

WHERE SPORTS AND FAITH COLLIDE

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**Aaron  
Rodgers**



**INTO THE  
SPOTLIGHT**

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# SPORTS Spectrum

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**CLOSE-UPS:**

**Kurt  
Warner**

**Jordan Staal**

**Colt McCoy**

**Jordan  
Norwood**

**Tony Bennett**

**Nick  
Willis**

**TAMPA BAY'S**

# Derrick Brooks

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SPORTS SPECTRUM WINTER 2009



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**CLOSEUP:** Arizona Cardinals' **Kurt Warner**; Pittsburgh Penguins' **Jordan Staal** (p10); University of Texas' **Colt McCoy** (p12); Penn State's **Jordan Norwood** (p14); Washington State coach **Tony Bennett** (p16); New Zealand runner **Nick Willis** (p18)

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**Derrick Brooks: 100 Percent** Future Hall of Fame linebacker **Derrick Brooks** is in elite company in the NFL, and he has cemented his standing in the community with various projects—but it started with his commitment to Christ **BY BOB BELLONE**

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G

reen Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers may not have his own Christmas ornament hanging on the shelves of Green Bay stores yet, but he *has* succeeded in winning over diehard fans who mourned Brett Favre's controversial exit prior to the start of the 2008 season.

These aren't typical football fans either. Packers fans actually own their hometown team, boasting 112,088 local shareholders, and enthusiastically endure sub-zero temperatures in the stands at Lambeau Field. They also wear their game gear to church on Sundays—and leave early if the pastor has mistakenly preached past noon.

"Aaron had big shoes to fill when he stepped in, and we think he has done very well proving himself on the field and leading the team, despite the situation he was in," notes one local shop clerk.

It's true. As sports commentators said early in the season, no young player has ever faced more pressure than Rodgers, and no other young quarterback has ever been in the situation he faced—the legend retiring, then wanting to return after Rodgers had been named the starter, and the friction that ensued

**FAITH AND CHARACTER DEFINE GREEN BAY QUARTERBACK  
AARON RODGERS, WHO WENT FROM BACKING UP A LEGEND  
TO LEADING A LEGENDARY FRANCHISE ■ BY JENNA SAMPSON**

# OUT **OF THE** SHADOW

between the team management and Favre prior to his release.

"The best part was that it was an opportunity for me to speak honestly and openly in the midst of strong adversity and a difficult situation," says Rodgers, who routinely had 50 cameras at his locker after practice. "Either myself or Brett was the leading story on SportsCenter every day, and I knew that the way I handled the situation would be remembered for a long time. The way I handled it hopefully said a lot to my teammates, the fans, my family members and my friends back home."

It spoke volumes about his character, as well as his confidence as a leader on the field. In his first NFL



JONATHAN DANIEL / GETTY IMAGES





DWS





## LAMBEAU FIELD FAST FACTS

◆ **LAMBEAU FIELD** was voted as the #1 NFL fan experience by a *Sports Illustrated* online poll in 2007.

◆ **SEASON TICKET HOLDERS** pass their tickets down from generation to generation.

◆ The **WAITING LIST** for season tickets is about 80,000 people long.

▼ **TIME HONORED TRADITION:** During training camp, players ride across the street to the practice field on the bikes of local kids, who in turn carry the players' helmets alongside.



DUSTY HANCOCK / GETTY IMAGES

start last fall, he earned a spot in the record books with an 81.1 percent completion rate, beginning a pattern of consistency successful signal callers possess. And according to Rodgers, the key to that consistency is confidence by way of preparation.

"The way I prepare each week, the film I watch, how hard I practice, the notes I take in meetings—all of those things allow me to have a lot of confidence when I go into the game," he says. "I'm going through reps I've already done and looks I've already seen on film or in practice. My confidence level is so high when I get in the game that I expect to play well."

Rodgers relishes being a leader on the field.

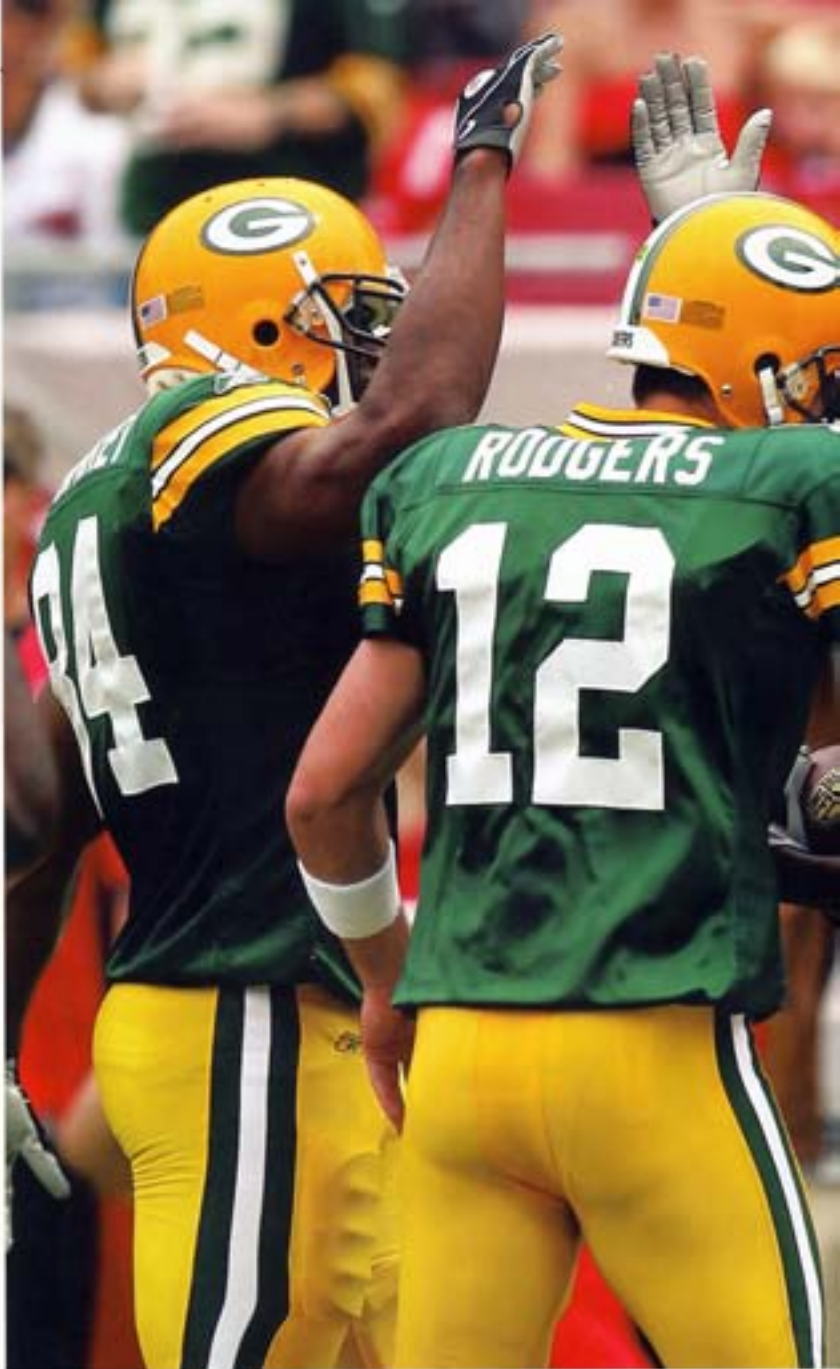
"Any sport I've played, I've always wanted to be in the position where you can have a great impact on the game," he said. "I'm not saying the quarterback is the only position in football, but it's a very important one."

Growing up as a middle child in a household of boys, Rodgers credits his even-keeled temperament and his ability to be a peacemaker as an invaluable leadership asset for his day job. "You have to help the older brother and younger brother get along. Likewise, on the field you have to be able to get everyone on the same page, and have your confidence filter out to those guys."

To understand that confidence, you have to take a closer look down the road that brought the California native to the place he is today. Rodgers grew up in a Christian home, but it wasn't until the spring of his junior year of high school that he faced a crossroads about the path he would follow in life.

"Before that point, I went to church because my parents went to church," he admits. "But when I was 17, I realized I had to make a choice because I was starting to do some things that my buddies were doing, and I knew deep down that it wasn't right. I rededicated my life to the Lord. Ever since then I fall on my face and get back up, get on my knees and confess, and keep on trying to live for Jesus. It's not easy. It's daily dying to yourself and prioritizing your time."

It was after that decision that Rodgers' journey to the NFL began. His senior year of high school came to an end without a college scholarship in sight, and it was while quarterbacking at a junior college that he caught the eye of California Berkeley head coach Jeff Tedford, who noticed Rodgers on a



▲ **Pack to the future:** Rodgers and favorite target Greg Jennings—both 24—figure to be pass buddies for years to come. ◀ **Aaron it out (left):** Rodgers' success with the California Golden Bears led to national attention and his selection by the Packers to succeed the legendary Brett Favre. Aaron's 2008 play assured Packer Nation that they made the right choice.

scouting tape featuring one of his Butte College teammates.

Division I scholarship in hand, Rodgers took the reins of the Cal offense during the 2003 season, and the following year led the Bears to their highest national ranking since 1952. He finished his college career with the school's career record for passing efficiency



whom I trust.' Psalm 91:1-2

Even now, on football's biggest stage, Rodgers is eager to use his platform to share the hope of Jesus Christ, but he does so carefully. He lives out his faith following the words of St. Francis of Assisi: *Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words.*

"Faith plays an interesting role in our game. There are a lot of guys that profess to know God, but myself included—we don't always set the best example for Christ. It's a work in progress as every relationship is, but we have an important opportunity as Christians in the NFL to use that platform to glorify God, and I don't think you have to be the most vocal guy in the media."

"He has handled himself with great character, and character is the key to being the voice box he wants to be without saying a word," says assistant team chaplain Troy Murphy. "You can tell that he genuinely cares for people, and that's very evident in his life."

Rodgers acknowledges that NFL players have so many things within their grasp—including money, fame, and opportunity. But there is something decidedly different about guys who are content with what they've been given and are living their lives for Christ.

"There are so many of us that are trying to fill that God-shaped hole in our heart with different things," Rodgers says. "We realize that there has to be something more."

And what does he say to athletes who believe that playing sports is their sole purpose in life?

"You're gonna get let down because sports aren't forever," he replies. "Every practice or game could be your last. You have to put your hope in something that's more stable. And God's proven that He's stable and is going to last a lot longer than your sport. You can't take your records, stats and money with you into the next life, so you need to plan for that as well as life after football."

"I've played for four years and I'm 24, and if I'm lucky to play 10—and I live to be 70—I better have something to do the next 40 years of my life that fulfills me outside of sports and can give me a purpose."

The near future, though, is certain for the young quarterback, who signed a contract extension at the end of October with the Packers. The extension runs through the 2014 season.

"Just to be able to play the way I did starting the season definitely helped,

but [the extension] was still a little unexpected," Rodgers said at the time. "This definitely means a lot to me that they are saying I am going to be the guy for the future."

Rodgers has clearly emerged from the shadow of a legend, and is now casting his own. **O**

*Freelance writer Jenna Sampson lives in Carlsbad, California, and managed to squeeze in a quick trip to Green Bay last fall. She also serves as Communications Coordinator at North Coast Church in Vista, California.*

## KEEPING IT REAL

■ **Despite his fame,** Aaron Rodgers stays grounded by keeping his priorities straight: family, faith and friends.

"You have to have people in your life who keep you humble," he says. "I think in the Kingdom, humility is God's favorite attribute. I have people who tell me how it is, keep me focused, and keep me walking the talk."

Those people include his brother, friends back home, teammate **Aaron Kampman** (a veteran Pro Bowl defensive end who is Rodgers' training camp roommate), and several other teammates who join him for Bible studies. Former NFL quarterback **Trent Dilfer** is also a good friend who has offered some great words of advice to Rodgers during the last year.

In addition to the team chapel that 30-40 players and coaches attend the night before games, Rodgers and Kampman came up with the idea to start Wednesday night "Packers Church" for the players and their spouses who aren't able to attend on Sunday mornings. The duo also organized small groups that meet during the week.

Every morning, assistant chaplain **Troy Murphy** sends daily verses by text message to about 40 guys, including a few on other teams.

"For some of them, with the pace they keep, getting that daily verse is important," Murphy says.

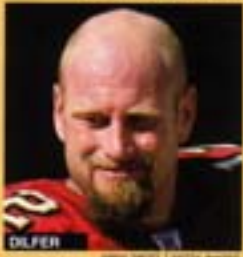
Murphy and head chaplain **Joe Urcavich** accompanied several players (including Rodgers) to Alaska last year on a trip with Unlimited Potential, Inc., a Christian organization that ministers through sports. The group visited a military base and had a chance to share their testimonies with the soldiers. —JENNA SAMPSON



RODGERS



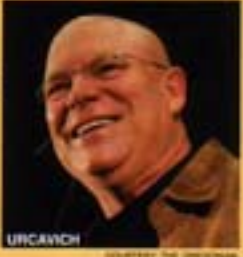
KAMPMAN



DILFER



MURPHY



URCAVICH



PHOTO: SPINELLI / GETTY IMAGES

(150.27). Then came the 2005 NFL draft, where he was projected to be the first pick. Instead, he sat patiently until he was named the Packers' first choice and the 24th pick overall. Rodgers once again waited patiently, biding his time behind Favre for three seasons.

Through all of the obstacles he has faced—it is Psalm 91 that he clings to.

"I felt like the Lord gave me that passage my junior year in high school," he says. "I used to write it on my shoes. And now, years later, every time I get injured, or am scared, or have a bad day, I go back to that passage."

*He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in*