

**Insights & Inspiration from a Thought Leader,
NFL Star, Sports Analyst & Entrepreneur**



PIVOT **to WIN**

**Make the Big Plays In
Life, Sports & Business**

JORDAN BABINEAUX



INTRODUCTION

“Bring it in, guys,” said Uncle Dwight, motioning for my brother Jonathan (Monsta) and me to bring our bikes to a halt along the seawall in Port Arthur, Texas. It was a typical sunny February day and the air smelled faintly of oil. Uncle Dwight took a knee and then reached for each of our hands. Uncle Dwight, who we called Godfather, was my father’s youngest brother. He was one of those guys who are great with kids but doesn’t have any of his own. Godfather was always at our house taking me and my four siblings on beach outings and camping trips, bringing us treats, and making sure we were minding Mama.

As Godfather took both of our hands, I took a deep breath, inhaling the chemical smell of the refineries that kept 80 percent of Port Arthur residents provided with food, water, and shelter. Monsta and I had spent the afternoon racing each other around the big boulders that anchored the shores of the Sabine-Neches Waterway.

“I’m sorry to tell you boys this,” Godfather said, “but your father has passed away.”

Passed away? I looked at Godfather, utterly confused. At eight years old, I understood that death meant that someone wasn’t coming back, but I didn’t understand death or what it would mean for Monsta and me—let alone my whole family. After Godfather told us that my dad had

died, I don't remember how we got back to the house or what Mama said to us. I do remember feeling a heavy sense of loss, an emptiness as if someone blew a hole through my chest.

My father, Joseph "Butch" Babineaux, died in a freak accident on February 8, 1991. A Vietnam veteran, my dad was at a local vet hospital for a general checkup. While he was waiting for the doctor, he stepped out of the waiting room on the fourth floor, lit a cigarette, leaned against a loose balcony, and fell to his death.

Almost overnight, Mom started worrying about bills, how she would pay for college, and how she would keep her five kids on the right track. While she suffered and mourned, family and friends moved through our house shocked and grieving. I remember the house being our "safe place" but also feeling like I didn't belong there. Mama was so distraught that she could hardly contain herself. To temporarily relieve us from the trauma, we kids spent a few nights at my grandpa's house. While she was moving through her grief, Mama kept her job at Southwestern Bell and then added second jobs whenever she could, leaving each of us to essentially care for ourselves.

Monsta and I are eleven months apart in age, so wherever Monsta went, I went. Whatever Monsta wanted to do, I wanted to do, and whatever he did, I wanted to do better. Right after Dad's death, the one thing both of us wanted more than anything was to eliminate Mom's pain.

When Dad died, we moved back into his house, which is where we lived before my parents divorced. Boy, was that eerie! One night, sitting on our bedroom floor, Mom's wails rising in the background, Monsta and I made a pact: We would find jobs that would prevent Mom from ever having to worry about money again. Because we were naïve and didn't know that only 1.6 percent¹ of college football players actually make it to the National Football League (NFL), we decided that we'd become NFL players.

We didn't know anything about the NFL other than what we saw on TV. To us, the NFL was a bunch of seriously strong dudes making courageous tackles and spiking footballs into the end zone after driving past the defense for game-winning touchdowns. We knew those guys couldn't possibly worry about money, not with the flashy jewelry, houses, and cars

¹ <http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/research/football-probability-competing-beyond-high-school>

they had. They looked healthy, they looked happy, they were rich—and we wanted a piece of what they had. Without any question, the NFL was going to be our ticket out of Port Arthur.

Like music artist Janis Joplin, Pro Football Hall of Fame Coach Jimmy Johnson, hip-hop duo Underground Kingz, NBA champion Stephen Jackson, and NFL player Tim McKyer, we were going to put Port Arthur on the map. Many people consider the southeast part of the state the “armpit of Texas,” due to the heavy oil production. With Beaumont and Orange as neighboring cities to Port Arthur, at one time the area produced more pro football players and Super Bowl champions than anywhere else in the country. Aaron Brown, who attended my high school, played in the first AFL-NFL World Championship Game.

So we got to work. We joined the peewee football teams and, when Mom wasn’t home, we tackled each other until the walls shook. Mom didn’t say much about our dream. She was just happy that, while she was working, two of her kids were on the football field staying out of trouble. For Monsta and me, trouble meant more than it might have for the white kids. There was a time when every Black mother living on the west side of Port Arthur had warned their sons and daughters not to slip up and “accidentally” cross into the white side of town.

Growing up in the South, we experienced racism, but as kids we weren’t able to synthesize it well enough to know the depth of those prejudices. It wasn’t until I got older and had my own experiences that I realized the severity of generational discrimination. In our city of Port Arthur and in surrounding areas, the KKK not only was visible but also threatened Black people with intimidation, violence, and murder. Less than a fifteen-minute car ride from the house we grew up in, a billboard on the highway displayed a version of the following: “N*****, don’t let the sun set on you here.” This was the early 1990s when we would play little league football games and pack half the town to travel with us for safety. We’d blow out our white adversaries and have to run straight to the bus when the clock hit zero to get out as fast as we could. Anything could happen—the referees were known to make fake calls, our competitors would take cheap hits, we were even chased off of football fields for whooping up on the white teams. Things had gotten so bad by the time we got to high school that just miles away—in the same areas we used to

avoid as kids—three white men tied a Black man to the tail of a pickup truck and dragged him to his death.

Kids who grew up in Port Arthur had two options: Graduate from high school and work for the refinery for about \$70,000 or fall victim to the street life. Some went off to college, left, and never came back, but only a few. The choice between drugs and life was the first major decision every kid in my neighborhood made—but Monsta and I, we made a third choice. That choice was sports. For Monsta and me, it started in our house. Our older brothers set the pace for sports. Then each of my siblings was accepted into college, and we both knew that the expectation was higher education.

I was a star in little league football, but by the time I got to high school, it felt like I had to work extra hard to get playing time. There were a lot of talented kids from the neighborhood and we all wanted a way out. I was undersized and fast, but no matter what I did I was always the underdog. In college, I had to fight to earn a scholarship. In the NFL, I had to fight to get exposure to as many teams as possible. Then I had to fight to get on the roster—and then I had to fight to stay on the roster. But I’ve never been afraid of the fight. I love the fight. I love breaking down barriers and testing what I’m made of. I love putting my finger on something, saying, “I’m going to do this, and dammit, I’ll do it just because you said I couldn’t!”

Coming out of high school, I was lucky to play for Division II Southern Arkansas University as a defensive back. It didn’t take long to see playing time. Going into my senior year of college, no one expected to see anything more from me as a football player. They thought I would finish the season playing the way I had my sophomore and junior years, since playing at the next level is a rare feat. No one expected to hear from me again. No one except for me.

See, what other people didn’t know is that between my junior and senior year, I met with a man who was also an NFL football scout. I asked him to lunch and when we sat down, I said, “How do I get to the NFL?” He said, “You need to get bigger and I want you to return kicks.”

Not long after that conversation, I was on the road to Iowa to train with Monsta at the University of Iowa, a Division I school that had a top-notch football program led by coach Kirk Ferentz. That entire summer,

I worked just as hard as everyone on Monsta's team, sometimes harder. I trained, made a point to be the first one in and the last one gone, and slept on Monsta's couch. Then I woke up and did it all over again.

By the end of the summer, I left Iowa City exuberant and confident. I increased my weight and speed and returned to Southern Arkansas demanding a cornerback position and a special teams assignment. In 2003, which was my senior year, I earned NCAA All-America First-Team honors as a cornerback and kick returner. I also received NCAA All-Region First-Team and All-GSC First-Team honors as a cornerback. I had sixty-eight tackles (forty unassisted), defended fourteen passes, recovered three fumbles, picked off five passes, and earned a trip to the Whataburger Cactus Bowl, the Division II All-Star game in Kingsville, Texas. I also caught the attention of both the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the Detroit Lions, which felt pretty damn good.

By the time the 2004 draft rolled around, both the Bucs and the Lions had lost interest in me. However, I was confident that I could play at the next level if I got an invite to any team's training camp. Day three of the NFL draft, I got a call from a Seattle area code and when I answered, the voice of defensive coordinator Ray Rhodes offered me a position with the Seahawks. I could hardly contain my excitement. I kept thinking, "Hell, yeah!"

With all the odds stacked against me, I walked onto the Seahawks field as an undrafted free agent and started showing my team why I belonged. For the next seven years, I persisted, I trained, I grew, I dug deep, I worked hard, and I performed until the only place for me on the Hawks roster was a starter position. During that time, I also suffered injuries, helped bring the Hawks to Super Bowl XL, went through a difficult coaching turnover twice, dealt with the harsh reality of the business of football, and joined the Tennessee Titans. But what I really did, just like my brother, was join the ranks of the nobodies who crawled out of Port Arthur and gave hope to young players looking to fulfill their own NFL dreams—people like Jamaal Charles, Kevin Everett, Danny Gorrer, and two-time Super Bowl champ Elandon Roberts.

For many people, having an NFL career of any length would be a marker of success, a good place to stop and say, "Hey, look what I did." Not for me. The NFL is just one chapter in the Jordan Babineaux playbook. Playing

in the NFL is just one challenge that needed discipline and a plan for overcoming obstacles. When that chapter closed after the 2012 season, I knew I needed to start looking for the next chapter. It was time to pivot.

If you're a football fan, you may have read a few stories about ex-NFL players who have struggled to transition out of the NFL. It's understandable. The NFL is not like ordinary life. It's a very extravagant lifestyle where everything is five stars, gourmet chefs are at your fingertips, and anything and everything that you could want at a moment's notice is accessible. Getting away from this and then using that NFL chapter as a stepping-stone to an even greater chapter is difficult for most players.

When I retired from the NFL in 2012, I knew I was facing a startling statistic: Seventy-eight percent of NFL players are bankrupt or under financial stress within two years of leaving the league.² I did not want that for myself or my family, so I planned for failure. Several years before I left the NFL, I started investing in my future. First, I put my broadcast journalism degree to work by starting a couple of radio shows. Then, in 2010, two years before I retired, Monsta and I started a production company called 2 Brothers. In between those two successes, there were a few failed investment attempts and a tuition cost attributed to pivoting through the School of Life. I'll talk about those lessons throughout the book.

Today, just like when I was in the NFL or when I was training at Southern Arkansas, what stands in the way of what we desire is what we do every day. Goals can be achieved with the effort of consistent practice. If you fall short, the journey is well worth the attempt. It is the person we become that makes setting goals worth it. It's the reason I am sharing this book as well as my experiences, successes, failures, and lessons about what I did well and could have done better. I squandered away hundreds of thousands of dollars in a sickness of impulsive spending, started businesses that failed, and nearly went bankrupt trying to maintain a certain lifestyle. On the flipside, I've also started companies that provide economic stability, given thousands of dollars to charitable causes, and helped others achieve their mission on their journey.

In *Pivot to Win*, I'm going to show you how to bring a dream to fruition, how to leverage your skills to reinvent yourself (or your company), and how to recognize when it's time to pivot. I'm going to show

2 <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/theres-a-difference-between-broke-and-bankrupt-for-ex-nfl-players/>

you how to use your strengths and your adversities. I'm going to show you how to develop a growth mindset. I'll show you how to take the lessons you learn in this book and apply them to your business or your professional life.

At the end of this book, you will:

- Know how to **leverage** your odds to maximize your winning potential.
- Recognize your **pivot** so that you can move from being stuck toward success, achievement, and greater purpose.
- **Transition** better when change happens.

We'll identify each of your assets so that when you're ready to play your game, you won't find yourself on the sidelines.

There isn't a single person in this world that lives one chapter their entire lives. Things happen—careers change, relationships end, crises happen, and the world grows in ways that might not benefit your current position. That's okay, because you can change too.

Whether you're a CEO, an athlete, a homemaker, a leader in your organization or family, or an entrepreneur, *Pivot to Win* is for you. The tools in this book are not just for NFL players; they're for any company that wants to grow new ways of serving customers and any individual who wants to evolve so that when change happens, you can accelerate into living your purpose.

When you're ready to take the journey, I'm ready to take it with you!

With appreciation,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jordan Babineaux". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and larger than the rest of the letters.

Jordan Babineaux