and leadership have been recognized at every level.

He was the Texas offensive player of the year in high school and a two-time Heisman Trophy runner-up and Maxwell Award winner at Purdue, where he also was an Academic All-American and received a prestigious postgraduate scholarship from the National Football Foundation.

In the NFL, along with the aforementioned hardware, he's also received the Walter Payton Man of the Year Award and the Bart Starr Award.

"His work ethic is unlike anything I've ever seen," Reid said. "Even if he weren't in the NFL, he would still be a successful person."³

Brees's success on the field has been definitive. After being drafted by the San Diego Chargers in 2001, Brees persevered through some rocky seasons, most notably with a quarterback controversy and the Chargers

using their number-one draft pick on Philip Rivers even while Brees was performing well as the starter. It seemed he still had to prove himself.

After leading the Chargers to the AFC West title and being named NFL Comeback Player of the Year, Brees still was not in the Chargers' long-term plans. At the end of the 2005 season, disaster struck: Brees tore his right labrum and rotator cuff while trying to recover a fumble.

"That was a real bad injury," said Brees. "It was my throwing shoulder, and it was potentially career ending. If you don't think for a split second, right after it happened, I didn't think, 'Why is this happening? Why me?'"

"But I very quickly snapped out of it, and realized this is happening for a reason, and I'm going to turn this into a positive. He wouldn't let me face it if I couldn't handle it."

"He" meaning God. Brees became a Christian as a 17-year-old and realized a greater sense of peace and purpose.

"I accepted Jesus Christ in my heart and knew that there was something bigger planned for me than just sports," Brees said.

"From that moment on, with Jesus in my life, I knew that the fear of the unknown was there," Brees said in an interview during a live event at The Rock Church in San Diego. "With Jesus in my heart and in my life, I'm not afraid of the unknown. I'm not afraid to go to Purdue. I'm not afraid of dropping in the second round and being drafted by the San Diego Chargers. I know God has that plan and I'm going to trust Him. I'll be led by faith and not by sight."

Brees worked incessantly to come back from the 2005 injury. Most experts didn't believe he would be able to regain his arm strength after sustaining that type of damage to his throwing arm. Once again, Brees was underestimated. Once again, he did what others said he could not do.

In 2005 the Chargers, with Rivers in waiting, told Brees they weren't convinced he would fully recover. With his contract up, they made a less than desirable offer. Brees desperately wanted to stay in San Diego, but he saw the proverbial handwriting on the wall and walked. He was devastated.

"I said, 'This is the worst thing that has happened to me in my life,'" Brees recalled.

The Saints, however, viewed Brees as a star quarterback. They signed him, and in 2006 Brees led the league with 4,418 passing yards and

guided New Orleans to the NFC South title and into the NFC Championship game.

“A year later,” Brees said of parting with San Diego, “I looked back and said, “That was probably the best thing that happened to me.””

In 2007 Brees set the NFL record for the most pass completions in a single season with 440.

Two years later he led the Saints to a Super Bowl victory against the favored Indianapolis Colts. Brees tied a Super Bowl record with 32 completions and was named the game’s MVP. It was also the first league championship for the Saints. In 2010 Brees was named *Sports Illustrated* Sportsman of the Year as well as the AP Male Athlete of the Year.

Since that pinnacle, Brees has maintained an amazing level of consistent excellence. Over his career he has had more than 400 completions in a season 9 times. He has thrown for more than 4,000 yards in a season 12 times. He has surpassed 5,000 yards 5 times, while no other quarterback in NFL history has done it more than once. He’s had 9 seasons with more than 30 touchdown passes, throwing for more than 40 twice.

He holds NFL records for the highest single-season completion percentage at 72.0 and the highest career completion percentage at 66.9. He also holds the record for most consecutive games with a touchdown pass at 54 and tied the league record for most touchdown passes in a game with 7.

As accomplished as his career has been, Brees has valued his success off the field even more. He lives by an axiom that encompasses his four priorities: faith, family, football, and philanthropy. Brees likes to call them the “Four F’s.”

In 2003 Brees and his wife, Brittany, established the Brees Dream Foundation. Since then they have contributed more than \$10 million to help advance cancer research, care for cancer patients, and assist with the building of schools, parks, playgrounds, and athletic fields in New Orleans, San Diego, and Purdue–West Lafayette, Indiana, communities. Brees worked extensively to help restore the city of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Brees is seen by the people of New Orleans as a local hero. They see his authenticity through the investment he has made in the community

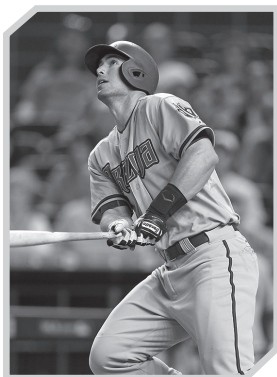
and because he and his family make their home in the city rather than in the suburbs. For Brees, it's about living out his purpose.

"I live for God, for the faith I have in Him," Brees said. "Knowing the sacrifices Jesus Christ made on the cross for me and feeling like it's in God's hands, all I have to do is just give my best, commit the rest to Him. Everything else is taken care of. That takes the weight off anybody's shoulders.

"God puts us in positions, all the time, for a reason. You can say, 'Why is this happening to me?' But you have to understand that it's happening for a reason."

“There are no shortcuts to anyplace worth going.”

BEVERLY SILLS



PAUL GOLDSCHMIDT

» FACTOIDS

His great-grandmother sold candy door-to-door in Massachusetts after immigrating to the United States in the 1930s.

His favorite movie is *Billy Madison*.

He is one of the most devastating offensive weapons in baseball. Yet outside of Phoenix, few people are familiar with Paul Goldschmidt.

The Arizona Diamondbacks first baseman has been one of the National League's finest hitters since he entered the major leagues in 2011. Through 2017, over his first six seasons, Goldschmidt had a career .299 batting average, with 176 home runs and 627 RBI. He is a five-time All-Star and has finished in the top three in the NL MVP voting three times. He has won the Hank Aaron Award and the Silver Slugger Award (three times) for his hitting.

Tony La Russa, former Diamondbacks chief baseball officer, created a nickname for Goldschmidt: Albert P. Pujols.

The *P* stands for *Perfect*. Invoking the name of one of the game's all-time greatest hitters speaks for itself.

“I'm being honest,” La Russa told *USA Today*. “Perfect. He works at every part of his game—defense, base running, hitting. He works to get better. He's a plus, plus player and a great teammate and he's dying to win.”¹

“The highest compliment I can give him is that he's so much like Albert Pujols that it's a credit to both of them,” said La Russa, who managed the future Hall of Famer for 11 years in St. Louis.

“He's just a remarkable human being,” Diamondbacks manager Torey

Lovullo told *Baseball Digest*. “You walk down the hall, security people, ushers, they feel the same way about him. You walk in the clubhouse, his teammates feel the same way about him.

“Now, I can get specific because I watch him perform and work every single day. I’m honored to be sitting in the same dugout as him. I still get giddy when he sits next to me and talks to me. I have to pinch myself and think, ‘That’s Paul Goldschmidt.’ I’m just honored to be around him.”

Even with Goldschmidt’s growing reputation and his prodigious numbers, a disconnect remains between the public and those who watch him play every day.

“There’s no part of his game that you’re like, ‘Well, if he did this better, he’d be a superstar,’” Arizona teammate Daniel Descalso said. “He does everything well, like no one I’ve ever really seen.”²

“He’s everything you want in a baseball player,” said former Diamondbacks hitting coach and broadcaster Mark Grace, himself a three-time All-Star first baseman. “We know what a special, not only player, but a human being this guy is. He’s not in a major market like New York or Chicago, L.A. or Boston, so he does get overlooked.”³

It seems Goldschmidt has always been overlooked. He was lightly recruited out of high school and ended up at Texas State University. After his junior year he was drafted by the Diamondbacks in the eighth round and never showed up on any Top 100 prospects list during his time in the minor leagues.

Still, Goldschmidt could always hit, and he did so from the moment he became a pro. He batted .334 with 18 homers and 62 RBIs in 74 games of rookie ball in 2009, yet he was not satisfied.

“I remember him talking to the defensive coaches and saying, ‘I want to be a Gold Glove first baseman,’” said Alan Zinter, a hitting instructor who worked with Goldschmidt in the minors. “This big, burly-looking, lumberjack guy with not the quickest of feet, not the best glove. It’s almost like, Yeah, right.”⁴

He made it to the majors, skipping Class AAA, less than two years after he was drafted. From there this once unheralded prospect has become a yearly MVP candidate and Triple Crown threat through determination and effort. Oh, and he did win a Gold Glove Award—actually three of them through 2017.

He also has studied the art of baserunning, and through his first six seasons has averaged 20 steals per year. He ranked seventh in the league in 2016 with 32 steals—a ridiculous number for a six-foot-three, 225-pound power-hitting first baseman who is known as one of the slowest players on the team.

“He’s as good as it gets,” Diamondbacks first base coach Dave McKay told *The Arizona Republic*. “Goldy is the type of guy who wants to be as good as he can get at whatever he’s doing, whether it’s playing first base or hitting or baserunning. If there’s an edge and he can be better, then he is the one guy who seeks it out more than any player I’ve known.”⁵

It’s possible that the reason the player known as Goldy is overlooked now—even as the National League’s best right-handed hitter—is because he is so humble. Self-promotion is not something reporters will hear from him.

“It was how I was taught to play the game,” Goldschmidt said. “I can’t control what people say about me. My focus is on what I can control and what I need to do to get better.”

“His personality is just that. He doesn’t seek the limelight,” said Grace. “What he seeks is greatness. What he seeks is a world championship.”⁶

“Sometimes I tell him, ‘When you hit a home run, you need to do a little thing,’” said Diamondbacks outfielder David Peralta. “He says, ‘No, I like to do the right thing,’ which is good.”⁷

“He’ll hit a two-run homer and come in the dugout, and the first thing he does is tell whoever was on base, ‘Good job, nice at bat, nice walk, way to be on base,’ or something,” said former Arizona teammate Josh Collmenter. “What he’s doing is secondary to what everybody else is doing.”

That old-school approach comes through in his approach to being on the field every day. Goldschmidt has missed just four games a year on average throughout his career.

“I always want to play and will play every game possible,” said Goldschmidt. “My job is to play.”

“He’s come to the realization that he is the face of this team, the leader of this team, whether he wants to be or not,” said former teammate Brad Ziegler. “If you asked him he would probably choose to be in the back-ground and just go out and play. He doesn’t want the limelight.”⁸

“For a while now, professional players have been distracted by fame and

fortune,” La Russa told *Sports Illustrated*. “Which means that once you get some fame and you get some fortune—yeah, that’s pretty good. You start sitting on the couch. When you see a guy that has just exemplary drive, if that’s the word you want to use, it stands out. Goldy, he can’t be better than he is.”⁹

Interviewers often try to get Goldschmidt to open up and talk about himself. It rarely works.

“My personality is a little bit more of a shy personality,” he said on a podcast of *The StewPod*. “I’m just doing my own thing. I can’t really control what gets out there and gets written beyond my actions. So I share some stuff, but sometimes you want to keep some stuff private.”

Goldschmidt’s humility is matched by his sense of responsibility.

“I remember my dad sitting me down and saying, ‘Hey, if you want to make the varsity team, you want to play in college, you want to play professionally, you’ve got to put in the work,’” he recalls. “You’ve got to show up early. You’ve got to hit extra. You’ve got to run extra. You’ve got to be in the weight room. I took that to heart and probably, at times, too much as I was growing up.”

As evidence of how seriously he took that advice, Goldschmidt also had a 3.8 GPA in college as a finance major. Since he was drafted before his senior year, he determined to complete the requirements for his degree. In 2013, after taking a slew of online classes during the season, he graduated from the University of Phoenix with a degree in business management.

Goldschmidt’s maturity comes from the keen balance he has achieved in his life.

“Your faith and your family are the No. 1 and No. 2 things in your life,” he told *azfamily.com*. “Yeah, it’s completely changed me.”¹⁰

Goldschmidt’s journey to faith is an interesting one. His father was Jewish, the grandson of parents who left Germany to escape the Holocaust. Goldschmidt’s great-grandmother, Ilse Goldschmidt, was the heiress to one of the largest printing companies in Germany, but in 1938 she and her husband, Paul, and their five-year-old son, Ernie, fled the Nazis and reestablished their lives in Boston.

“They were living in Germany, and they figured out what was going to happen to them,” Goldschmidt told *MLB.com*. “All three of them got out and were sponsored by someone. I don’t know who.”

While his father's side of the family is Jewish, Goldschmidt and his two younger brothers, Adam and Robert, adopted their mother's Christian faith.

Paul's mother, a Catholic, raised Goldschmidt in the church, but Paul said it never had meaning in his life and he developed a negative perception of Christianity.

"I had this thought, what I thought He [God] was like, what I thought the church was like, what I thought the Bible was like, or religion in general, that was not something I was attracted to," he said. "But then I realized I had this wrong picture in my head. So, I think that just opened my eyes and seeing teammates who were Christians... There was something different about them."

Goldschmidt points to former teammate Ian Kennedy, hitting coach Turner Ward, and coach Andy Green as among those who he saw a difference in.

"They showed me a lot of love," he explained. "That's the word I like to use. They cared about me as a person. They cared about my family and my wife. The way they treated people and the love they showed everyone and their openness was what touched my heart.

"It was a slow process, but I wanted to know more about these people. Why were they so full of grace and everything Jesus showed in his life?"

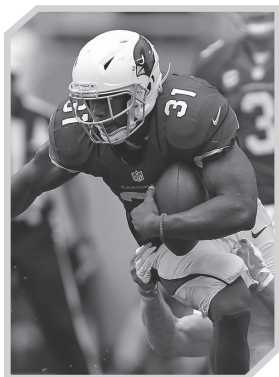
As part of the expression of his faith, Goldschmidt and his wife, Amy, have devoted themselves to outreach in the Phoenix community. They visit the Phoenix Children's Hospital so frequently they have badges that provide access whenever they like. Paul also speaks at numerous churches and events, sharing his story.

"I try to do as much as I can," he said, "but unfortunately we're all selfish at certain times, and I could do a better job of it."

That's just Goldy being Goldy. For him, there is always more to do.

"Nobody who ever gave his best regretted it."

GEORGE HALAS



DAVID JOHNSON

» FACTOIDS

Illinois State was the only school other than Northern Iowa to offer him a scholarship.

He played on a traveling dodgeball team in high school.

In the fall of 2016, football fans were asking, “Who is David Johnson? Where did he come from? And what makes him so good?”

By the summer of 2017, those same fans were making Johnson the first pick in their fantasy leagues (including yours truly).

The answer to “Who is David Johnson?” is simple. He’s the top running back in the NFL.

Where he came from is also easy to answer. He played college ball at Northern Iowa.

What makes him so good is a bit harder to answer.

Johnson’s success comes from a combination of athleticism, versatility, a commitment to excellence, and the drive birthed in him from being somewhat overlooked.

He made a grand entrance onto the NFL stage in 2015 after being drafted in the third round by the Arizona Cardinals. A highly productive backup during the first half of the season, Johnson started only five games as a rookie but still scored 12 touchdowns—8 rushing, 4 receiving—in helping Arizona reach the NFC Championship game. It was a harbinger of what was to come.

In 2017 he became the first player in NFL history to record 100 yards from scrimmage in the first 15 games of a season. He rushed for 1,239

yards and caught 80 passes for another 879 yards, giving him a league-leading 2,118 yards from scrimmage. He also scored a league-best 20 touchdowns. He earned Pro Bowl and first-team All-Pro honors.

“Running-wise, he’s a mix of all the greats,” said Cardinals offensive coordinator Harold Goodwin, who mentions Johnson in the same breath as Gale Sayers, Barry Sanders, Marshall Faulk, and Adrian Peterson.¹

Stump Mitchell, who served as the Cardinals running backs coach during Johnson’s first two years, elevates the conversation even higher.

“Listen,” he said, “it’s not far-fetched to think that David can be the best running back there is—or ever has been.”

“I wouldn’t trade him for anybody,” said Cardinals general manager Steve Keim.² By this he means any player at any position in the entire NFL.

It wasn’t always this way for Johnson. In fact, he was overlooked or marginalized most of his life before coming to Arizona. His childhood was spent running from things he wanted to forget.

Johnson’s father abandoned him when he was little. His mother, Regina, struggled to raise her six children. She worked multiple jobs and moved several times, often finding shelter in cheap motels. Johnson spent most of his nights wondering where he would sleep while most of his days in the summer were devoted to working in the cornfields.

When Johnson was in grade school, his mother was jailed for driving under the influence, so he moved in with an older sister. When his mom was released, she quit drinking, but the lifestyle meant money was scarce. To make matters worse, Johnson became the target of a bully who stalked him constantly.

While it seems implausible that the well-built six-foot-one, 224-pounder could ever have been the victim of bullying, it’s perhaps the most painful aspect of his childhood.

“I get that the most when I tell my story,” Johnson told *Sports Illustrated*. “‘There’s no way you were bullied.’ They didn’t know I wasn’t always this big. Sometimes they don’t believe me, and I have to really tell my story, that I had to go through the same thing they have to go through.”

The bully—a high schooler who was three or four years older—tormented Johnson after school. Once he took Johnson’s winter hat from a basketball game at the local YMCA and told Johnson the hat was now his.

Another time the bully found Johnson at the Y and started beating

up Johnson and his cousin. Johnson ran away, leaving his cousin alone to fight, a decision he still feels bad about.

The harassment was so painful, Johnson never told anyone about it. Now he does. Through his Mission 31 Foundation, he combats bullying at schools, sharing his story and encouraging students to be accepting of everyone. He also made bullying his focus, as displayed on his footwear when the NFL began its “My Cause, My Cleats” initiative.

“I want to talk about it,” he said. “I feel like, with kids being bullied, I feel like if they have one friend, one kid they spoke to, that would change their lives.”

Back then, with no one to talk to, Johnson was simmering under the surface, looking for an escape. He found it in football, where he liked to please his coaches and lose himself in the contact.

Johnson made varsity as a sophomore at Clinton High, where he scored 42 touchdowns as a senior.

Yet his diverse and advanced skill set made it difficult for college football recruiters to see him as a running back. Some coaches saw him as a linebacker, others as a defensive back. And some didn't even get his name right. Iowa State's letter to him was addressed to David *Jacobson*.

So Johnson went to Northern Iowa, where only a prophet would have been able to predict his success in the NFL.

Northern Iowa's coaches didn't know what to do with him, so they tried him at safety. Offensive coordinator Bill Salmon told him at one practice, “Intercept another pass, and you'll never play offense again.”

The coaches moved Johnson to receiver and then had him play both receiver and running back.

Johnson learned how to run passing routes, fake out defensive backs, and make precision cuts. He put in substantial work in the weight room, improving his max squat from 470 pounds to 670 and his bench press from 275 to 435.

All the reps at receiver allowed Johnson to grow into his place at the running back position. Over the next four years he set UNI records for rushing yards (4,687), all-purpose yards (6,859), and touchdowns (64). He scored four times against Iowa State, the team that couldn't get his name right on their recruiting letter.

When Johnson was not working over opponents, he was working

at various jobs to support himself. He spent summers removing asbestos, working as a handyman, and earning nine dollars an hour cleaning campus toilets, installing blinds, repairing stoves, and unclogging shower drains.

“That’s the stuff I had to do in the summer, whereas I think other college student-athletes were able to just work out,” he said. “I had to do a job, and I had to work out at the same time, so I think that’s really where I learned how to have my work ethic.”

As the 2015 NFL draft approached, Johnson was determined to prove the doubters wrong, not just those from the NFL, but from his entire life.

When he arrived at the Senior Bowl, a Jacksonville Jaguars scout couldn’t find his name on his list and asked, “Do you play linebacker?”

Another pro scout’s take of Johnson before the draft was that “[he] lacks the short-area quickness to be a consistently effective every-down running back. . . . Isn’t a classic finisher.”

Johnson took a picture of that report and read it multiple times each day.

The Cardinals drafted Johnson in the third round, after another running back they had targeted had already been chosen.

A few months later, in training camp, general manager Keim felt he may have stumbled onto greatness when he watched Johnson take a pitchout and blow through a hole in the defense like a sprinter. *A 224-pound human isn’t supposed to move like that*, Keim thought to himself. He turned to those nearby and mouthed “Wow!”

As a rookie, Johnson scored the first time he touched the ball in his very first regular-season game, turning a short pass in the 2015 season opener into a 55-yard touchdown against the Saints. The next week, at Chicago, he returned the opening kickoff 108 yards for a score. The Pro Football Hall of Fame called after the game—they wanted his cleats.

That season Johnson became just the fourth rookie in NFL history to record 500 yards rushing, 400 receiving, and 500 in kickoff returns and to score at least 13 touchdowns.

In 2016 he broke more records and quickly became one of the elite backs in the NFL. As evidence of his freakish skill set, Johnson was rated as the top-graded wide receiver by Pro Football Focus for the 2016 season, even though he was a running back.

“Very few humans possess his background or his physical skill set,” Keim told *Sports Illustrated*.³

In 2017 he set his sights on joining Roger Craig and Marshall Faulk as the only players ever to gain 1,000 yards rushing and receiving in the same season.

He cut fast food from his diet in the off-season and worked to improve his flexibility, muscle symmetry, and balance.

But a not-so-funny thing happened on the way to making history. Johnson dislocated his wrist in the first game of the 2017 season, had surgery, and missed the rest of the year.

“A weird injury and it’s really not a common injury in football,” said Johnson, who had never missed more than one game playing football at any level.

“At the beginning, it was very tough. I was down on myself. I was thinking, what could I have done on that play better, to change the play? Maybe my wrist wasn’t strong enough.”

The time off allowed him to be present for the major milestones of his son, David Jr., born to him and his wife Meghan in January 2017.

“When he rolled over I was there,” Johnson said. “I was there when he started crawling. I need to be there, support him. I might not know what I’m doing, but just being there, learning from those mistakes and moments, supporting him. Being there at every developing milestone that he has.”

Because of his son’s impending birth, Johnson declined the invitation to the Pro Bowl that same month. It was a good decision. Meghan had numerous complications, including preeclampsia, a potentially serious blood-pressure disorder occurring in just 5 percent of U.S. women.

When David Jr. was born, the doctors let Johnson catch his son. His only thought: *Don’t fumble*.

After the birth, David and Meghan retreated to their home outside Tempe. The house, like the man, is big but not fancy. The blinds stay drawn, and the Johnsons have their groceries delivered to maintain some privacy. Johnson is still adapting to the attention he receives.

He will receive more attention in the years ahead. After the 2017 season, star quarterback Carson Palmer announced his retirement and head coach Bruce Arians also stepped down. Suddenly, the Cardinals’ window

for success seemed much smaller, and that window will be in the hands of Johnson.

“I’m blessed, and I thank God for giving me this platform, for giving me the ability and the skill to play in this league,” he said. “If it wasn’t for Him, I wouldn’t be where I am today.

“I think God is working on me right now as for being a leader. He’s doing stuff to put me in positions to try to be a leader, but sometimes I get scared or I don’t want to. I feel like I’m going to say the wrong thing to the team or do the wrong thing, and I feel like He keeps wanting to put me in those positions.”

Johnson sees it as an opportunity to lead through his actions, actions he hopes will demonstrate who he truly is.

“Just the small things I’ve learned from the Bible, those small things go a long way in how I conduct myself,” Johnson said. “People don’t have to ask us if we are Christians. They know by the way we conduct ourselves, by the way we speak, and even by the way we play football.”