



\$100 MILLION

UNDERDOG

Nothing about **Drew Brees'** rise to NFL superstardom has been easy, and despite his record-setting contract, this season could be the toughest of his life. But when his back is against the wall, he's always at his best.

BY MATT TUTHILL
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In

ABOUT THREE HOURS, DREW BREES WILL BECOME ONE OF THE

richest men in football history. He'll agree to a five-year, \$100 million contract with \$60 million guaranteed, a certainty unheard of in the NFL. But right now, he doesn't know any of that. All he knows is that his agent is working around the clock to seal the deal before Monday and avoid all sorts of unpleasant territory like training camp holdouts and the inevitable game of PR chicken that would ensue in the media. Right now, the only thing that matters is his workout.

It's 6:30 in the morning, and Brees just walked into Fitness Quest 10 in San Diego, CA, the gym where he's trained in the off-season under Todd Durkin for the past nine years, dating back to his days with the

Chargers. If the contract process hangs over his head in any way, he hides it well. He stops to greet the staff, all of whom gather to meet him like a family member returned from a long trip away, even though he was just here yesterday. There are fist bumps and hugs and personal banter about kids and wives and husbands. Brees' wife, Brittany, 8½ months pregnant with the couple's third child, will come in to work out later. One of the girls behind the desk tells him she baked muffins for after the training session. From the way he reacts, she might have said she had built him a monument.

"That's incredible," Brees says in his warm Texas accent. "Thank you so much."

● **DURKIN GETS THE LONGEST EMBRACE**, and when the pleasantries are done, he leads Brees to a corner of the gym where Saints running back Darren Sproles and backup quarterbacks Chase Daniel and Sean Canfield are waiting. Durkin tapes a piece of paper to the wall and gives the guys a verbal run-through of what's to come—a two-hour "split-fusion" training session comprising a series of disparate circuits that incorporate about 100 movement variations. To a layman, the language on the sheet looks like Latin. Brees & Co., though, have the whole thing memorized as if it were a playbook, and hop to.

Lean and muscular at six feet tall and 209 pounds, Brees moves through the workout with cool precision, his posture ramrod straight at all times like a Marine. His every step displays a combination of purpose and the easy athletic grace you'd expect from an All-Pro NFL quarterback. He's got a long scar by his right eye that bisects his famous birthmark, thanks to a biopsy that came back A-OK—news that allowed him to keep the trademark that earned him nicknames like "Spot."

"I'll never take it off," Brees says. "It's who I am."

It's easy to understand why he wouldn't want to change for anyone.

**SUPER
BOWL
CHAMP**

Brees salutes Saints fans—Who Dat Nation—after winning Super Bowl XLIV and the game's MVP award.



PREVIOUS SPREAD: STYLING BY MICHAEL CIOFFOLETTI/CELESTINE AGENCY; GROOMING BY SUNNIE BROOK FOR HEAD & SHOULDERS/CELESTINE AGENCY; CLOTHING: NIKE SHIRT AND SHORTS. THIS PAGE: GETTY IMAGES

(DREW BREES)

Along with his gentlemanly bearing, there's a chip on his shoulder, too, which started growing back during his days as a superstar high school quarterback in Texas. Despite his winning a state title, scouts discounted Brees as being too short for the storied college football programs, so he wound up at Purdue. Once there, he went on to torch the school record books while becoming a second-round draft pick for the Chargers in 2001. San Diego, though, basically left him for dead when he tore the labrum and rotator cuff in his throwing shoulder in the final game of the 2005 season, and it was only the Saints—the perpetual down-and-outers rumored to be leaving town in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina—who were willing to take a chance on him. A marriage of misfits was made, and it turned out to be one for the ages, with Brees not only bouncing back from the injury to play his best football yet, but also elevating the organization beyond any status it had ever enjoyed, culminating in New Orleans' first-ever Super Bowl win in 2010.

The past off-season, however, saw Brees' career roller coaster bottom out again. The league dropped the hammer on the Saints in the aftermath of the pay-to-injure "bounty" scandal with a series of heavy penalties, including full-year suspensions of defensive captain Jonathan Vilma and head coach Sean Payton, the man responsible for bringing Brees to New Orleans. A vocal union leader during the 2011 lockout, Brees isn't shy in chastising the league for a lack of evidence, and again reiterated his lack of knowledge of any such bounty program. To top it off, he and the team couldn't come to a long-term contract agreement even though he had just shattered Dan Marino's single-season yardage record. Instead, the Saints slapped him with the franchise tag—a one-year deal based on the top five salaries for his position. Brees declined to sign and technically sat in a holdout until today, Friday the 13th of July, which will turn out to be his lucky day.

For now, though, none of that matters. It's time to train.

After the warmup, Durkin, who blends in like another player jumping in and out of the drills, turns and sprints out the back door of the gym. The guys follow him outside to a brick wall for a medicine ball circuit. Next, they sprint up an outdoor stairwell to a deck fitted with resistance bands for some external rotations to work on shoulder joint integrity. Right then, the Saints captain decides that his backup's form leaves something to be desired.

"Chase, you gotta come higher with that," Brees says, demonstrating just how high one should go.

Daniel glares back, incredulous. "You know what? You worry about you, and I'll worry about me, OK?"

Brees doesn't respond just then, but can't let it go, and gets Daniel's attention moments later when the two are jogging back down the stairs.

"You know what I meant, right? Up here." Brees shows him again.

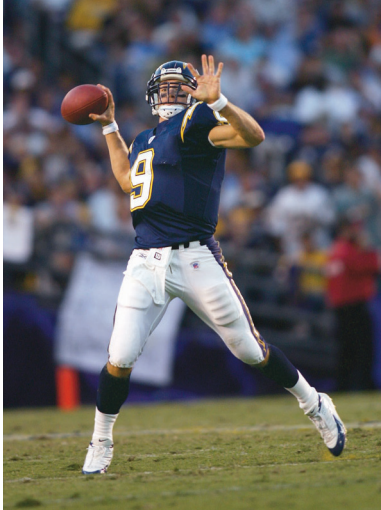
"Are you seriously f—ing telling me what to do right now?"

Brees fixes him with an icy stare and no hint of a smile. "I'm just trying to make you better, man."

Later, Daniel laughs about it, but there's no mistaking that Brees' always-on, game-time intensity can catch even his friends by surprise.



"When you are of the mindset that everything you encounter is there to make you better, you immediately take the positive approach, and it's amazing the changes you'll see."



A SAINT RISING

Brees showed flashes of greatness as a Charger (above) before a devastating injury to his throwing shoulder. He has since found new life with coach Sean Payton (above right) and the Saints.



"That's just the way he is, man, and we wouldn't want it any other way," Daniel says. "I know he really is trying to make me better."

More than the way all men in his presence defer to him, or the omnipresent urgency of his voice, what you always notice about Brees are his eyes—bright spheres of sharp, crystal blue, focusing like lasers on whatever the task at hand might be. They make no distinction between looking deep downfield in the Super Bowl or telling the *Men's Fitness* photographer where to stand to get the best pictures. It's an intensity that brings friends and teammates into the moment with him. Likewise, it's not hard to imagine how many a young defensive back lost his nerve through the error of making eye contact with him.

By all accounts, this focus is unshakable. Multitasking—that 21st-century buzzword meant to be a positive character trait of the highly successful—is of little interest to Brees. He doesn't steal a glimpse of an ESPN story about him that's airing in the gym during his workout, and he doesn't futz around with his iPhone during conversation. Whatever he's doing at that moment is truly the most important thing in his world.

"I've always been somebody who puts a lot on my plate," Brees says, "and the fact is you have to be able to manage your time extremely well and compartmentalize at times. You have to find a way to bear down and focus on that one task at one time. It just has to get done."

● **DURKIN HAS A RARE** vantage point into Brees' life and gets to see this ability to compartmentalize and focus up close like few others. Last year, Brees invited Durkin and his family to tour the Saints training facility. Durkin pulled up at five on a Friday afternoon, and there was only one other car in the lot. Brees was there alone—watching film.

"I looked at my boys and said, 'Listen, we could turn around right now and our trip would be complete because you just learned a great lesson,'" Durkin recalls. "When you're already great and you're still the last one to leave, that says everything."

Brees knows that it's his ability to compartmentalize—and not his



Brees brings game-time intensity to every rep in his sessions with trainer Todd Durkin.

DREW BREE'S CORE WORKOUT

Below is a six-exercise core circuit performed with little to no rest between exercises to elevate heart rate. This is only an excerpt of Durkin's full-body program—which runs two hours in length—but it's a valuable one nonetheless. High performance in any sport is dependent upon core strength.

DIRECTIONS: Perform three times through. Don't rest between exercises and rest only one minute at the end of each circuit.

EXERCISE	REPS
TRX Plank to Pushup*	20
Side Plank with Hip-up	20
TRX Rip Trainer Swing**	10 each side
Physio Ball Plank (circle, figure 8, and saw)***	30 seconds each
Med Ball One-arm Pass against wall	20 each side
Hyperextension w/Med Ball Throw at trampoline****	5 each arm

* With your feet in the stirrups of a TRX, hold a plank for 10 seconds on your elbows, then transition to your hands to perform a pushup. Return to the plank position and repeat.

** Using a TRX Rip Trainer (or long-handle attachment) on a weight stack, swing handle away from the anchor point with your left hand on top (shown above). Switch hands each rep.

*** Hold a plank with both elbows on a physio ball, then move the ball in circles, figure 8's, and saws (back and forth).

**** Hold a light med ball in one arm while on a back extension bench. At the top of each rep, throw the ball at an angled trampoline and catch it on the rebound (or use a partner).

other considerable athletic talents—that is largely responsible for his success. While it's difficult for him to put a finger on how exactly he is able to control his thoughts, he says it is possible to learn, and the best way is firsthand through a mentor. Pick someone whose success you want to emulate, he says, and try to pick up their habits. Brees has had several mentors throughout his life, and now he's the guy everyone seems to look up to. His 2010 memoir, *Coming Back Stronger: Unleashing the Hidden Power of Adversity*, was an attempt to reach those fans in a deeper way and help them find the good in every situation. If anyone has a right to preach such a message, it's Brees, who lost his mother, Mina—with whom he had a strained relationship through the years—to suicide in 2009.

"That was extremely tough," Brees says. "There are a lot of unanswered questions around the circumstances of her death as well, which made it even harder. But I felt like I became closer with my family in a lot of ways through that experience. I tried to gain something from it, and in the weeks after, I was able to celebrate my mom's life. Then we went on to win 13 games in a row that year and win the Super Bowl. Out of that tragedy came one of the greatest years for us."

● **IN THE FEW HOURS** between his workout and his cover shoot, Brees gets a call from his agent and learns the deal is done. He says it feels good, allowing a smile to creep over his face momentarily before it's banished.

"Right when it happens there's elation," Brees says as the smile fades, "and then you start reflecting a little bit on what it's taken to get to this point, and you start thinking about the responsibility that comes along with this. A lot of people view a contract like this as, 'Hey, you've earned this.' But in my mind, it is yet to be earned. I've always believed that to whom is given, much is required. I don't shy away from the responsibility that comes with this."

Surely he celebrated later that night, though. Right?

"To be perfectly frank, when I got home, I changed a poopie diaper, and I went downstairs and did a load of laundry," he says a few days later.

In truth, there really is no time to celebrate. His contract is the lone bright spot of the year for his team, which stands decimated by scandal and sanctions. The coach who believed in Brees the most and treated him as a partner has been ripped away, putting more pressure on him than ever before. Few will buy any \$100 million man as an underdog, but there's no denying the deck is stacked hard against him and the Saints.

Still, the more the strikes against him pile up, the more you can see the shadows of the past, of how he continually rises to the occasion in the face of adversity—when scouts think he's too short, when coaches think his shoulder is shot, when he's beset by personal tragedy. There is no handicapping what Drew Brees can do. If history is any guide, this is when the magic happens. A kick in the teeth only adds fuel to the fire, and right now, he's got enough to burn a clear path to a second Super Bowl ring—and whatever else he sees beyond. **MF**



BREES IN ACTION
Go to mensfitness.com for our behind-the-scenes video.