

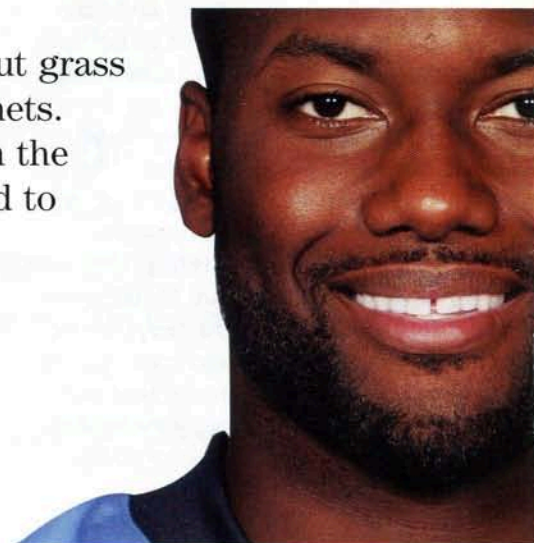
Jacksonville Jaguars' Quarterback

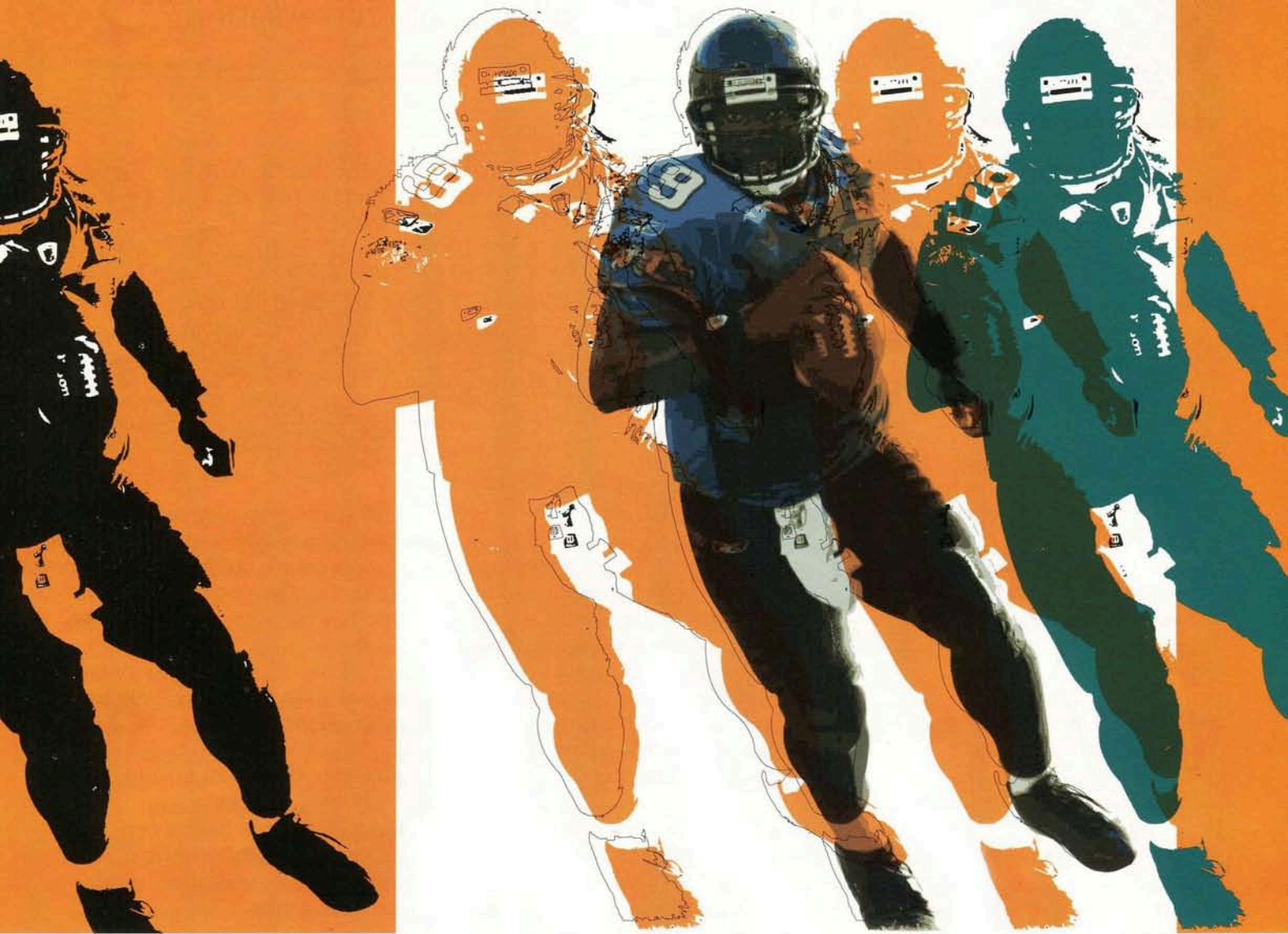
DAVID GARRARD

Tackles Crohn's

“There was something about the smell of the cut grass that day and the kids in their jerseys and helmets. I was out there watching my oldest brother on the field. It was at that moment I realized I wanted to spend my life playing football.”

— *David Douglass Garrard, at the age of six*





When he was of age to join his two brothers, Quincy and Anthony, for football games in Plainfield, New Jersey, his mother promptly signed him up to play. Twenty-one years later, Garrard has just entered his fourth season as a quarterback for the National Football League's (NFL) Jacksonville Jaguars.

However, it hasn't always been a field of dreams for Garrard. He sustained his first bout of stomach pains in January 2004, but didn't think it warranted immediate medical attention. "I felt like something was wrong, but the pain went away. I figured I'd see a doctor in March when I reported back for workouts with the Jaguars," explains Garrard. During his check-up with the team physician, he was referred to a gastroenterologist for a full work-up. After a series of tests, including a colonoscopy, Garrard was told that it looked like he had Crohn's disease. After further testing, this diagnosis was confirmed.

“I needed pain killers, not conversation.”

He was initially relieved by his doctor's words. "I never heard of Crohn's so I thought, 'Whew, it's nothing.' I figured it couldn't be all that bad if I never heard of it. I'd take a pill and be done with it."

Surgery never even entered his mind. Even after learning more about the disease, Garrard wanted to exhaust all other treatment options before succumbing to the knife. "I didn't want to go through the whole ordeal of surgery and the post-surgery recovery period, especially since I was trying to gear up for football season. I'd try anything else first. I was willing to try whatever medication was available and anything else that could be done short of surgery."

After trials of drugs including prednisone and Canasa, Garrard was still suffering from the symptoms of Crohn's disease. He subsequently spent several days in the hospital where he was given infusions of Remicade and, after being discharged, he worked with a dietician to fine-tune his diet. Although Remicade showed promise and had some positive effects on his disease, it wasn't enough to do the trick.

Garrard was back in the hospital within a week's time. "The day I had to go back to the hospital was one of the worst days of my life. I was throwing up day and night, and my entire body was cramping up. I was barely able to get dressed so my wife could drive me to the emergency room. All I could think about was getting some relief — and fast."

He was confident everything would be fine once he made it to the emergency room. Unfortunately, this wasn't the case. "I had to wait 45 minutes before anyone even saw me. And then they just wanted to get some background information. It seemed like an endless list of questions. I could barely move. I needed pain killers, not conversation," emphasizes Garrard, who says that an IV angel finally came to his rescue.

By this time, Garrard had dropped 35 pounds and had to buy a new wardrobe. At 6'2", he was now a 215-pound quarterback. But even during his darkest times, Garrard never lost faith. "I always knew I would be playing football again, and my wife shared this belief. We never gave it a second thought, never doubting that I would be back on the field. I believed in my doctors and trusted they would help me get back on my feet."

Shortly after his visit to the emergency room, Garrard finally opted for surgery. In June 2004, doctors removed the diseased section of his intestines, measuring about a foot long, and he was out of the hospital in just four days.

He did everything in his powers to ensure a quick recovery, listening to his doctor's every word. "I was told I had one of the quickest recoveries that my doctors had ever seen. I was running and throwing in about five weeks, instead of the standard six- to eight-week recovery period. After surgery, there were no traces of Crohn's anywhere else in my intestinal tract."

Putting back the weight he lost from Crohn's disease was a major goal for Garrard, and he did so in just a month's time. "I ate excessively. I was determined to put on weight because I never played that light. I didn't always make the best food choices because I was so motivated to get back to my normal weight. I've always been a big guy. Once I reached my ideal weight, I leveled off and maintained it."

During a routine colonoscopy earlier this year, Garrard's doctor saw signs of Crohn's disease. At the time, he wasn't on any medication and, in light of this recurrence, his doctor prescribed Remicade, which Garrard continues to take. A colonoscopy last July revealed no sign of disease. He has been back to his old self ever since.

A Leader On the Field, and Off

Due to his success, Garrard encourages individuals suffering from Crohn's disease to consider all treatment options, even if some of these options don't sound appealing at first. Although surgery offers no guarantees, he believes it is worthy of consideration. Says Garrard: "If your doctor recommends surgery, give it some serious thought. It could really make a difference in how you feel."

He is encouraging one of his acquaintances with Crohn's disease, who went from a powerful 200 pounds down to 150 pounds, to be more open to his doctor's advice and consider surgery if his doctor feels it can

Continued on p18



“Sticking to the right diet for me can be a bit challenging.”

enhance his quality of life. “I’m trying to pump him up and motivate him to get the best medical treatment for his particular situation,” adds Garrard. Maintaining a positive mental attitude is part of Garrard’s make-up, and it certainly came in handy during his battle with Crohn’s disease. “You have to keep your dreams alive. You can’t just hope and wish. You have to take action and make it happen both in your mind and in your heart.”

His mother Shirley, who died of breast cancer in 1994, introduced religion into Garrard’s life and this also brought him comfort. “I re-evaluated my life to make sure I was doing the right things. My mother did the same thing when she was sick with breast cancer. Her illness was something that hit the family really hard. I wondered what I was going to do when I came home from school and she would no longer be there. But she gave us faith,” recalls Garrard, whose mother died at 49 years old.

Two years ago, his father Wilmer died from complications of a respiratory illness. “When I was a kid, I told my father I would make the honor roll on my report card if he stopped smoking and drinking. I would have done anything to make him stop. He did tone down his drinking after my mother died, but he continued to smoke,” says Garrard, who served as the Jaguars’ 2002 spokesperson for the American Lung Association of Florida’s “Unpuffables” anti-tobacco program geared to children, and who currently promotes breast-cancer education and research for the Baptist Cancer Institute in Jacksonville.

He says the people around him helped him remain optimistic and positive, and these individuals played an integral role in his recovery. “My family,

friends, teammates, and coaches came down to the hospital to show their support and to help me keep up my spirits. And I wanted to keep up my spirits for them, too. I didn’t want anybody to be down and out because of me. I’m the one who normally likes to show everyone a good time.” Not only did his friends keep him company, but Garrard says they even pitched in by helping his wife with chores around the house while he was in the hospital.

Garrard is grateful for the loving relationship he has with his wife Mary and has come to believe in love at first sight. “I found the one when I was 25 years old. I had seen Mary around campus, but I officially met her at a college party when a friend introduced us. She was athletic and had a great personality, and I instantly knew she was right for me. We’ve been together ever since,” said Garrard, who resides with his wife in Jacksonville, Florida.

Keeping up his sense of humor was another source of strength for Garrard, who chuckles as he says, “This disease is just a pain in the butt — literally. But you can’t let setbacks beat you down, because there are so many things in life that can do just that if you let them.”

Playing to Win

Educating the public about the disease is now a priority for Garrard. “Even though a lot of people suffer from Crohn’s, it’s still a condition many people don’t know anything about. Since telling others I have this disease, I’ve had people who seemed to come out of the blue, saying ‘Oh, yes, I have that, too.’ It’s a funny disease in a funny place in an area you don’t normally want to talk about over dinner.”

He has been so successful in building up his body that his coach recently asked him to shed ten pounds off his 250-pound physique. Garrard, who now weighs about 240 pounds and has a mere nine-percent body fat, eats a high-protein diet. That’s not the way it was when he was in college, where he ate lots of junk food and had 15-percent body fat, which Garrard says is at the high end of normal for professional quarterbacks.

He now stays far away from junk food and no longer has cravings for fried chicken. “I haven’t had fried chicken in such a long time that I don’t even have a desire for it anymore.” But David still loves food. “Sticking to the right diet for me can be a bit challenging,” he says, adding, “That’ll always be my weakness. I’m a food connoisseur with a passion for everything from Italian to seafood.”

When it comes to his future, Garrard’s goals are straightforward. “I’ll do whatever it takes to avoid any more recurrences of Crohn’s disease. I eat as healthy as possible, take my medication on schedule, and listen to my doctor. I want to be the best husband I can be and, when I have children, the best father, too.” ■

Annette Racond

The author is a freelance writer living in New York City whose work has appeared in The New York Times, Business Week, and Travel & Leisure.

