



A SAINT WHO WALKS THE TALK

BY ERIC TIAN SAY

New Orleans Saints tight end Ernie Conwell knows a lot about football and even more about God's grace and healing touch.

In 1998, Conwell, then a member of the St. Louis Rams, suffered a catastrophic knee injury while playing the San Francisco 49ers. Three ligaments, along with chunks of cartilage and his patellar tendon, ripped in his knee. It seemed Conwell's career was over. But his faith swelled in the face of adversity and he believed that one day he would play professional football again.

Fourteen months later, during the Rams' unlikely trek to a victory in Super Bowl XXXIV, that is exactly what happened. But it wasn't during the thrill of victory that Conwell praised God for his return to football. In fact, it happened only moments before the game began.

"I was moved to tears during the national anthem, but it wasn't because of [Faith Hill's] great performance," says Conwell, who has played in the Super Bowl twice. "That was one of the most sacred moments of my life. There were millions of people watching that Super Bowl, but I felt alone with God."

As for the game, Conwell had key blocks and his 16-yard reception in the third quarter led to the Rams' first touchdown in the game, in which St. Louis beat the Tennessee Titans 23-16.

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Conwell, who was signed by New Orleans to a five-year contract as a free agent in 2003, has a reputation as an underrated player.

“I don’t know if there’s a more complete tight end in this league. I haven’t seen one,” Mike Martz, Rams’ head coach, has said of Conwell, who was a second-round pick by St. Louis in 1996 out of the University of Washington. “He is the complete package.”

The 6-foot-2-inch, 255-pound Conwell is in peak physical condition, but he’s also no Christian lightweight.

For the past two years, he has been a licensed minister-in-training with a large nondenominational charismatic church.

“I work for them during the off season,” explains Conwell. “I feel like I’m going out as a missionary when I return to the NFL.”

Saints associate head coach/running game coordinator Jack Henry said Conwell is a leader in both word and example.

Conwell is not afraid to take a stand on important spiritual issues, but he does it in a nonabrasive way, Henry says. Guys can see the message in his eyes, hear it in his words and, most importantly, feel it in his actions.

Saints offensive coordinator Mike Sheppard agrees, calling Conwell “a great role model.”

“He lives his faith every day,” says Sheppard. “He’s a great example to Christians in how you should walk the talk and how you can be a Christian and still be a tough, hard-nosed, competitive NFL player.”

According to Henry, Conwell is also compassionate and caring.

This was evident after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, which displaced the Saints and many residents to San Antonio.

In the weeks after Katrina, Conwell and nearly a dozen other players visited a Wal-Mart in San Antonio to buy clothes and other items for Katrina evacuees staying at shelters in the city.

While at the store, Conwell met a man who was staying at a shelter with his girlfriend who had recently given birth to twins. The couple — engaged to be married — lost everything they owned during the storm according to the *San Antonio Express-News*.

“I’m thinking, *Here’s a gentleman who wants to do the right thing and marry the mother of his children,*” says Conwell, who bought the couple engagement rings as well as clothes. “He had some money, but he didn’t have enough to cover everything he needed.”

The couple was later married at a San Antonio relief shelter.

“I was more blessed than that gentleman,” says Conwell. “I just wanted to let people know it’s better to give than to receive.”

Conwell’s teammates noticed his compassion.

“No one was surprised by it,” defensive tackle Rodney Leisle told the *Express-News*. “That’s the kind of guy he is. Everybody wants to be like Ernie Conwell.” **tpe**

ERIC TIANSAY is a frequent writer for *TPE’s* Super Bowl edition. E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.



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