

Dennis OKLAHOMAN OF THE YEAR Byrd:

A Lesson In Courage

When this NFL defensive end broke his neck on the field last year, doctors never expected him to walk again. But faith, family, and sheer willpower turned this Oklahoman into a national hero.

By Mike D'Orso

Photography by David Fitzgerald

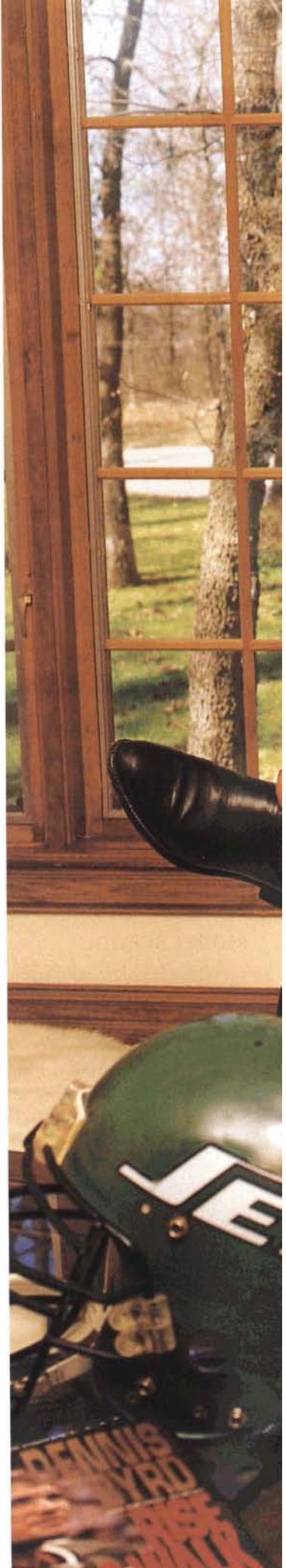
On November 29, 1992, on the hardened turf of Giants Stadium, the world of Dennis Byrd, an Oklahoma-born defensive end for the New York Jets, was turned upside down. In the midst of sacking the quarterback for the Kansas City Chiefs, Byrd collided with a 280-pound teammate. His neck was shattered, his hulking six-foot, five-inch, 270-pound body paralyzed. After seven hours of surgery, Dennis Byrd was told he might never walk again.

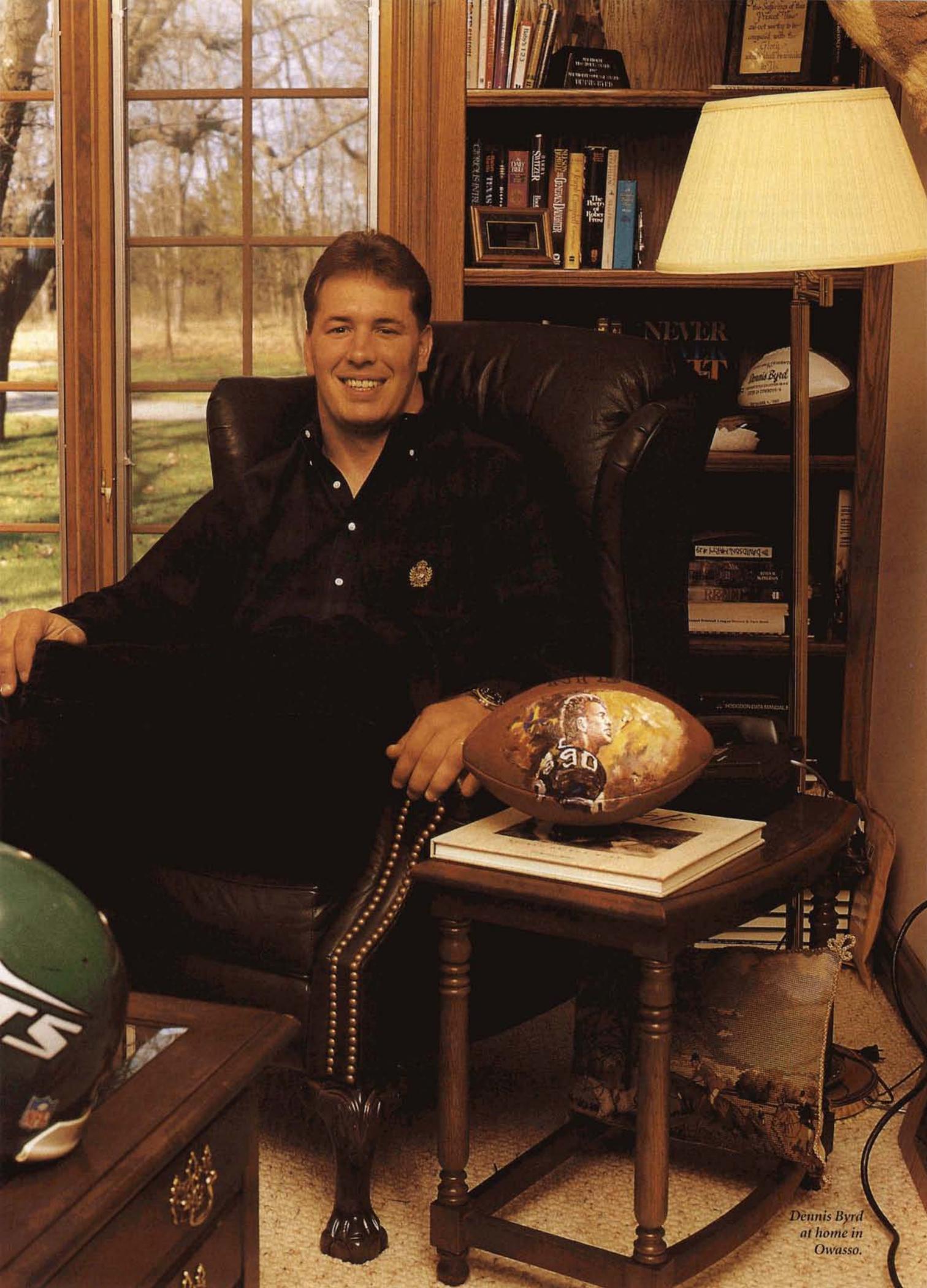
What has happened since is the stuff heroes are made of.

*Though doctors said it would be two years before he would walk—if he ever walked again—two months after the injury Dennis Byrd was able to stand and take small steps on his own. He leveled against his injury the same degree of faith, sweat, and willpower that had made him one of the best in the game of football. His struggle and ultimate success drew national attention: in September HarperCollins published *Rise & Walk: The Trial and Triumph of Dennis Byrd*; this February, a made-for-TV movie about his life will air on the Fox network.*

Meanwhile, Dennis himself has come home to Oklahoma to start a new life. Football is now a memory—albeit a glorious one. His world now centers on spending time with his wife and two young daughters, educating the public about spinal cord injuries, working as a television football commentator, and seeing that his dream of a first-class summer camp for handicapped children built in the windswept hills of Oklahoma is opened by the summer of 1995. The latter is all but a given. Already, all the teams in the NFL have promised support, major corporations have donated money and services, and Paul Newman has even offered his own children's camp as a possible site for a trial run this coming summer.

It is not the life that Byrd planned for himself, but it is a good one, an inspiring one. What follows is a closer look at the man who has provided a lesson in courage for so many Americans—from those with spinal cord injuries to celebrities such as Diane Sawyer, Tom Landry, and Joe Namath—written by the fellow who helped Dennis Byrd tell his own story.





Dennis Byrd
at home in
Owasso.

FROM RISE & WALK

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THE EARLY YEARS

There's no question where my taste for combat came from. All those years I followed behind my brothers, they never did anything half-speed. When we played football, it was always tackle. Not once did we play touch. When we played baseball, it was never slow-pitch. I remember asking Doug one time to toss me a pitch underhand. I was six years old. He looked at me like I had to be kidding and threw it all the harder for asking...I had the drive to win inside me, and it didn't come from my parents. It came from my brothers. We weren't driven, we drove ourselves. And it was a healthy drive. I see that same drive on outdoor basketball courts in the inner city. I see it in kids who don't have Nintendo, a swimming pool, all the neat stuff that makes life pleasant. There's nothing wrong with having these things, but I'm not sure the kids who have them feel this same competitiveness, maybe because they don't have to compete...

At the end of my junior season, my family moved back into the countryside, onto this raw piece of Oklahoma. My mom and dad and sisters stayed in a trailer while my brothers and I lived in a bus. It had a refrigerator and plenty of lights, as did the trailer. It had air conditioning, too. The only thing it didn't have was running water. Every day we'd make a couple of trips up the hill to a well my dad had built, dipping the water with a six-gallon bucket and carrying it back for cooking and drinking and bathing.

I never felt bothered by how we were living. I never felt poor, never felt ashamed. Then again, Angela reminded me that we were dating six months before I could bring myself to show her where I lived, so I guess I might have been a little sensitive on that score. Bobby Proctor, the OU secondary coach who recruited me my senior season, told my high school coach after I'd made it to the NFL that he thought he'd seen some pretty harsh living conditions in the inner cities he often visited but that he had never seen anything like the place I lived. Still, to me this was as much a home as the nice houses we'd had in Oklahoma City and in Sacramento. We were a family, we had each other, we had our faith, and that was enough.

COLLEGE DREAMS

It was pretty clear that my parents couldn't afford to send me to college, not at that point in their lives. If I wanted a way out that was a way up, it was going to have to be through a football scholarship, and the only way I was going to win a scholarship was to make myself into more of a player than I already was. Leading a J.V. team in tackling and receiving was not going to be nearly enough. I needed to get even stronger, even bigger, and I had only one summer and one more season to do it.

Which is how I wound up with the pole.

I had heard a story somewhere about a football player who built up his body by going one-on-one against a billy goat. We didn't have any goats, but the dirt yard outside our family's trailer was nice and flat, a perfect place to put a hole in the ground.

I found a four-by-four green oak post, about six feet long, sunk it about three feet deep and began a routine that became my evening ritual that entire summer. By day I lived in the school's weight room. Then each night, as the sun was setting and the air was cooling off, I'd go out to that post and settle into a good, solid, three-point stance, digging my cleats into the bare earth beneath my feet. Then I'd fire out and slam that wood with my hands or my forearms, using the form and techniques my coaches had taught me. Over and over I hit that post, until the sweat was pouring off me. I'd hit it until my hands actually bled through the calluses that had already formed. Then I'd hit it some more. I'd keep going until tears were streaming out of my eyes. That's when I knew it was time to stop, when the pain and exhaustion turned into tears. Only then would I finally drop to the dirt and call it a day. The next night, I'd be back to do it all over again.

I had a dream by then. I told my parents and friends I was going to go to college on a football scholarship. Privately, I believed I was going to play professional football, too...I shared that dream with no one.

So there we were, crouched in a sea of buffalo grass, a near-full moon shining above us as I scanned a ravine with the beam from Dennis's flashlight, just the way he had told me to.

"That's it," he whispered. "Just keep it moving, left to right, real slow."

I leaned against his Bronco as Dennis stood behind me, raising a small metal tube to his mouth and blowing through cupped hands, shattering the midnight silence with the wail of a crying baby. That's what a wounded rabbit sounds like, he had told me. A crying baby.

"A coyote will come in on that sound from a mile away," he had said.

That's what we were here for. Coyotes.

That's why we had left after sundown, traveling an hour west from Dennis's home on the outskirts of Owasso, picking up his friend David Fritts at the trailer where Fritts lives—a double-wide with goats coming and going through its rickety front door. We'd driven two more hours after that, the three of us jammed in the jeep, Dennis at the wheel, rolling into the Oklahoma night, into open ranchland where the highway ended and a two-lane blacktop began. And then that ran out too, and still we kept going, following a pair of dirt ruts through barbed wire fence gates and out into the prairie blackness.

We were supposed to be writing a book, Dennis and I. I'd flown to Tulsa the day before from my home in Virginia, armed with a sack of pens and notebooks, a tape recorder, a case of blank cassettes, and a thick file of everything that had ever been written about Dennis Byrd—which included a handful of newspaper clippings from his senior season at Mustang High School; some programs and yearbooks from the University of Tulsa, where he'd starred as a hell-bent-for-leather defensive lineman; a few stories done during his first three seasons as a New York Jet; and the dozens of pieces written after that gray November afternoon in 1992 when the big kid from Oklahoma, the one the New York writers called "Huck Finn in a helmet," lay paralyzed on the frigid turf of New Jersey's Giants Stadium, his spine splintered by a horrifying collision with a teammate.

Like millions of Americans, I watched replays of that collision for weeks after it happened. I read newspaper accounts of Byrd's progress, from the first fearful prognoses through the small signs that his recovery might be better than expected to the remarkable moment when he walked into a press conference at New York's Mount Sinai hospital in February, steadied by a

pair of canes, and announced to the world that he was going home.

Home to Oklahoma.

That was the last I heard of Dennis Byrd until the spring of 1993, when my agent called from Manhattan and asked if I'd be interested in possibly writing a book with Byrd. Sure, I said, but only if this man and his story were truly the stuff of a book.

I wasn't sure they were. Yes, he had staged a stunning recovery from a broken neck, but beyond that, what was the story? Who was Dennis Byrd? What kind of person had he been before the injury? What kind of life had he lived? How had that life shaped him up to the moment his neck was shattered, and how was it altered by that moment?

Depth. Texture. Drama. These are the elements of a compelling story, but were they there in Byrd's? Were they there in Byrd? For all I knew, his life had been a straight line from suburbia to the NFL, with no struggles other than those he faced on the football field. Rarely do good stories follow straight lines. I needed to know the line of this one.

And I needed to know if this was a man of substance, a man in touch with his feelings, someone who would allow me to climb inside him, into the shadows as well as the light, who could open his soul to a stranger, holding himself together while holding nothing back. Most importantly, was that soul one I wanted to enter? Was Dennis Byrd a man inside whose skin I could feel comfortable? When all was said and done, was this a person I could believe in?

These questions were all on my mind as I flew to New York on a Sunday in April to meet Dennis and his wife, Angela. They had come to the city to see several writers over the course of a few days, to decide who they would both like to work with.

What struck me most when Dennis entered the room—a small hotel conference room with flowers and a fireplace—was his size. It is one thing to read that a man is six-foot, five-inches tall and 275 pounds. It is another thing to stand next to him. Dennis had lost some weight during his months in the hospital, but he was still an enormous figure, his flannel shirt filling the doorway as he stepped through to shake my hand. His grip was strong; his smile broad, warm, genuine. He limped noticeably, his steps measured and slow, but he insisted on pulling chairs from the wall to the table, first for Angela, then for me and himself. He wouldn't let anyone do that for him. As we sat and talked for the

next two hours, he held Angela's hand nearly the entire time, like a couple of kids who had just begun dating. Again, genuine.

More than anything else, that's what I took away from that meeting—the belief that this man and his wife were the real thing. There was nothing bogus, nothing phony or false about them. Some people wondered if the Dennis Byrd they saw in those press conferences on television was just an act. Nobody could be that sincere, they thought. That's what Dennis's teammate Jeff Lageman had thought when he first met Byrd at the Jets training camp their rookie season. "I couldn't believe this guy," Lageman said.

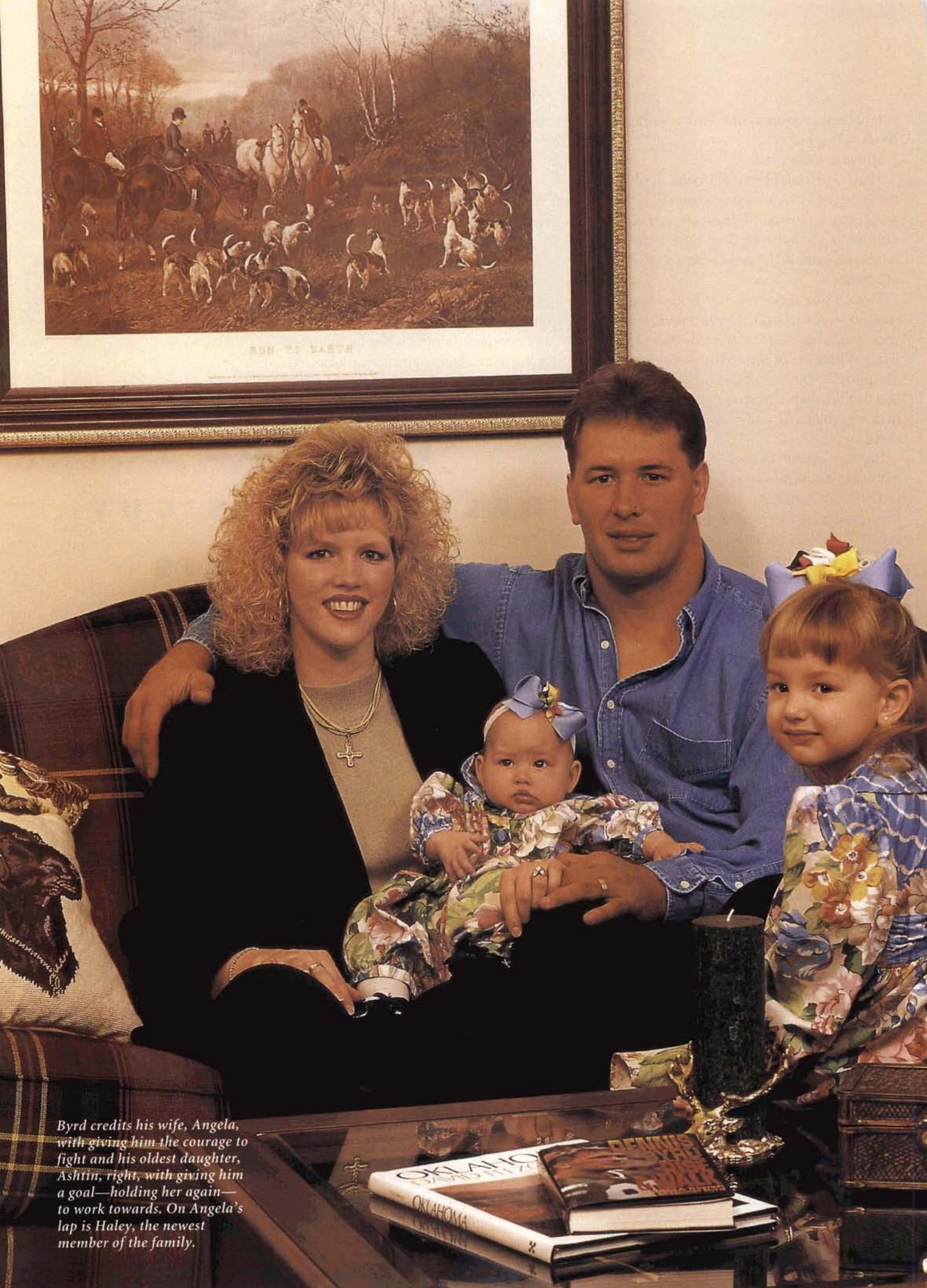
**" I C O U L D N ' T
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T O B E T R U E . "**

"Calling his wife on the phone every night. It was sickening, too good to be true."

Lageman, the leather-clad, Harley-riding line-backer from Virginia, became one of Byrd's best friends over the next three seasons. During the long, dark winter after the injury, Lageman was at Dennis's bedside almost as much as Angela. He cut Dennis's food for him, lifted him like a baby from his wheelchair into a van the first night Dennis was allowed to leave the hospital, changed Dennis's catheter for him when they went out to eat that night.

I knew none of this the day I met Dennis. What I did know by the time I flew home that

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RUN TO EARTH

Byrd credits his wife, Angela, with giving him the courage to fight and his oldest daughter, Ashtin, right, with giving him a goal—holding her again—to work towards. On Angela's lap is Haley, the newest member of the family.



THE PROVING GROUND

They say I came out of nowhere my senior season at Mustang, and in a way that was true. I had played hardly any varsity football at all. I had never started a game. There had been no newspaper stories written about me, no headlines, no films or scouting reports filed in coaches' offices at other schools. Other schools didn't even know I existed.

But I wasn't surprised. I knew I had put in more time than anybody else. If somebody was going to beat me, he was going to have to work harder than I had, and I didn't think that was possible. I knew how much I could give, how deep I could reach. I'd answered all those questions myself that summer.

I was six-four now, 205, and it didn't take long for other teams to begin noticing me. Pretty soon I no longer had one man to beat. It was always two, then three. I remember having to beat first of all the tight end, then the tackle, then there'd be a running back in there, too, and I'd have to go through them all.

We finished 8-2 that regular season, good enough to get into the state playoffs, where we faced Tulsa's Bishop Kelley in the first round, and if any one game epitomized my senior year, that was the one. We weren't supposed to have a chance against the reigning state champions. Early in the first quarter they ran an option to my side, their strength against ours. The quarterback kept it, and I nailed him—along with the fullback, all in one blow. They had to help the quarterback to the sidelines; he was done for the night. The very next play, they ran the option again, to my side again, with the new quarterback keeping it again. And I took out the whole backfield again, putting that quarterback out of the game. Charlie Carpenter told me he'd never seen anything like it in his life. They had to go with their third-stringer the rest of the way, and we won 30-6.

When the game was done, Tom Stockton, the Bishop Kelly coach, came over to Coach Carpenter and said, "Who is number sixty-eight?" The next morning Stockton drove over to the University of Tulsa football department, where his good friend John Cooper was the head coach. Cooper wasn't in, so Stockton left a note on his door. "GO TO MUSTANG," it read. "RECRUIT DENNIS BYRD. ONE TOUGH S.O.B."

LIFE AS A JET

I remember every detail of our first rookie scrimmage against the Washington Redskins; I began a ritual that day. Not long after the draft, after we knew I'd be going to New York, my dad took me with him on one of his trips to sell insurance. On this particular one, we wound up stopping at a small Indian trading post in the northeast corner of the state. Among the handmade goods lining the shelves was a small leather sack, a pouch decorated with buckskin fringe and tiny metal bells and etched with the beaded outline of a thunderbird. My dad noticed me admiring it, and a few days later he gave it to me as a gift.

I filled it with some of the dirt from our yard in Mustang and brought it with me to minicamp in May. My teammates constantly asked me, "What's with the bag?" They wanted to know what kind of voodoo I was working. I'd just tell them it was a memory bag. "It's where I've been," I'd say. "It's who I am." I didn't tell anyone what was in it. In later years I told a few close friends, but most of the guys never knew.

A memory bag is exactly what it was. I added a lock of Ange's hair to it the day before I left for training camp. I put a tooth from a buffalo skull in there, too. And a feather. And a little clip of hair from our dog, Roxie. When Ashtin was born, I put a clip of her hair in there, too.

There was no special magic to it, unless you believe in the magic of memories, in the power of the past.

I do.

That day in Lehigh, just before we took the field, I sat by myself, squeezed that bag tightly in my hands, and meditated on my life. I thought about the things I'd been through, about the people I loved. And I prayed. I prayed that I'd play to the best of my ability, that no one would get really hurt, that the Lord would take care of each one of us and allow us to fulfill ourselves in whatever way He saw fit.

Then I untied the sack, sprinkled some of the soil into my palm, and hung the pouch in my locker. As we ran out onto the field, I opened my hand and let the dirt fall onto the Pennsylvania grass.

It's a ritual I would repeat on every NFL field I ever played on. Anaheim. Seattle. Indianapolis. Cleveland. Chicago. Tampa. Philadelphia. Pittsburgh. Foxboro. Miami. Denver. New Orleans. San Diego. Cincinnati. Buffalo. Houston. Detroit. Artificial turf or natural grass, every one of those stadiums has some Oklahoma soil on it.

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night was that I wanted to help tell this story. When he called late that month and said let's do it, I booked the next flight out.

We were working with an ungodly deadline. The publisher wanted the book in the stores by the first Sunday in September, the day the Jets would open their 1993 season and Dennis would walk back out onto that same Giants Stadium field where he had fallen 10 months before.

That meant the manuscript had to be done by July. That meant we had two months to write the book.

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PATIENT.**

Two months to relive Dennis's life, to go back through the twenty-five years before his injury as well as the one after it. Two months to talk with his family and friends, teammates and coaches, doctors and physical therapists and anyone else who had been part of his personal journey.

Six months would be a sprint for a task like this; two months was warp speed. Every minute mattered, which is why I thought Dennis was insane when he tossed a cap at me the second night I was in Owasso and told me we were going for a ride. "A ride?" I said, following him into his garage, looking nervously at my watch. "Where?"

"You'll see," he said, grinning and grunting as he pulled himself into the driver's seat. He was walking more smoothly than he had the last time I'd seen him, but it was still a struggle simply for him to stand. He still had numbness from the neck down, he felt tingling and burning sensations in areas of his body where damaged nerves were continuing to come alive, and the muscles in his arms and legs—muscles that had been inert during his quadriplegic period immediately following the injury—were still weak.

Yet he could drive. He insisted on driving. He had dragged himself behind the wheel of that jeep the first weekend after he'd arrived home in February. The neighbors thought he was nuts. Now it was summer, and they could watch him take his little girl Ashtin out for strolls in the soft twilight of early evening. They didn't go far on those strolls, Dennis and Ashtin—maybe a quarter mile or so—and by the time they got home, Dennis was exhausted. But he did it. He did it every time Ashtin asked. Six months earlier he had lain limp in an ambulance, watching a medic slice his uniform off as he and Angela prayed that one day he'd be able to lift his arms again, that one day he'd be able to hold his wife and his little girl.

Now he could do that, and he never said no. Six hours a day Dennis and I sat in his den, pulling together his family's history, his memories, his emotions, pushing and prodding to piece together the story of his life both before and after the accident. Even then, we didn't know if we'd be done in time. But Dennis was never too busy to give Ashtin a kiss or a hug whenever she asked. And like all three-year-olds, she asked a lot.

I needed to see these things to understand who Dennis was, to know how his story could best be told. I needed to see how he loves the lake behind his house, how he treasures the boat he keeps back there to cast for bass, how he'll drop everything to talk fishing and hunting with the friends who phone him several times a day, friends like Fritts, who Dennis met at a gun show a couple of years back. Fritts calls nearly every day to talk about their last outing and to plan the next one. They've ranged as far as New Mexico together, Dennis and David, armed with cameras and rifles, in search of coyotes.

I needed to see the room Dennis has upstairs, its walls painted New York Jets green and lined with photos from his football career. I expected that. What I did not expect, and what I needed to see, were the other mementos Dennis keeps in that room: the big wild turkey he bagged and had mounted the year before last; the stuffed

coyote standing in the corner; the tiny tanks and soldiers Dennis fashions from scratch, crafting the miniature models as precisely as he measures the powder with which he loads the bullet casings in his workshop-closet; the antique oil lantern saved from his grandmother's trailer in Mustang, the same kind of lantern the family used when they sat out tornadoes in the storm cellar of his grandparents' home.

Dennis taught me about tornadoes, describing in detail how it felt as a boy to be playing in a gully on a sunny morning and see the sky suddenly turn dark and feel the temperature drop and the wind kick up, to sprint across the field with a wall cloud closing in behind him and see his family ahead, waving frantically beside the cellar, praying he'd reach them before the storm did.

I'd never heard of a wall cloud. I live on the Atlantic, where we have hurricanes, not tornadoes. But the day Dennis was done telling me what a wall cloud looked like, I found myself outrunning one as I drove back to my motel near Broken Arrow. I passed cars pulled over and parked beneath the interstate overpasses, wondering what they knew that I didn't. The next morning I opened the Tulsa paper and saw that two tornadoes had touched down within miles of where I was staying. One turned a truck over; the other tore the roof off someone's house.

"Oh, that," said the desk clerk, shrugging his shoulders when I showed him the headline. "Happens all the time."

This was Dennis's world, a place of wind and wildness as well as silence and solitude. I learned—and saw—how this land, this place, had become a part of him long before football, and how that feeling of connection to these prairies, as well as to his family and his faith, was where he found his strength, both as an athlete and, even more crucially, as a recovering spinal cord injury patient.

When I went out in public with Dennis—to the photo store, to a restaurant—I could see what his life is like as a local hero, a former All-American and New York Jet. Strangers stop to chat, and of course to ask for his autograph. Again, as with Ashtin, Dennis never says no. Not only that, he pays attention. There's none of the callousness or arrogance worn by so many celebrities today. More than once I watched Dennis's food grow cold as he listened earnestly to a waiter tell him about a friend or relative who had been paralyzed in an auto accident, or diving into a lake, or falling off a ladder.

That's what Dennis's life—and his story—

THE ACCIDENT

I remember coming around the corner, leaning in and lowering my shoulder to keep Rich Valerio, the Chiefs' right tackle, from getting back on me. You plant everything low at a point like that, dipping your body and driving with everything you've got, turning the corner at top speed. I could see the Chiefs' quarterback Dave Krieg right then, his white jersey filling my field of vision. He was actually above the spot I expected, which was great. That's just how you want it.

But then he stepped up.

Krieg must have seen me, too. Or sensed me. Typically, a quarterback will set up at the back of the pocket and let the offensive tackle ride an outside-rushing defensive end on by. But Krieg, seeing I was bearing down on him so fast, saw that the only way out for him was to step up.

Now it was all physics. My momentum and sheer centrifugal force were slinging me out even as I was straining to lean in. At this point I knew I was not going to be able to tackle Krieg, so I chopped at the football with my right arm as I came past. I remember focusing on that football, bringing my hand down, actually hitting it, and then...

In an instant, in the millisecond it takes to bat an eye, something rose in front of me like a wall. A huge green wall, inches from my face, my body hurtling through the air with all its might.

All my years of training, the thousands of tackles I'd made, the way I'd been taught to hit with my head up, to keep that spine bent so it can take a blow, all that meant nothing at that instant. I wasn't making a tackle. My reaction wasn't that of a football player. It was an instinctual reaction, the reaction anyone would have when they're suddenly about to slam into something head-on and they've got a thousandth of a second to respond.

I ducked.

I ducked my head down instead of raising it up. I hunched my shoulders, pulling in my head, all in an instant.

I felt a solid thump. And everything slowed down.

Everything fell away.

Then everything stopped.

NO REGRETS

After the accident, I heard that some critics portrayed me as a poor country boy from Oklahoma who wasn't smart or sophisticated enough to realize the risks of the game, who was somehow taken advantage of by the dark forces of football that used me as fodder to make their own fortunes. That's so ridiculous it's hardly worth responding to. How dare anybody who doesn't now the game and who doesn't know me presume to speak for me or my feelings? And how dare they use what happened to me to attack the game I love?

I never stopped loving this game, not before I had to leave it behind and not after that. I loved it even as I lay in that ICU room that Friday morning, knowing my teammates were somehow trying to gather themselves to play another game that weekend. I felt no bitterness whatsoever. I had no regrets, no second thoughts.

"To play this game, you have to play it on the edge," Bruce Coslet said in a press conference after my accident. "You throw your body around. That's what Dennis was doing. He was hell-bent for leather on that play."

Ninety miles an hour with my hair on fire.



DAN FARRELL / DAILY NEWS

The no-banner rule was suspended at Giants Stadium at the first home game after Byrd's injury to allow messages of support to fly.

have come around to. He obligingly signs autographs, writing his uniform number—90—below his name. He'll always be a former New York Jet, and he cherishes those memories. More than once he cried as he talked with me about his teammates and about the sport he misses so much. He still can't cue up a video of one of his games without shaking a little. "It's hard," he said the first time he played one of those tapes for me. "It was a long time before I could even bring myself to look at these."

He doesn't look often. He has no need to. Football is part of his past now, and he respects that fact. He told me more than once that he'd suit up again in a second if he had the chance. He holds no grudge against the sport that shattered his neck. No bitterness.

But he knows the game is behind him now. He is no longer Dennis Byrd, New York Jet. Now he is Dennis Byrd, recovering spinal cord injury patient, and that is where he finds his identity. Each morning he wakes up praying his comeback will continue, hoping the burning is still there because that means something is still happening to those nerves he thought he'd never feel again.

Three times a week Dennis drives the half-

hour or so into Tulsa for his physical therapy sessions at the St. John Rehabilitation Center. Watching him in that room, straining on a leg-lift machine, his T-shirt as drenched with sweat as it once was on the football field, I could see the intensity, the drive, the focus that had helped carry this man to the pinnacle of his profession.

Now it had carried him here, into a room filled with men and women of all ages, some with halo braces attached to their heads, others unable to lift themselves from their wheelchairs. This was Dennis Byrd's world now. These were his friends, his teammates, as it were. And he showed them as much love and respect as he used to share with Jeff Lageman and Marvin Washington and all the rest of his fellow New York Jets.

Each afternoon, when Dennis was done with his workout in the rehab room, before going down to his jeep, he'd ride the elevator up, to the fourth floor, where patients with spinal cord injuries as severe as his own laid in rooms much like the ones in which Dennis had spent two months in New York.

He entered those rooms humbly, gently, with the compassion and the knowing that only someone who has shared such suffering can

understand. I watched him sit at the bedside of a young man named David Cane, an eighteen-year-old kid who had driven an all-terrain vehicle over a cliff, shattering the same C-5 vertebra as Dennis. David could move nothing below his neck. Dennis treated him like a brother, talking gently to him about how he felt, about what he could or could not feel, bringing him a book one day—a Louis L'Amour western—a couple of videotapes another, dialing the phone for him, getting him a cup of water—just being there.

That, in the end, is what Dennis Byrd's life is like now—fully and totally being there, whether it is at the bedside of a boy like David, or in the arms of Angela and Ashtin and the newest family member, Haley, born the week we finished the manuscript, or out in the middle of that Oklahoma prairie with the midnight moon hovering above him, with the buffalo grass waving in a soft summer breeze, and with those coyotes coming in from the darkness, lured by the sound of crying and the beam from a light.

Dennis's light. ❏

Mike D'Orso lives in Norfolk, Virginia, where he is a staff writer for the Virginian-Pilot. He is also a frequent contributor to Sports Illustrated. Besides Rise and Walk, written with Dennis Byrd, D'Orso is co-author of For the Children, with Philadelphia inner-city school principal Madeline Cartwright; The Cost of Courage, with former Alabama congressman Carl Elliott; and Somerset Homecoming, with former Portsmouth, Virginia, social worker Dorothy Redford.

The made-for-television movie Rise and Walk: The Dennis Byrd Story is scheduled to air February 28 on the Fox network. The film was shot in December in Yukon, Mustang (Byrd's home town), and Norman, with football scenes shot at Owen Field at the University of Oklahoma. (Byrd actually played for T.U., but when the film company was having difficulty finding locations to shoot its film in California Lt. Gov. Jack Mildren, who did play for O.U., called up and offered the Norman stadium as a stand-in.)

Byrd himself oversaw some of the filming. Oklahoma actor Cathy Morris played Angela Byrd, and four-year-old McKenzie Lain Smith played Byrd's daughter, Ashtin.

Another little bit of Oklahoma will appear in the film: movie-makers created a tornado, just like the ones that used to send Byrd and his family scrambling into their Mustang storm cellar.

Ahh, the magic of Hollywood.

THE TURNING POINT

The hospital staff rigged up a phone system with a headset I could wear to make it easier to handle the calls coming in. I could operate it by pushing my head against a pad put on my pillow, answering that way, then listening through a speaker, and talking through the headset microphone. I was trying it out that night with my sisters, when suddenly one of the hospital operators cut in and told me Bill Clinton was on another line, waiting to speak to me.

Right. Ha-ha. "Could you tell him I'm on the line with my sisters?" I said.

A minute later my dad came in with a small card in his hand. "Son," he said, "that really was the president...or the president-elect. He left his number." I couldn't believe it. I called the number right away—my dad dialed it for me—and sure enough, a secretary answered, and in a couple of seconds Bill Clinton came on the line.

"Hi, Dennis," he said. "I wanted to call and tell you I've been thinking a lot about you lately. And I want you to know I'm praying for you."

"Thank you very much," I said. "I'm praying for you, too. The way things are going, you need it more than I do."

We talked for about ten minutes. I told him I'd never talked to a President before, and he told me he hadn't talked to many football players. Finally, he wished me luck. "I wish you luck," I said. "You're the one who's inherited the problems."

I hadn't voted for Bill Clinton. I didn't share his point of view on some key issues. But I respected his sincerity tremendously, especially after that phone call.

Early the next morning I did something I hadn't done since being carried off the field the Sunday before. I moved my toes.

By the time the team arrived at La Guardia for its 1 p.m. flight to Buffalo, there was more news waiting for them. I'd "fired" my right quad—the quadriceps muscle in the lower thigh, just inside the knee. It was only a twitch. You could hardly see it. But this was the spark that could start a fire. I was no medical doctor, but I knew if a twitch is there, it means the nerves are intact from the brain to that point. The highway is open, at least partially. If you can fire the quad, you can eventually extend the knee. If you can extend the knee, you can stand. And if you can stand, maybe you can walk.

GIVING CREDIT

From the moment I went down on the field to the day I left Mount Sinai Hospital, all the way up to this moment, my case has been a textbook example of what a model system of care can do. Ten years from now, I hope the treatment I received will seem archaic. There is that much still to learn about treating spinal cord injuries. I pray the doctors and researchers will continue to discover new and effective ways to deal with this condition, and I pray the public will give them the support they need.

Just as crucial, however, was the love and support I received from tens of thousands of people who responded with cards and letters and phone calls and prayers. Knowing you're not alone is so important to making it through an ordeal like this. I know there are people who go through a situation like mine feeling that they are alone. I wish they knew they weren't.

I could easily have been destroyed by what happened to me. I could easily have been broken, just fallen apart. In every sense, I was weak and vulnerable. I had become weakness, and I became it in an instant. Suddenly. As suddenly as a clear April afternoon turns into a tornado. As suddenly as a coyote appears in a breeze-blown stand of buffalo grass. As suddenly as a gunshot to the head ends a good man's life on a dark city street. As suddenly as a collision on a football field changes one man's life on a gray November afternoon.

I feared that my wife would leave me, but she is beside me now as never before, with a love that has been tested by fire. I feared I would never hold my daughter again; I hold her today and she holds me back with the love of a little girl who knows she will never lose her daddy. And she has a little sister now who will hold me in the same way. I feared I might be abandoned, forgotten; instead I have been embraced and honored more than I could ever have dreamed. I feared I would never have my legs beneath me again; they are there now, and they will only get stronger. Even when the fear was strongest, I still believed from the bottom of my heart that someday I would walk back onto the turf in Giants Stadium. I didn't know when, but I knew I would.

And now I have.