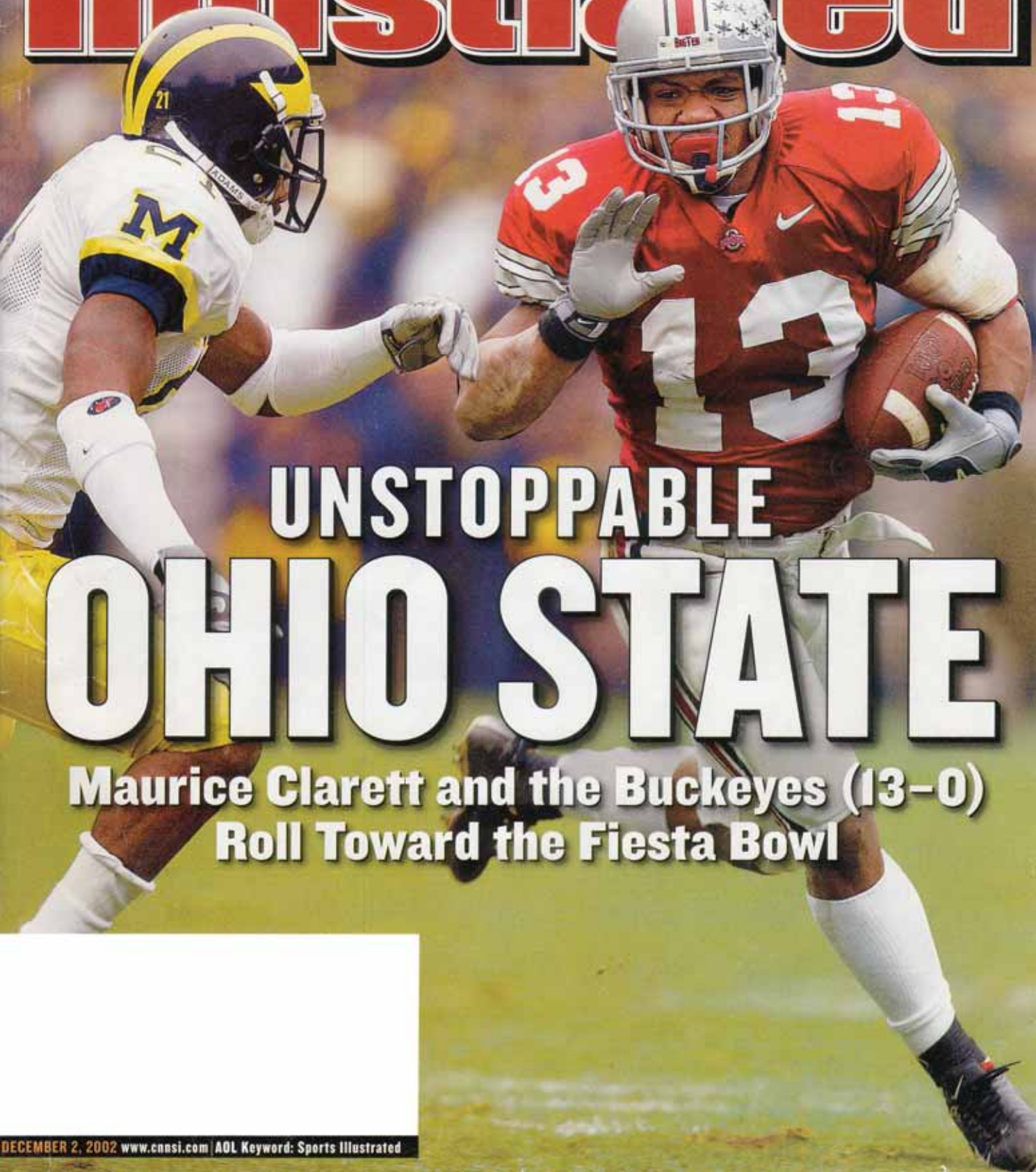




MICHAEL VICK
ATLANTA FALCONS
MR. EXCITEMENT

Sports Illustrated



UNSTOPPABLE OHIO STATE

**Maurice Clarett and the Buckeyes (13-0)
Roll Toward the Fiesta Bowl**

SOUL Survivor



For almost two years Washington State receiver **Devard Darling** has been haunted by the need to find the spirit of his deceased identical twin, lifelong teammate and best friend, Devaughn

BY GARY SMITH

THE GOLDEN HELMET GLEAMED UPON THE PEDESTAL beneath the foyer light. It stopped the boy as he came through his mother's front door. It held his eyes. He'd searched everywhere else. Why not here? ¶ Devard Darling lifted the helmet from the pedestal and peered inside. After all, if the soul resided in the mind, and the mind resided in the cranium, and the cranium resided—during his identical twin's moments of greatest hope and aliveness—inside

this golden Seminoles helmet . . . then couldn't it be here?

It *might* fit inside a helmet. It wasn't a complete soul, mind you. Just half of one. Devard and his twin had gone halvers on everything their entire lives—a splendid arrangement right up to the day that Devaughn, pursuing their dream, worked himself to death. But now that Devaughn was gone. . . .

Devard pulled the helmet over his head. He walked into the living room, then the kitchen. He looked at the newspaper. Patience. It might take awhile to lure the half-soul back.

ON HIS OWN This is the first season Devard has played without Devaughn (above, left, with Devard at age 3) as a teammate.



DEVARD DARLING

His mother and two sisters stole glances. It was an odd sight, a boy walking around the house in street clothes and a football helmet—heartbreaking and humorous and eerie all at once. But they were wise, and they kept silent.

He returned to the foyer—and froze. There, in the flash of the mirror by the bathroom door, in the glimpse of eyes framed by the headgear, he'd almost sensed it, felt it, found it. The mirror pulled him closer . . . closer . . .

He swallowed what rose in his throat as he stared at his eyes. He removed the helmet and returned it to the pedestal.

No. His half-soul wasn't in the helmet. He'd have to keep searching.

SCIENCE CAN'T explain it. Now and then, once in about every 250 human conceptions, the fertilized egg splits, creating two distinct embryos containing identical genetic material. There's magic in this sudden duplication, a powder keg of psychic implications for the pair of children born. This was understood long ago and over there, where the ancestors of Devard and Devaughn Darling lived.

African tribes created rituals and totems to contain this magic—some even built fences around the homes of newborn twins. Some killed one or both twins upon birth; others rejoiced and made offerings. Some tribes buried a dead twin as swiftly as possible, or not at all, leaving the body sitting on a rock and then fleeing without looking back. The Yoruba, of Nigeria, sensed that identical twins possessed just one soul between them, and they understood the spiritual emergency when a child's double died. That's why they carved a wooden figurine for the deceased twin's half-soul to reside in, an object for the survivor to wash and clothe and feed, to reach for whenever he felt half of himself missing and needed something—God, *something*—to hold onto.

Somewhere in the clang of manacle and chains and the stench of a slave ship's lower deck, such understanding began to be lost. And so one day in the second month of 2001, as Devaughn Darling lay dying in front of his twin at the end of an off-season football conditioning workout at Florida State, Devard had to begin his search on his own, without figurines or ceremonies to see him through the trauma. On his own, amid a tribe whose principal ritual occurred in stadiums thronged with thousands of people worshipping strength and speed, youth and vitality. God only knew how he'd find his missing half-soul, how he'd keep his brother's memory alive, but it would have to be with a football.

Of course, he had a loving family trying to console him. Of course, he had sympathetic friends and teammates from Austin-Fort Bend High School, just outside Houston—where

the twins had become blue-chip prospects sought by large universities across the land—and new friends at Florida State, where the Darlings had displayed their promise as freshmen: Devard, the 6' 3" wide receiver with 4.3 speed; Devaughn, the 225-pound linebacker who devoured quarterbacks. But all who knew the twins knew it was impossible to know the depth of Devard's loss; their attempts at empathy felt futile. This was one mind

in two bodies, says their aunt Yvonne Moncur. A chemistry like you've never seen between two human beings, says their high school teammate Nick Nichols. For God's sake, marvels their cousin Frank Rutherford, they even had to *take leaks* at the same time. They were harmonized, synchronized, two hearts that beat as—

Wait a minute. If one heart had failed under the glare and bark of a football coach, couldn't—*wouldn't*—the identical one fail as well? How could Florida State risk it? Sorry, son. Take off your helmet. No more football, Devard.

Find your half-soul some other way.



NOT IDENTICAL IN EVERYTHING Devard is a fast, sure-handed receiver, while Devaughn (top, at Florida State) was a fierce pass rusher.

THIS IS a ghost story. The ghost isn't Devaughn, the dead twin. It's Devard. Sometimes it's the living who haunt. Have you ever loved someone enough to do that?

The place where they began: Maybe that's where Devard's spirit would find what had been ripped from it. A few months after his brother's death he flew to the Bahamas, where they had lived their first dozen years. He went to their old home in Nassau. He stood in front of the two-story house with the big backyard and the plum tree that their godfather had planted—the wise sapling that forked into two trunks, one for each twin to perch on—and stared, watching their past unfold. It wobbled and blurred through his tears, but he could still make it out.

It's a Sunday, and they're so damn happy to have each other all day, because it's the year of that failed exper-

iment, in which grown-ups tried to pull them apart. The year school administrators placed them in separate second-grade classes to help them become individuals—*miserable* individuals—and their mother, trying to heed the experts' warnings about blurred identity, attempted to dress them differently. *No, Mummy*, they protested, with that lovely Bahamian lilt that turned the

phrase into a question. *We want to keep dressing the same, Mummy, so just buy two of everything and put it in the same drawer. Can't we be in the same class again, please, Mummy?*

The school would surrender at the end of second grade. Mummy? She lasted only a day or two, melted by those four sad brown eyes, so they're back in matching outfits, right down to their football undies. It's a force larger than her, has been from that moment on the delivery table when Devard came forth and the obstetrician's eyes popped: What's that wrapped around the newborn's ankle? A . . . *hand*? Yes, a hand—here comes another one! One heartbeat, the dumbstruck doc kept saying. That's all he'd ever heard.

Thank goodness cousin Enith Darling spotted that tiny birthmark on the bridge of Devaughn's nose and concocted the ditty that the extended family would repeat to tell the two apart—*Vaughnie's got a mole/And Vardie's got a cold*—because even the twins can't look at photographs and tell themselves apart. Truth is, it doesn't much matter. Each answers to both names, no worries. Same pals, same birthday cake, same sick days, same toy bank to stash their allowance, same adorable hip shimmy when the reggae starts. Same glow on their faces and on those of everyone who meets them—so why pry them apart?

Wait a minute. If one heart had failed under the glare and bark of a coach, couldn't—*wouldn't*—the identical one fail as well?

But they're torn today, because it's Sunday. Torn between the joy of jiggling on Daddy's knees in front of the TV and catapulting off when his beloved Miami Dolphins score touchdowns and watching emotions they didn't know he had pour out of him—and the bliss of pretending to be Miami Dolphins scoring touchdowns in the big backyard. Look at 'em bolt, man: Speed and agility are in their blood. Their cousin Frank will soon become the first Bahamian ever to win an Olympic track and field medal, a bronze in the triple jump in Barcelona in 1992, and a three-time NCAA champ at the University of Houston. Their older brother, Dennis, will captain Houston's track team and twice win the 200 and 400 meters in the Conference USA indoor championships. Their aunt Yvonne would've been a cinch to make the '64 Olympics in the sprints if she hadn't gotten pregnant, and their great-uncle George Knowles won the European Commonwealth's middleweight boxing crown. Those two long-armed rascals even run the same, trained by cousin Frank on his visits from Houston, their wrists flicking up on the backswing as if they're shoeing gnats riding in their draft.

Let 'em pretend to be Marino and Duper in the yard. They don't know yet that kids like them can't play in the NFL because there's no high school football in the Bahamas. They don't know yet that their upper-middle-class life as the sons of the Bahamas' deputy treasurer—maid, two cars, private schools, big-screen TV, vacations at Disney World—will be shattered in just a few years, that the cops will surge through the front door at 5 a.m. and

Daddy will end up in handcuffs on the front page of the *Bahamian Tribune*, wrongly accused after \$2 million vanishes from the national treasury. That their parents' marriage will crumble, even after Daddy is found innocent in court, and they'll drift with Mummy from house to house, unable to pay the electric bill even though she works as a government clerk by day and delivers pizzas at night—the *butter floating in the ice cooler* is how brother Dennis will describe their altered state.

Devard stared at their old home, rubbing the wetness from his eyes, then turned and trudged away. His half-soul wasn't there.

HAVE YOU ever had someone you could lie down in the dark with and talk to about anything? Maybe you're lucky. Maybe you have.

He was me and I was him, says Devard. Devard was the shy and quiet twin, the one few could imagine pouring out his heart to anyone, at any hour. The one who'd softly talk Devaughn out of sacking their toy bank and blowing their life's savings on candy bars, the one a few minutes older and wiser but assured enough to let Devaughn function as the leader. Their grandfather, a Baptist minister, predicted that

Devard would become a preacher too. . . . So what in the Lord's name was the silent, sober one doing now, returning to the house his family had moved into on the outskirts of Houston and screaming a name in the middle of the night: *Devaughn!* . . . **DEVAUGHN!**

There he is, pile-driving Devard's rear end right through the bedroom wall and apologizing in the same grunt—the dispute settled before the dust has. It's here that they show what they're made of, immigrants thrown into the swarm after their world collapsed in Nassau and their divorced mother turned north, to America, with her 12-year-old twins and two daughters. Here where they learn to mimic Mummy, who just keeps taking blows, smiling and stepping into tomorrow. Here where they grab mops at night to help her swab the library and the courthouse in Sugarland for a few bucks an hour, then sardine together at bedtime, all six of them—Mummy, the twins, Monique and Stacey and Stacey's child, Rashayne—into one bedroom, where Mummy will dip her finger into olive oil and anoint their foreheads, and then they'll link hands and pray and fall asleep.

Father, aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, friends, school, status, *home*: The twins lost so much when they left behind the Bahamas. What can America possibly offer to compensate?

Football! Daddy's favorite! Shoulder pads, hip pads, helmets, jerseys, cleats: The twins adorn themselves in these sacred new vestments, unsure whether to howl in delight or kneel in reverence. Well, then, Devaughn could howl and Devard could kneel, for distinct personalities have emerged in Sugarland, their *twoness* as well as their *oneness*. Devaughn's their mouthpiece in this new world. The one who makes all the phone calls, the jokes, the peace. He'll croon the corniest songs and dance the silliest dance without blushing: "The Big Man Dance!" he'll bellow, remaining motionless except for thrusting his chest out and in,

DEVARD DARLING

and soon everyone will be flushed out of the shadows, boogying around the big teddy bear.

Funny thing, though. The girls Devaughn flushes from cover usually go for the silent one, the mystery man: Devard. The brothers harvest each other's fruits that way. Devard can hang back and feel his way, pulled along in Devaughn's bubbly wake. Devaughn can let his impulses howl, knowing Devard will whisper in his ear if they howl too loud.

Football begins to carve two distinct physiques as well. Devaughn starts jacking up monster weights and wolfing down monster bowls of frosted cereal to become the monster linebacker. Devard remains the whippet, uncannily strong but 30 pounds lighter than Devaughn by the time they graduate from high school.

At first their classmates find it strange that the twins talk funny and don't curse.

Soon they too find themselves saying *rawp* instead of *rap*, and *ting'um* instead of *thing* and *golleeee!* or *shoots!* or, in a very wicked adjectival moment, *freakin'*. In the beginning they find it odd that the twins won't smoke or drink but will, at the mere loss of a football game, start sniffing, then dabbing an eye, then . . . weeping. By the ninth grade all their teammates are weepers too. Initially they find it hokey that the twins, at Mummy's urging, hang posters on their bedroom walls with a list

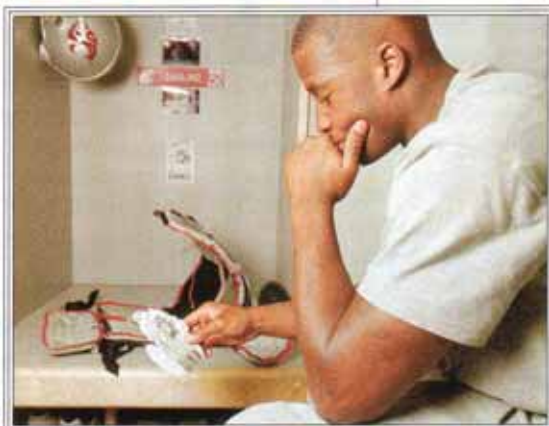
of yearly football and scholastic goals beneath a Bible verse, but then the members of the G.C. Fam—the nickname for the twins' circle of friends that formed at Garcia Middle School—begin to hang them on their bedroom walls as well. Everyone wants to want something as dearly as the Darlings do.

Mummy gets a job taking care of a multiple sclerosis sufferer by day and a stroke victim by night, kissing the twins goodbye each Sunday night and not returning home until Thursday. No ma at home, no pa at home—guess what those two teen anarchists stay up half the night doing? Lying in bed clutching the cushion footballs Mummy bought them, hatching their blood-brothers pact: They'll both major in sports medicine at one of America's elite football colleges, then become the first identical twins from the Bahamas ever to play in the NFL, then buy matching black Lamborghini Diablos and houses a few doors apart, then start a youth football program in their homeland and make sure that Mummy never works another day in her life. They set the alarm clock for 7 a.m. in the dead of summer to make it all come true.

To the weight room. To the track. To the football field. To the VCR, combing their performances for flaws so many times it makes their friends groan. At a voluntary workout on a chilly morning during the Christmas holidays, nobody on the track team shows up—except coach Dennis Brantley, Devard and Devaughn. Unheard-of drive, says the twins' pal Reggie Berry. The

highest integrity and character you can imagine—a coach's dream, says their football coach, Tom Stuart. I didn't know people could be like that, says their buddy Godwin Nyan.

Every teenager around them is burning so much psychic energy searching for his *other*, for the mirror in which to find his own identity. The twins were born possessing that, freeing them to funnel all their fuel into the engine of their dreams. Their grades? Up: 3.8 for Devard when he graduates, 3.5 for Devaughn. Their bench presses? Up: 305 for Devaughn, 275 for Devard. Their times in the 100 meters? Down: 10.31 for Devard, 10.50 for Devaughn. When the two co-captains of the football and track teams, the two humblest, fastest, strongest and damn near smartest kids at Austin-Fort Bend High, are out of earshot, the rest of the G.C. Fam says, "Man, their life's too perfect. Something bad gotta happen."



PLAYING IN PAIN When he takes the field, Devard wears an old photo of his twin under his pads, next to his heart.



BUT HOW could it? Devaughn wouldn't allow it. Have you ever had someone grasp both your hands and begin jumping and screaming, telling you how much he believed in you and how quickly he'd be there if ever you got in trouble? Until you started jumping and screaming and believing too?

Devard did. Maybe that was where he'd find his missing half-soul, in the high school locker room where they jumped and hollered face mask-to-face mask before every game, or on

the field where they fought three years of autumn wars together. He wandered back and stared. All the spirit they'd spilled here couldn't just evaporate . . . could it?

No, look, there goes Devaughn! Hitting that wall of flesh against Elkins

High, spinning away somehow for that 65-yard run. Cramping up from playing both ways in the Texas heat, hobbling off and then back on to flatten blockers and quarterbacks in a single burst that ends in Devard's waiting arms as the crowd roars and recruiters from Kansas and Kansas State and Arizona and Purdue and Texas A&M and Auburn and Michigan State and Tennessee and Syracuse and Florida State rise to their feet, each awaiting a pair of nods.

Devard will choose their college. Devaughn insists on it, knowing that he can maul and maim anywhere but that his twin—an All-District jet mostly stranded on the tarmac in a landlubbing offense—needs to find a coach and a quarterback who believe in bombs away.

Devard chooses Florida State. Tears fill the twins' eyes when they sign their letters of intent. All their 1 a.m. plans are coming true. Why, then? Why, in the still of night when Devaughn falls asleep, does Devard keep staring at his twin's face and feeling desperation in his gut, rushing in like the wave that sucked Devaughn out to sea when they were seven and nearly drowned him? Devard lies there, crying and telling himself how ridicu-

lous this feeling is, that his twin won't die until they're old, and then, somehow, they'll do it like they do everything else: together. Have you ever done that? Loved someone so much that you mourned his death as he slept?

THE LAST bedroom they shared. Devard kept sneaking back into it: How could NO TRESPASSING apply to a ghost? He'd slip away from the apartment he'd moved into with his brother Dennis—who had come to see him through the school year and the grief—and drift back to Burt Reynolds Hall, where Florida State's freshman and sophomore players lived. He'd pull out the key he hadn't turned in, enter the silence and sag onto one of their old beds, waiting . . . listening . . . watching.

There they are, the two of them coming back from study hall on a winter Sunday night and ordering a pizza. It's seven weeks after their freshman season ended. It's their last night together.

Their dream's on track. They've learned that they belong in the big time, with Devaughn pegged to start as a sophomore and Devard to be one of four receivers in the Seminoles' rotation. Their coaches call both of them a coach's dream.

They've learned something else after their freshman physicals: They both have the sickle-cell trait. But so what? So do 8% of all blacks in America, including plenty of gifted athletes. It's a generally benign hereditary condition marked by one abnormal gene for hemoglobin that causes the production of some red blood cells with a sickle shape, instead of the smooth-flowing spherical one, and thus potentially reducing the blood's oxygen-carrying capacity. The NCAA medical handbook warns that the trait might be linked to exercise-associated sudden death—in military training, not in sports—but so rarely that no specific restrictions should be placed on an athlete who carries the trait. Only that he, like all athletes, should avoid dehydration during workouts and get into condition gradually over several weeks before engaging in exhaustive exercise regimens, and that team doctors and trainers should familiarize themselves with the medical literature. The only caution flag waved at the twins is this: Be careful making babies. If their partners have the same trait, they run a high risk of conceiving a child with sickle-cell anemia, an often fatal disease in which the sickle-shaped blood cells are rampant.

The twins are not thinking about multiplying as they polish off the pizza—just about surviving. Just a few more mat drills remain to be completed. To a man, ex-Seminoles who've gone on to NFL two-a-days in July or to Marine Corps boot camp agree: Nothing compares to Florida State's off-season mat drills. Former Seminoles tailback John Merna, a Marine, called the drills "a true test of a man's physical and moral courage." Former Seminoles defensive lineman James Roberson said they were like "stepping into a gas chamber." Players who had finished four years of them came back and thanked Coach Bobby Bowden for the rewards they reaped from them and for the lessons they learned about themselves and about life.

The drills are a battery of noncontact running, jumping,

crouching, diving and rolling exercises that Bowden borrowed from Bear Bryant nearly five decades ago. "We want to push you to the breaking point," is how Bowden explained them to players. "Not over it, but to it."

Trash cans are placed within staggering distance of the three stations through which the players rotate. Both twins have already vomited into them. Ten Seminoles vomited on the first day of mat drills the previous year, some so intimidated that they puked before the drills even began. Former FSU offensive lineman Eric Luallen, a Tallahassee sports-talk-show host, wrote a column about mat drills on a website just a week and a half before. "It was always chilling to hear [former Seminoles assistant] Chuck Amato address the team the first day of mat drills," Luallen wrote. "While he would point out the trash cans and what they were to be used for, he would always throw in this confidence-building quote: 'Just remember, gentlemen, the body is a wonderful machine. You will pass out before you die. If you pass out, the trainers will take care of you.' "

It's 11:30 p.m. Devaughn's got a head cold that he caught from Devard, and mat drills begin in six hours and 15 minutes. Devaughn pops a couple of nighttime cold and flu pills. The twins reread the New Year's goals on their wall posters. Devaughn has

Even the twins can't look at photos and tell themselves apart. Truth is, it doesn't matter. Each answers to both names.

dared to write *All-America first team* on his and keeps urging Devard to take the dare too. They say their prayers, asking God to be there at dawn when they need him, and they fall asleep.

BANG! BANG! BANG! That's the big metal spoon striking door after door, spreading dread through Burt Reynolds Hall at 5 a.m. *Bang! Bang! Bang!* That's the traditional wake-up call for Florida State mat drills. *Bang! Bang! Bang!* Devard could almost hear it four months later as he stood and peered at the door at 3 a.m. on a summer night, because someone else lived there and he could no longer search inside.

There they go, out that door on their final morning together, trudging down those stairs, bludgeoned by fatigue. Into the darkness, onto the dirt road through the construction zone, taking the short walk to Moore Athletic Center.

No time for breakfast or to brush their teeth. No time for more than a few swallows of water. Silence between them, except for Devaughn's one remark: "I can't wait for this to be over and for us to go home for spring break." Devard nods. They enter the trainer's room, where Devaughn gets his sore ankle wrapped. They go upstairs and stretch on the mats in the Rubber Room. The bullhorn shrieks at 5:45. Time for hell.

Devaughn and Devard go separate ways with their position groups. Devaughn completes his first two segments in the gym downstairs. Short sprints, running drills through ropes and agili-

ty drills, crouched beneath PVC pipes. The twins pass each other in the hallway between stations. Devard sees the faraway look in Devaughn's eyes. No time to speak or gulp from the water fountain as the coaches hurry the players to their next tasks. Devard touches Devaughn's hand to give him strength.

Devaughn ascends the stairs. Into the fire. Into the Rubber Room, where players form lines of four on the mats, legs pistoning furiously, and at the order or gesture of a coach . . . hit the floor! Roll left! Roll right! Jump up! Sprint! Again and again, and then once more if anyone in your foursome can't keep up. Peer pressure builds, because no one wants to make his buddies repeat, or get a failing grade and an order to report at 5 a.m. for an extra session back-to-back with a scheduled one. No one wants the coaches to win, to snap his will, because that's the dynamic at work: Us against Them.

No one, most of all Devaughn, who's feeling it happen again: the cramps and the dizziness and then the blackness, the world going dark the way it did the week before, when he vomited and passed out. Quit? Be the weak link? The kid who coded his computer to pipe out the FSU fight song every time he turned it on, the kid who never missed a day of classes in four years of high school, the two-way player they called the Beast in high school because he kept coming back from the dead like a monster in the movies?

Pain rips through his chest. He bends and presses his hands against it. Yes, the coaches have told the players to see the trainers if they're in trouble, but what have the upperclassmen poured into the freshmen? You *don't* quit mat drills. You *can't* quit mat drills. They're how we build unity and how we build pros. They're who we are in the fourth quarter on a 90° September Saturday afternoon in Tallahassee. Devaughn begins to stagger, to sway, to gasp to teammates that his chest hurts, that he can't breathe, that he can't see. But he keeps going. The coaches and trainers will say later that they never heard him, that they wish to God they had, that he looked no worse than other players struggling to finish.

A coach commands Devaughn to hit the floor. He falls forward like a board. He needs help to get up. "Come on!" his teammates cry. "You got to go four quarters!" They clap to try to rally him, they grab his arms and hold him upright and do the drills with him—just as they've done in previous mat drills when he has struggled—never dreaming that they're dragging and exhorting him to his death. His foursome is ordered back to redo a set of drills, and when he falls behind again he's sent back once more, the last man, finishing alone.

In the gym downstairs Devard finishes. No vibe, no sixth sense that his twin's in trouble one floor above. Why? Didn't people say that twins do that in a crisis?

Devaughn staggers to the wall at the end of the drill and drops to his knees. Randy Oravetz, the head trainer, goes to his side and begins to ask him questions. Devaughn's breaths are shallow. He doesn't reply.

The team members are regathering in the Rubber Room to hear their grades. Devard sees Devaughn sitting beside the trainer with ice packs on his neck, but it's just fatigue, he thinks, it'll pass. "C'mon, Devaughn," he says. Suddenly he sees teammate O.J. Jackson and the trainer carrying his twin out the door as a coach calls out, "There goes our only F."



MEMORY BANK The twins' mother, Wendy Hunter, displays Devaughn's helmet and other football mementos at home.



BY THOMAS KIRBY

"I gotta go check on my brother!" cries Devard. He rushes downstairs and into the training room, glimpses his brother on a table with ice bags packed around him, a mask over his mouth, the trainers frantically pumping his chest. No pulse! His eyes are rolling back into his head! Call EMS! Somebody shoves Devard out of the room.

Devard starts screaming, cursing the coaches and their mat drills, running upstairs to tell everyone what they've done to his twin, then turning—his brother needs him!—and running back. Corey Simon, the former Florida State defensive lineman who has just finished his rookie year with the Philadelphia Eagles, comes down the hallway on his way to lift weights and sees Devard's panic and the anger building in the gathering knot of players. He pulls Devard away. He gets him on his knees to pray.

An ambulance arrives. Paramedics rush into the trainers' room. Players hold hands in the hallway. Players

howl at coaches, players wait to God.

The trainers' room door opens. Out comes Devaughn on a stretcher, into the ambulance. Devard bolts to the front seat. It's like a movie now, it's not real, it's not real, it's not real. "C'mon, Devaughn!" he keeps shouting back as they race toward Tallahassee Regional Memorial. "C'mon, Devaughn! Breathe!"

The paramedics rush Devaughn into the emergency room. Devard is left in the waiting room. A receptionist hands him forms and a pen. He can't fill in a single blank. A nurse sees his desperation. She takes him to his twin. He sees all the tubes and EKG leads attached to him, screams to his brother, touches his leg—God, it feels so *hard*—wheels and staggers out of the room. He stabs at his cellphone, blurts craziness to Mummy.

"Devard, calm down," she says. "He'll be all right."

"No, Mummy. . . I hate these coaches! I *hate* them!"

Half the team is in the waiting room, crying, praying, trying to console Devard. An E.R. doctor enters.

Devard sees his face.

Devard knows.

His 18-year-old twin is dead.

His hands go to his chest, as if it's happening to him. He starts ripping off his shirt because he can't rip off his skin and rip up his heart. He whirls, glimpses a mirror and jerks his head away. Seeing himself is seeing Devaughn!

He collapses and sobs. Devaughn always told Devard he'd never go anywhere without him. But he had, he had, he had. . . .

AT THE memorial service, Bowden—who had never lost a player in all those decades of mat drills—apologized to the Darling family and said, "I hope this won't hit anyone the wrong way . . . but he's the first player I've coached in 47 years who actually worked himself to death. . . . He said, 'I will not quit. I will die before I give up.' That's a great virtue. I don't have it. Oh, God, what a role model You have created for us to follow."

Devard walked into their bedroom when the service ended, and at the bottom of his goals poster he wrote: *First-team All-American*. At the funeral he wrapped his arms around Devaughn's helmet and hugged it to the end. *Someone else* hadn't died. Half of him was dead.

And so a boy who had never come to know aloneness the way other human beings do—little by little, as a side effect of

the bottom of that shaft. But couldn't football kill Devard, too?

Two days after the funeral he walked into the office of a Houston cardiologist to find out if something inside him, too, lay in ambush. He underwent a series of tests and awaited the results with his stomach in a fist. Relief gusted through him when they came back negative. Then confusion when the cardiologist wouldn't give him clearance to play.

"I'm going to carry out our dream," Devard declared. His family closed ranks around him. We want to see Devaughn live through Devard, said cousin Frank.

Devard called the football office at Florida State, requesting a weightlifting program he could follow while he grieved with his family for a few weeks in Sugarland. No one would send one. Oravetz, the trainer, started philosophizing on the phone about how a college degree was more important than playing football. Uh-oh. . . .

"We can't wait for you to get back." Hadn't Bowden told him that at the memorial service? Maybe, Devard began to think, the coaches no longer wanted him around—a ghastly facsimile, a daily reminder of who was gone and why. Already they'd had to snuff the flames of rebellion that flashed through the freshmen players: Many wanted to transfer, blaming the coaches for the horror, and some, like Devard, wanted never to set foot in the Rubber Room again. Already the coaches had begun reevaluating mat drills, a process that would lead them to introduce two mandatory four-minute water breaks, along with an ambulance and a defibrillator on site.

Devaughn's autopsy report was issued. No definitive cause

of death was found, but sickle-shaped red blood cells—the ones that could form a sludge in the vessels and threaten the flow of oxygen in the blood, especially during a state of dehydration, when the overall volume of blood is reduced—were found diffused throughout his body, and the sickle-cell trait was noted as a possible underlying cause. Florida State University police filed a 300-page report finding no wrongdoing on the university's part.

Devard returned to Florida State and was promptly sent to a local cardiologist, Dr. John Katopodis. Katopodis voiced doubt that Devard should play football again. Tears rushed to Devard's eyes. Katopodis ordered a battery of tests, many of the same ones Devard had undergone in Houston. Blood tests, exercise stress tests, electrocardiograms, echocardiograms, bubble studies, MRIs of the chest and heart, oxygen saturation tests, volume oxygen tests and, hey, would he mind taking an electrophysiologic test, the one in which a wire is pushed through a tube sent up the groin and through blood vessels to the heart, so it can be microelectrically shocked into going haywire to see if it can regain its natural beat—with just a tiny, tiny risk of death? Oh? He would mind?

The cardiologist, of course, also asked Devard some questions. Yes, Devard admitted, he'd experienced some light-headedness and seen dots during rigorous workouts—but then, he thought, hadn't every athlete who ever pushed himself to his limit in the Texas and Florida heat? Yes, Devard admitted, an uncle of his had died from a heart problem—but what the cardiologist didn't

"C'mon, Devaughn!" Devard keeps shouting back as the ambulance races toward the hospital. "C'mon, Devaughn! Breathe!"

breathing—suddenly knew an aloneness with no bottom. He clutched at almost anything as he hurtled down that shaft. The tattoo that Devaughn had had etched on his left biceps just after his 18th birthday (an idea Devard wanted no part of at the time) now blazed on Devard's left biceps: a cross wrapped in barbed wire beneath the nickname Devaughn had given himself, THE BLESSED ONE. He carried Devaughn's key chain, wore Devaughn's helmet in his mother's house and, when that wasn't enough, wore Devaughn's jersey, too. He talked out loud to Devaughn as if Devaughn were still at his elbow. On their birthday he ordered two cakes at the bakery counter, one with his name and one with Devaughn's. Mummy had to walk out. She couldn't bear it. He cried himself to sleep night after night, month after month.

He roamed everywhere he might find his missing half. Back onto the field at Doak Campbell Stadium, which they'd charged onto together as fire-breathing freshmen; back to the trainers' room where life leaked out of his brother; back to the hallway at Moore Athletic Center where their hands touched for the last time; back to Burt Reynolds Hall, where Dennis would find him at frightful hours murmuring, "That's where I'm supposed to be," then hug him and lead him away. Everywhere except the Rubber Room. Devard couldn't make his legs go through that door.

And still, no matter how painstaking his search, his half-soul always seemed a whisper, a shadow, a sudden glance away. There was only one way to save himself—and Devaughn too—from

realize, said cousin Frank, was that the uncle's heart had been banging from an overdose of drugs. The new tests on Devard came back negative, but Katopodis, citing Devard's family history and his experiences of light-headedness, decided to do the safest thing. He refused medical clearance and told Devard that his football life was done.

Please, son, stay, continue your studies on scholarship, the Seminoles' coaches and athletic director urged him. They weren't running him off, and couldn't he understand their position: How could the school and the cardiologist live with themselves if this tragedy unfolded *twice*? Devard broke down. The kid's arms had been cut off when his twin died, said Godwin Nyan, and just when he was learning to live with that, they cut off his legs.

NO. IT wasn't just to soothe the surviving twin that the Yoruba washed and fed and clothed the wooden image of the deceased twin. It was to appease the departed twin's spirit so it wouldn't lure the living one to join it in death.

Could that be what was happening now, as Devard decided to defy the doctor's decision, to leave Florida State, to find a college that would let him run the risk of following his twin to the other side? Where would he go? He pulled out the list of suitors who had come calling the year before, when the twins were being wooed in high school, and imagined how thrilled they'd be to have a second chance to bag a Darling.

He started with Texas A&M, the school that would allow him to remain near home as he tried to start life over as *one*, and the program that had flooded his living room with seven coaches one night just before signing day. At first the Aggies seemed excited to hear from him, but then came silence, and then a reference to the shock their football program had undergone 10 years earlier when kicker James Glenn died of a heart problem before practice . . . and then, no thank you, Devard, we're sorry.

Next he contacted Tennessee. Yes, said the Volunteers, come see us on the double. They sat him down, indicated that they had a scholarship open, set him up with a counselor to arrange classes and told him they'd express-mail the forms he'd need to sign. Tennessee, man! Nearly on a par with Florida State! He arranged an apartment in Knoxville, read a story of his reported transfer in *The Tennessean*, went home and waited for the scholarship papers to arrive.

And waited. And waited. Cousin Frank kept calling the Tennessee football office to learn what was causing the delay. Well . . .

uh . . . we're sorry, a coach finally told him, but the scholarship we thought we had to offer, we don't have.

The news found Devard at his mother's house. Halfway up the stairs, he dropped and wept. How could it be? All the advantages he'd reaped in 18 years as Devaughn's twin suddenly were turning against him. Guilt by association, that's how it felt, but who—in a land of lawyers licking their chops—could take on the liability of Devaughn Darling's double?

He tried blasphemy next: Miami, the Seminoles' archenemy. Coach Larry Coker's remorse sounded real: Oh, if only Devard

had called two weeks earlier, before that last scholarship was bestowed, perhaps he could've been a Hurricane. The clock was ticking. Summer and scholarships were vanishing, the next school year drawing near. Cousin Frank contacted Arizona. Sorry. No interest. A question began to gnaw at Devard: Have I been blacklisted?

He tried Purdue next. Sure, said the Boilermakers, come visit, and his hopes rose again. He flew there and was asked to take virtually all of those tests a third time. More injections, more tubes, more straps, clips, mouthpieces and monitors. More invasion, more waiting. He hung his head and became a piece of meat again, then went home. He felt no connection there.

Southern Cal grew interested. He had barely gotten off the plane, it seemed, when he was asked to submit to the same tests yet again. Couldn't he forward the results of all the ones he'd already taken and re-taken? No. How many times, he wanted to scream, must his body prove its innocence? But he was Devard, not Devaughn, so he clamped his lips and walked away with his suitcase and his unspeakable loneliness.

MY GOD, *this is crazy!* Devard stared out the window as the airplane descended over a million miles of wheat. *Where am I?* That's all he could see, an ocean of gold grass swelling and dipping across the hills of eastern Washington.

Washington State was his next hope. Everything was wrong about the place: the distance from Houston and Mummy and friends, the light-years from Nassau and relatives, from reggae and rice. The sheer isolation and smallness of this town—what did they call it? Pullman? The winter freeze waiting to take hold of it, and of a boy from the Caribbean if he were obsessed enough to stay.

Everything was right about the place: From the top—head coach Mike Price—on down, the staff at Washington State felt to Devard like family. The team trainer and doctor seemed ready to fight for his right to play, if they could find a way for him to do



BROTHERLY LOVE After scoring, Devard points to the heavens in homage to Devaughn, whose picture sits on his bedside table.

DEVARD DARLING

it safely. The Cougars' offense filled the sky with footballs, a wide receiver's kingdom come, and the trash cans were tucked away in corners and beneath desks, not set up around the gym. John Lott, the strength coach at the University of Houston when cousin Frank ruled the triple jump there, had moved on to the New York Jets and relayed word of Devard's plight to Jets offensive assistant Eric Price . . . who just happened to be Mike Price's son. Presto, Devard was walking through Pullman, trying to conceive of himself starting fresh there, among total strangers on the continent's far corner.

He talked it over with Devaughn. Somehow, in the hush of a Pullman night, he came to a realization. Here there was no one and nothing to take his eyes off his mission. Here was the perfect place for a solitary, single-minded man.

He started classes and moved into an apartment at the end of the summer of 2001. Devaughn's mouth guard, wristband and gloves went up on the wall. No roommate could match the one he'd had all his life, so he wanted no roommate at all.

His family's lawyers readied a wrongful-death lawsuit against Florida State, charging the university with negligence in both the hydration and the supervision of a player in physical distress—"straight murder," cousin Frank called it. But the family was quick to sign a form freeing Washington State of liability should disaster recur. Still, the university needed more before it could let him take the field: a medical authority willing to counter Dr. Katopodis's opinion, willing to risk his reputation, and perhaps Devard's life, by clearing him to play. And so week after week, as the medicine men pored over reams of Devard's data and peppered the sickle-cell-trait experts with queries, he waited, suffocating from homesickness and living on his cellphone, agonizing as the season trickled away, rushing straight from classes to the football offices each day to ask if anyone had heard anything. Sorry, kid, they kept saying. Nothing yet. He came oh so close to quitting and going home, but he couldn't get past the framed picture of Devaughn on his nightstand.

Finally, in late October, Gust Bardy—a renowned Seattle cardiologist and the man on whom Washington State settled to make the call—invited Devard to his office and rendered his verdict: Yes. If Washington State was willing to take some precautions, Devard could play football. Somehow Devard made it all the way to the parking lot before the tears rolled down his cheeks.

It was too late to play in 2001, but two days later Devard adorned himself in the sacred vestments and bolted onto the practice field, so much adrenaline surging through him that he barely felt the bone-deep chill as he thumped his heart twice and

pointed to something in the sky. The second week of practice, as he crunched through the first snow of his life and shivered uncontrollably under three layers of sweats, Coach Price sidled up to him and muttered, "How dumb are you to come here?" and they both puffed out smoky plumes of laughter.

The Cougars purchased four defibrillators, installed a new digital radio system to call EMS, rationed Devard's conditioning sprints and watered him as if he were an orchid transplanted to the desert. He was rusty at first, but by spring practice he was turning on the jets and plucking balls out of the sky with those octopus arms, power-cleaning more weight than anyone except two behemoth linemen, and by opening day of 2002 there was a determination in his eyes that his mates marveled at, a sense of urgency

in him that smoked like burning rubber. He scrawled Devaughn's high school and college numbers on the tape he wrapped around his socks. Inside his shoulder pads, over his heart, was a picture of his twin, and over the pads he wore a new number, the loneliest number: 1.

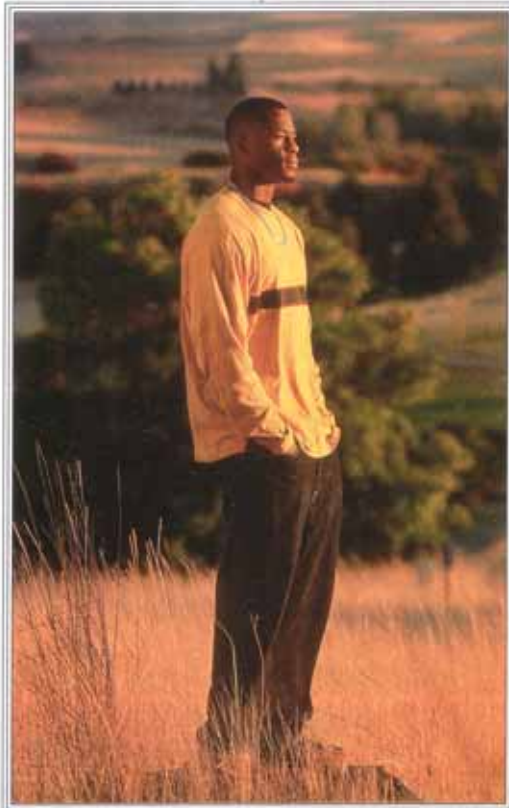
He caught six passes in his first game, against Nevada. Then he caught five, two for touchdowns, and scored a third time on an end-around against Idaho, double-thumping his chest and pointing to heaven each time. Then came six more catches and a TD against Ohio State. Through 11 games he led the Cougars with 657 receiving yards—no small task on a team featuring three receivers with NFL potential. His 10 touchdown receptions were one shy of the school record, and his 46-yard scoring catch on a tipped ball, which sealed a 32-21 win over Oregon that briefly vaulted his team to No. 3 in the AP and BCS rankings, was replayed on *SportsCenter* so many times that Devaughn couldn't possibly have missed it.

"He gets open so quickly with his speed and strength, it's like watching a man among boys," said Cougars quarterback Jason Gesser. "It's clear this is just a stepping-stone for him.

He'll be playing Sundays. His brother's on his shoulders, and he's taking him to the NFL. We haven't even scratched the surface with him yet."

He seemed to his teammates to be much older than they were, and he moved through the locker room wafting a certainty that no circumstance could stop him now, that nothing could hurt or shake him more than he'd already been hurt and shaken.

One thing could: the pressure he put on himself, the feeling that he couldn't let a dead man down. A few dropped passes in practice were all it took for him to cocoon himself inside his apartment and his headphones for a few days, for him to burn his retinas watching and rewatching the mistakes on video. After Mummy and his sisters flew up and watched Washington State's



PRAIRIE HOME Eastern Washington is a long way from Houston and the Bahamas, but it has given Devard space to grow as an athlete and a man.

DEVARD DARLING

Nov. 2 victory over Arizona State, a game in which Devard muffed a pass and managed just two receptions, they waited for nearly an hour in his living room while he holed up in his bedroom, clutching Devaughn's picture and sobbing.

It was far from over, his long trek into twinlessness. At any moment, at kinesiology class or a hamburger joint or the 20-yard line, he would find himself right back in that horrifying moment—a flashback so electric that his body jumped.

"I'm playing for two people now," Devard says. "Devaughn's living through me. I know I'm going to make the NFL."

Anger, too, still coursed through him—the thought that a breather and a water bottle or two might've saved Devaughn's life sometimes sent his fist into whatever was nearby. "It was inhumane," Devard says. "Pure negligence. Then they [the Seminoles coaches] wanted me to disappear, because every time I appeared on that field, Devaughn's name would be mentioned. They just wanted me out of there. But I wanted to go back and play there, whether a lawsuit was filed or not. My brother died there and was buried in that uniform. That's where my heart is. I'll be a 'Nole for life.

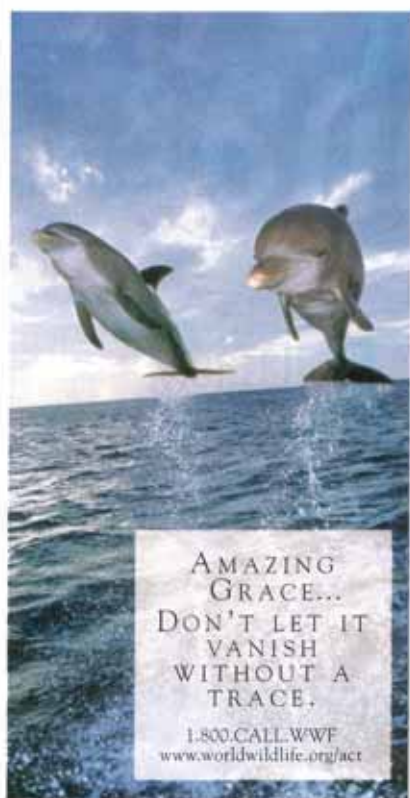
"I'm playing for two people now. Devaughn's living through me. I know I'm going to make the NFL, because there's nothing the world can send at me that's harder than what I've gone through."

Something began to shift in Devard in the second year of his twin's absence. His friends in Houston shook their heads over the way he would call them, expressing his feelings and getting as silly as someone else they used to know. They piled into Reggie Berry's car when Devard came home, talking old times as they drove around, and Devard smiled and blurted, "Let's go find some women!" and then actually approached a few when they took him to a dance club. The G.C. Fam members blinked at each other, and Reggie looked Devard in the eye. "Man, *who* are you?" he demanded. "Who the hell *are* you?"

Devard bear-hugged his friends before heading back to college. "It was amazing," said James Lucas. "I felt Devaughn in him. It's like they've become the same person."

Devard flew back to Washington, landed in Spokane and crossed that hour and a half of emptiness to Pullman. He looked out the window, just one heartbeat like the doctor once said, and as usual in those parts, a dust dervish began to stir, then to funnel and fly across the land like a spirit.

He stared at it. Naaaaah. Couldn't be out there, or anywhere else . . . because it had always been inside him. □



AMAZING
GRACE...
DON'T LET IT
VANISH
WITHOUT A
TRACE.

1-800.CALL.WWF
www.worldwildlife.org/act

Get your free World Wildlife
Fund Action Kit and help leave
our children a living planet.



SONY

sony.atomfilms.com

Log on. Vote. Win.*

South by Southwest Film Festival

*NO PURCHASE NECESSARY. To enter for a chance to win valuable prizes, and for complete official rules, visit sony.atomfilms.com. Void in Puerto Rico, Florida, and where prohibited by law. Open to legal U.S. residents, 18 or older as of 12/3/02. Voting begins 12/3/02 and deadline for entry is 12/13/02. Sponsored by Sony Electronics Inc. ©2002 Sony Electronics Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited. Sony, and the Sony logo are trademarks of Sony.