

# Delvin Breaux refuses to give up on football dream



Advocate staff photo by JOHN McCUSKER --Delvin Breaux, New Orleans Voodoo Friday, March 8, 2013. COOKING MAGS OUT / INTERNET OUT/ONLINE OUT/NO SALES/TV OUT/FOREIGN OUT/ LOUISIANA BUSINESS INC./GREATER BATON ROUGE BUSINESS REPORT/225/10/12/IN REGISTER/LBI CUSTOM PUBLICATIONS OUT/MANDATORY CREDIT THE ADVOCATE/ JOHN McCUSKER

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## Delvin Breaux refuses to give up after serious neck injury

By Gary Estwick

*Special to The Advocate*

**NEW ORLEANS** — On Oct. 27, 2006, Delvin Breaux sprinted downfield on McDonough 35's kickoff coverage, his body held upright by adrenaline, naivety and youthful invincibility, all masking warning signs he had ignored and hidden from teammates, coaches and family.

Forty yards later, Breaux's football career endured a painful, emotionally scarring detour which kept him on the sideline of the sport until an Arena Football tryout with the New Orleans VooDoo has become his latest — perhaps his last — opportunity to get back on course to reaching the NFL.

At Tad Gormley Stadium, Breaux dove head-first at the knees of a Jesuit kick returner. On contact, Breaux rolled over on his back, closed his eyes and counted two long seconds.

The collision slid his C4 and C5 vertebrae forward, crushing the natural curve in his neck. His C6 was also broken in the back of his neck.

One thousand one.

His right vertebral artery, which carries oxygen-rich blood from the heart to the brain and spine, was partially blocked by a tiny, chipped piece of bone, like a foot stepping on a hose pipe. Within minutes, seconds, Breaux, whose nickname is Chip, risked losing consciousness, or dying.

One thousand two.

Breaux, 17, opened his eyes and saw light. Stadium lights. Coaches and teammates hovered over him, asking questions.

"Hey man. How you feeling?"

"Get up, Let's go. We need you. Let's go."

He tried.

"I can't get up. I can't even move."

Eventually, he did. Now on the bench, Breaux sat with an ice bag on the right side of his neck, intent on returning to the game, unaware his life was one play away from ending — if it didn't end anyway.

Breaux put his helmet on, stood up and took one step. Oblivious to the fact his life was in jeopardy, he was focused on helping McDonough 35 beat Jesuit and improve its playoff seeding. Which is why Breaux never left the previous week's loss at Rummel, where his neck problems began with an initial head-first collision. Plus, LSU assistant coaches were in the stands, watching Breaux, one of their prized in-state commitments at cornerback.

A team trainer gave him two Ibuprofen tablets. He put them in his mouth, but couldn't swallow because a disc had slipped in his esophagus. He coughed up the pills, which burned his chest. His vision blurred immediately, forcing him to sit back down.

Now at Tulane Medical Center, Breaux heard doctors discussing his X-rays.

"Ain't nothing wrong with me, I'm good," he said, knowing he couldn't move his head.

His mood changed later when he was surrounded by his parents, both crying. A doctor approached.

"Son, you're not supposed to be here right now."

"Huh?"

"The way you injured your neck, you're supposed to be dead on the field."

His first surgery stabilized the spine and repaired the vessel. A plate secured the front of the break through an incision under his jaw, just below his Adam's apple. The second surgery consisted of a plate being placed in the back of his neck. His neck was placed in a halo, which left two small bald patches on the sides of his head. He lost about 30 pounds and most of his muscle tone.

What am I going to do now? Am I going to be paralyzed? Am I going to be able to eat on my own again? Am I going to be able to play sports?

Breaux learned to walk again in two days. After 28 days, as he prepared to be discharged from the hospital, Breaux asked Tulane neurosurgeon Miguel Melgar if his football career was over.

"Just make sure you send me Super Bowl tickets when you get to the NFL," Melgar said.

By February 2007, Breaux was running track at McDonogh 35. Somehow, he was faster.

As healthy as he felt on the outside, internal examinations revealed a different story. The area around his neck had yet to become strong enough to withstand collisions. LSU coach Les Miles told him to redshirt his freshman year.

Breaux watched several home games from the stands; he stopped because of the mental torment. He was so close to his LSU teammates, known as a weight room phenom. But on game days, he was so far away, sitting high above the field at Tiger Stadium in the family section.

By his third year at LSU, he felt he would never get a chance to play football with the Tigers. So he decided to chase women, hang out late at parties and live without much other purpose. Soon after, he flunked out.

He tried to transfer to the University of Arkansas-Montecello and was medically cleared by its doctors, but his grade point average at LSU doomed him.

A tryout with the New Orleans Saints fell through because he lacked game film. The closest he came to football was starting on several flag football teams in Baton Rouge. Meanwhile, he worked in construction and as a bouncer.

Last year, his girlfriend, Kasey, and several flag football teammates convinced him to try out for the Louisiana Bayou Vipers, a semi-pro team in Hammond.

Breaux ended his first season of full-contact football since 2006 with 45 tackles, five interceptions and two forced fumbles.

He wanted more.

According to Tulane Medical Center, fewer than five percent of people that suffer vascular and spine injuries endure them simultaneously, like Breaux. In 1995, actor Christopher Reeve did, falling from a horse, leaving him a quadriplegic. Ten years later, he died.

In October, Breaux showed up at a VooDoo tryout at Tad Gormley Stadium. Coach Pat O'Hara timed his 40-yard dash at 4.38 seconds.

O'Hara stared at Breaux.

"Run that again."

He did — 4.38 seconds.

And so began his journey through with the VooDoo, one he hopes will lead to the NFL, a place he thought he would be already. Because of his time away from the game and the adjustment to Arena Football rules, Breaux is a long shot, O'Hara said.

For now, Breaux is focused on what made him a prized commitment out of McDonogh 35 — his ability to sprint full-speed ahead.