



Everything New Orleans

New Orleans Saints have a special bond with their fans

By **Bob Marshall, The Times-Picayune**

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FORT LAUDERDALE, FLA. -- Watching the happy Who Dats and **New Orleans Saints** sharing the love, watching the tears flow from fans and players alike, I couldn't help wondering: Will they be the exception to the rule?



Susan Poag / The Times-Picayune

New Orleans Saints head coach Sean Payton holds up the Vince Lombardi trophy through his sunroof as he leaves the airport in Kenner on Monday.

Today, the Saints and the adoring Who Dat Nation are like lovers just back from the honeymoon, still glowing with the memories, ready to spend the next months looking at the snap shots, watching the videos, convinced their special time will never end.

And it has been very special.

What has happened in New Orleans since 2005 -- but especially this year -- is the very best that professional team sports can be. It's not the NFL championship. It's the potential of a franchise to help an entire city experience the values that are so special to teams -- the sense of belonging, of family, of commitment, of sharing joy -- as well as sorrow.

To listen to the players, it has been an experience like no other in their athletic lives. This time they were passing, running, catching, tackling and kicking for a purpose far larger than themselves or a mere team. They

were doing it for the spirit of an entire city and region.

"It's not the New Orleans Saints who are Super Bowl champions, it's the city of New Orleans that won the Super Bowl," said safety Darren Sharper in the chaos following the Saints' 31-17 victory against the Indianapolis Colts in Super Bowl XLIV at Sun Life Stadium on Sunday night in Miami. "We were playing for the city, not just the Saints."

Quarterback Drew Brees agreed.

"What can I say. We played for much more than just ourselves -- we played for our city, for the entire Gulf Coast region, for the entire Who Dat Nation," he said, as if it should have been self-evident. "We have been blessed with so much."

And New Orleans linebacker Scott Fujita seemed close to tears when he was asked if winning the trophy had been a "civic responsibility."

"No question about it," Fujita yelled. "It was all of us together! It was all of us in the city together the last four years! This is the moment we've been working for; this is the moment the city deserves!"

"And I can't wait to get back to New Orleans and celebrate with our people."

Our people.

I've heard a lot of players in a lot of locker rooms thank "the fans."

I've never heard them refer to the paying customers who watch, cheer and sometimes boo them, as "our people."

There has always been a clear wall between team family and patrons in the stands, yet somehow this team and these fans have bonded into one family, in a way you normally only see on a college campus or a high school gym.

It's wonderful, and it's rare because the modern professional sports industry doesn't encourage those moments to last. It's not just the reality that players leave teams and teams leave players; it's also the philosophy of the industry.

The mantra of the men who play, coach and manage this sport is embodied in one of the ugliest sports phrases ever coined: "Winning is the only thing." It's a slogan that preaches the antithesis of family life: We'll disown you, shun you, ban and banish you not only if you lose -- but if you don't win everything.

In other words: We love you, we've got your back, and we're brothers forever -- as long as you're winning. A real kum-ba-yuk world.

Of course, they live by that motto because the fans who watch them and the owners who pay them also subscribe to it.

As Colts Coach Jim Caldwell said last week, getting to the Super Bowl isn't his job description -- winning it is. And he recalled the plight three years ago of Marty Schottenheimer, fired by the San Diego Chargers after a 14-2 season -- because he lost in the playoffs.

Truth be told, the fans are usually one step ahead of management. Vikings fans believe Brad Childress should be fired, and some Colts fans have opined Caldwell is too conservative for his job.

So as I watch the happy Who Dats and the players who love them right back, it would be nice to think we're looking at an exception to the rule.

We can hope.

In the meantime, enjoy something very rare, and very well deserved.

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Ted Jackson / The Times-Picayune

New Orleans Saint Reggie Bush jumps into the stands at Sun life Stadium in Miami after the Saints beat the Indianapolis Colts 31-17 in the Super Bowl.