

SUPER SEND-OFF IN FOXBOROUGH



MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Thousands rallied at snowy Gillette Stadium yesterday as the Patriots left for their Super Bowl duel with the Giants. Tom Brady said upon arrival in Arizona that ankle trouble will not keep him from playing Sunday. **D1.**

A Patriot answers two callings

With charitable foundation, Watson offers a spiritual example

By Jackie MacMullan

GLOBE STAFF

FOXBOROUGH — When Benjamin Watson was barely 4 years old, already having mastered the proper technique for a three-point football stance, he tugged earnestly at his father's sleeve.

"Dad," he said. "Can you put me in the closet?"

"Why, son? Why should I do that?" his father, pastor Ken Watson, responded.

"So you can announce my name," Benjamin answered. "So I can run onto the football field."

And so began a family ritual. Young Benjamin, crammed in

with the coats, would patiently wait as his father declared in a booming voice, "Now, starting at running back for the Washington Redskins, No. 45, Benjamin Watson . . ."

At that moment, the boy would bust out, arms raised, eyes fixed straight ahead on the dream in front of him.

"Ever since I can remember," said Ken Watson, "if you asked Benjamin what he wanted to be when he grew up, he'd answer, 'I want to be a football player and a missionary.'"

Twenty-three years later, Patriots tight end Benjamin Watson is an NFL starter, an integral part of an unbeaten



WYNLOW TOWN/IN-ASSOCIATED PRESS/FILE

Benjamin Watson likens his pursuits with his "One More" Foundation to that of a missionary.

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BENJAMIN WATSON, Patriots tight end

TE Watson answers two callings

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team that will try to cap its perfect season with a victory over the New York Giants in Super Bowl XLII Sunday in Glendale, Ariz.

Watson's career is approaching its zenith, yet as he has established himself as a respected member of the Patriots, he simultaneously has answered the call of his faith. Last week, while his teammates enjoyed a three-day hiatus from football, Watson formally kicked off his "One More" Foundation, created to promote educational and enrichment opportunities through charitable programs.

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Inquisitive mind

The genesis of that calling came when he was a child in Rock Hill, S.C., as he engaged in bedtime talks with his mother, Diana, about her beliefs.

"He'd ask me spiritual questions he wouldn't ask when the light was on," Diana Watson said. "Questions about Jesus, about sins, about heaven. He was very inquisitive. He was looking for answers."

Because his dad was a pastor, Watson and his five siblings spent each summer tagging along to Christian camps. Benjamin found himself transfixed by the words of his father, whom he admired fervently. Once, after the family returned from a retreat with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), Benjamin's friends came over to toss a football. Instead, they were given a sermon by a solemn 7-year-old intent on spreading the word of God.

"He was telling them how important it was to give your life to the Lord. I was like, 'Wow.'"

Faith needs time to grow and develop. Benjamin was not a perfect child. He was too competitive, a sore loser, something that initially concerned Ken Watson, a former football player at the University of Maryland.

"I got this oversized teddy bear at a flea market," Ken Watson said. "I brought it home, and every night before bed, Benjamin would box with it. Every night, I'd let him win."

"So this one night I didn't let Ben win. I roughed him up pretty good with that teddy bear. Then I told him it was time for bed. The light was out and it was an hour later, and he was still screaming for me to bring that teddy bear back in there so he could beat him."

Watson recalls a habit of using bad language, which was quickly truncated by his mother sticking a bar of Ivory soap in his mouth. He teased his sister, Jessica, two years behind him, for what she wore, what she said, even berating her for the size of her head.

When the Watson children dressed for church, greeting friends with impeccable manners, Jessica groaned as her oldest brother smiled sweetly, pecking members of the congregation on the cheek.

"I thought he was a demon," Jessica Watson said.

As Watson grew older and excelled in football, his father reminded him to praise God in the midst of his failures as well as his successes.

"I told him his love for God should be the same when he was dropping the ball as when he was catching a touchdown," Ken Watson said.

Faith is not something to turn on and off like a faucet, although many athletes have been criticized for doing just that. The reason some people have an aversion to athletes who publicly praise Christ, Ken Watson said, is that occasionally the athletes come off as inconsistent, even hypocritical.

"I think when people see athletes being very demonstrative on the field about their relationship with God, they also want to see what they do once the game is over," he explained. "If you are pointing your finger to the sky and



WATSON FAMILY PHOTOS

Benjamin Watson proved he was coverworthy as a youngster, posing (as a Patriot) with cousin Jemel Ridgenal. Watson's parents, Ken and Diana (above right), instilled strong Christian values in their children. Benjamin lined up far right for team Watson (below left). In 2000, Benjamin (far right) attended the ground breaking of the church where his father serves as pastor.



praising the Lord after you score a touchdown, then you get off the field and you're a bum, well, who is going to believe in you?"

College an awakening

When Benjamin accepted a scholarship to Duke to play football, his mother worried his values would be skewed by the adulation so readily thrust upon sports heroes. Watson found college to be an awakening.

There were temptations everywhere: co-ed dorms, late nights, wild parties. Hardly any of his friends went to church. Even fewer talked about God.

"You grow up a certain way, and you make decisions within your family," Watson said. "But then you go to college and the decisions become harder. You are away from home, from the influence of your parents, dealing with

peer pressure. There's a lot of stuff that goes on in college."

He immersed himself in his football experience, but the Duke team was horrible. The team struggled to a 3-8 mark in 1999, his freshman season, and the losing wore on him.

"I kind of dreaded going to those games, to tell you the truth," his sister Jessica said. "The players were always so down."

Watson transferred to Georgia, where the temptations were the same, even greater, but he took his father's advice and learned to anticipate trouble long before it cornered him. He became involved in FCA and discovered kindred spirits.

He earned second-team all Southeastern Conference honors as a senior and was selected by the Patriots in the first round of the 2004 draft.

Trying rookie season

Expectations were high for the chiseled tight end, but in the second game of his rookie season, Watson injured his knee and was placed on injured reserve. The Patriots cruised to a 14-2 record without him and beat Philadelphia in Super Bowl XXXIX.

"It was so hard," Watson said. "First of all, you know how it is with our team. No one could know. It was almost two years before the media realized I had suffered a torn ACL. I felt I had to keep it to myself."

"Somehow you ended up feeling like it's your fault, like you are holding on to this bad secret, like you are letting people down."

He tried to interact with the team, but injured players are apart from the hub of activity. By necessity, the team must focus on who can help it on the field.

"The train moves on," said Watson. "On days like that, when you are feeling secluded from everyone else, you have to remember that who you are as a football player does not measure your worth as a person. What matters is who you are in Christ."

One of the more striking customs in sports is when opposing NFL players, who, moments earlier were trying to annihilate one another, join hands in the center of the field to share a prayer when the game ends.

"It's a time for us to acknowledge there is more to life than football, that all the glory should go to God, not Benjamin Watson, or anyone else," Watson said. "We thank God for the opportunity to let us play in the NFL, we thank him for our physical gifts, and we pray for the safety of the traveling team."

"Now, everyone in that huddle isn't necessarily Christian, just as everyone outside that huddle is not necessarily a heathen. We're all human. We all make mistakes."

Watson does not preach to his Patriots teammates like he did when he spread his message to his neighborhood pals.

He hopes his actions speak for him. Watson is the FCA spokesperson and donates his time to food banks, the Salvation Army, Toys for Tots, and Habitat for Humanity. He said his foundation will help multiple charities, not just Christian ones.

He still relishes a trip he took with his father to Jamaica last April on a mission.

Platform for view

His mother wonders if Watson will become a pastor when he retires from the NFL.

"He has a platform now," said Diana Watson, "if he chooses to use it."

Ken Watson has heard his son speak many times. The most impressive, he said, was last summer when Benjamin addressed 800 football players at Northwestern, his old high school in Rock Hill.

He talked about his long rookie season, watching the Patriots win it all without any contribution from him.

"He told them how he didn't feel a part of the team, until one day Tom Brady walked up to him and said, 'Ben, we're going to win you a Super Bowl ring,'" said Ken Watson. "The night of the game, Benjamin stood on the sideline and was part of the team. Did he do anything to help them win? No, but he was part of something bigger than individual glory, just as God is."

Benjamin Watson is healthy for this Super Bowl. He proved it by leveling a number of San Diego Chargers with some bone-crunching.

"I'm watching the final minutes of that game, and I'm saying, 'Lord, please don't let this kid get hurt,'" Ken Watson said. "He deserves this chance. He's come a long way from the closet."

Watson feels blessed to have found his wife, Kirsten, who will be heavily involved in the "One More" Foundation. He is grateful for his parents, who guided him along his Christian path.

Even Jessica has come around to believing the "demon" is a man to be admired. She is an elementary school teacher in Myrtle Beach, S.C., and her students quiz her about her famous football sibling.

"The other day one of them asked me, 'Who is your favorite player?'" Jessica said. "I thought about it for a minute, and I said, 'You know what? I guess it would have to be my brother.'"

Jackie MacMullan can be reached at macmullan@globe.com.

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