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2007 Sportsman of the Year

At 38, Brett Favre is having one of his finest seasons. But that is far from the Green Bay QB's best attribute

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2007 Sportsman of Year: Brett Favre.
Walter Iooss Jr./SI

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By Alan Shipnuck

There is no happier place than Green Bay, Wis., on a Sunday evening after the Packers have won. The beer tastes better, the girls are even prettier, and few seem to notice the bite in the air. In a town defined by its team, civic temperament can be quantified on a scoreboard. A few weeks ago, in the moments after the Packers had defeated the Carolina Panthers 31-17 at Lambeau Field, the parking lot was alive with merriment. Kids in number 4 jerseys and GOT BRETT? sweatshirts chased footballs with reckless abandon, tailgaters handed out bratwurst right off the grill, and one optimistic gent tried to sweet-talk the

more attractive passersby into adding to the impressive collection of donated bras he had strung up on a flagpole.

The epicenter of Green Bay's game-day good cheer is adjacent to Lambeau, just across Holmgren Way, a block over from Lombardi Avenue: Brett Favre's Steakhouse, located at 1004 Brett Favre Pass. The restaurant ("Where you are the MVP!") is a 20,000-square-foot temple to the Packers' quarterback, and following the Panthers game Favre's extended family had gathered in a private back room for a celebration of its own.

Brett's wife, Deanna, was there, looking glamorous in a long coat and high-heeled boots. Even before her memoir about beating breast cancer hit *The New York Times's* best-seller list, she was the second-biggest celebrity in Green Bay. Favre's mother, Bonita, was holding court at one of the half-dozen tables, her throaty laugh audible over the din. Brett's sister, Brandi, was cooing over her newborn daughter, Myah, while his brothers, Scott and Jeff, were busy refereeing their young sons, who were creating a ruckus by playing tackle football with an empty water bottle. Also enjoying the spread of steak and crawfish and all the fixings were various cousins, neighbors and hangers-on. In this loud, lively gathering only one person was missing -- the man for whom the restaurant and the street are named.

In his 16th winter in Green Bay, Favre has turned into Gatsby, throwing a party he no longer enjoys. While his family and friends were reliving every detail of his three-touchdown performance against Carolina, Favre was at home a couple of miles away, stretched out on his couch, watching that day's NFL highlights and cuddling with his lapdog, Charlie. By the ostentatious standards of modern-day celebrity, Favre's house is modest, but it suits him fine. On this Sunday evening it was dark and quiet, giving him some precious hours to decompress. There was a time when Favre never skipped a chance to celebrate -- "Hell, I always had to be the life of the party," he says -- but now solitude is what he thirsts for.

"As I've gotten older, I've become more of a loner," Favre says. "You've just been out there in front of 80,000 screaming people, everyone watching every move you make, the pressure of all that -- it's fine and dandy for three hours, but afterward..." Here Favre takes a big, billowing breath. "I used to thrive on that adrenaline. I never wanted it to end. Now I need to get back to reality. Like sitting on the couch with Charlie."



If Favre is weary, it's only because he has given so much of himself to Green Bay through the years. "He means everything to these people," says Donald Driver, who's in his ninth season catching Favre's passes. "He's not only our leader -- he's the symbol of the franchise, of the whole town. There's a generation of fans in Green Bay who don't know this team ever existed without Brett."

The familiar smile has been seen plenty this fall, belying Favre's more rigorous and disciplined approach.

John Biever/SI

When Favre decided to return for the 2007 season, even die-hard Cheeseheads must have been hoping only that he would not tarnish his legacy. What no one expected was that Favre would reinvent himself yet again, enjoying one of his best years at age 38 while cajoling a talented but callow team to a stunning 10-2 record. Along the way he passed two significant milestones for quarterbacks, overtaking Dan Marino atop the alltime list in touchdown passes (436 at week's end) and victories by a starter (157). He trails Marino by 449 in passing yards, another mark that should soon fall.

But one record above all others speaks to what Favre is made of: his Ripkenesque streak of consecutive starts at quarterback, which stands at 249 -- more than five seasons ahead of the next player on the list, Peyton Manning. During last week's 37-27 loss at Dallas, Favre was knocked out of the game in the second quarter, when on the same play he separated his left shoulder and took a helmet to his right elbow, causing numbness in two fingers on his throwing hand. Afterward, to no one's surprise, Favre said he expected he would not miss a game. He has rarely been flawless (after all, he leads the NFL in

lifetime interceptions, with 283), but he's always shown up. Through pills and booze, through cancer and car crashes and heart attacks, he has played on. Once reckless on and off the field, Favre has matured before our eyes while never losing his boyish love for the game.

It is for his perseverance and his passion that SI honors Favre with the 54th Sportsman of the Year award. But there is more to his story than on-field heroics. On game day the whole of Green Bay may live and die on Favre's rocket right arm, but his greatest legacy lies in how many people he has touched between Sundays.

The intensity of Favre's relationship with the Packers faithful goes far beyond mere longevity. He arrived in Green Bay in 1992 through a trade with the Atlanta Falcons, and in the third game of the season came off the bench to lead a madcap comeback against the Cincinnati Bengals, throwing the winning touchdown with 13 seconds left. He has refused to leave the starting lineup ever since, harnessing his hair-on-fire style to win an unprecedented three MVP awards (1995, '96, '97) and lead Green Bay to a Super Bowl triumph following the 1996 season.

But the success was leavened by personal setbacks and heartache. In 1996 the NFL sent him to rehab to kick an addiction to the painkiller Vicodin. Two months later Scott was involved in a car crash that killed his passenger, Mark Haverty, Brett's close childhood friend. Scott pleaded guilty to felony DUI and served a year of house arrest. Brett's own heavy drinking drove Deanna to consult divorce lawyers before Favre checked himself into rehab in 1999.

After Favre quit drinking, he settled into the comfortable second act of his career, during which life was quieter and his teams were good but not quite good enough. The drama, however, was far from over. In December 2003 Favre lost his father, Irvin, who suffered a heart attack at age 58. The day after Big Irv died, Favre summoned the defining performance of his career, passing for 399 yards and four touchdowns against the Oakland Raiders, and riveting a *Monday Night Football* audience. Grown men around Green Bay still tear up when recalling that game.



As a collegian, Brett returned home often to break bread with Big Irv (far right), Bonita (seated right) and the Kiln crew.

Ronald C. Modra/SI

One dark week in 2004 set the Favres reeling all over again. In October, Deanna's younger brother, Casey Tynes, was killed when he crashed his all-terrain vehicle, leaving behind a girlfriend who was eight months pregnant. Four days after Casey's funeral, Deanna learned she had breast cancer. As always, the Favres were overwhelmed by the outpouring in Green Bay -- bags of letters, innumerable prayer circles and many kind wishes murmured in the grocery aisle.

"People here treat us like family, and I think they care for us like family," says Deanna. "Because of everything we've been through, they don't see Brett as untouchable or as some kind of superhero. And they've been through it with us. The fans here feel close to Brett because they've all had their own similar struggles. Nothing against Tom Brady or Peyton Manning, but I'm not sure their fans relate to them in the same way."

Favre grew up in tiny Kiln, Miss., "the Kill" as it's known on the Gulf Coast, a place his coach at Southern Mississippi, Curley Hallman, would memorably describe as "like *The Dukes of Hazzard*, minus the demolition derby." In a typical anecdote from Favre's youth, he was tossing a football to Scott but led him too much, sending his brother through a bay window of the family house. When the Favre boys weren't shooting each other with BB guns or feeding Oreos to alligators from the back porch or sneaking pinches of chewing tobacco -- of baby brother Jeff, Favre once said, "That son of a bitch could chew and spit when he was three years old" -- they were tagging along to sporting events with their father, who coached high school football and American Legion baseball in Kiln. Under Big Irv's watchful eye, Brett developed into a standout athlete, but he was imbued with none of the aloofness that the star quarterback has in every teen movie.

Credit Bonita for that. During her 16 years as a special-education teacher, Brett was a regular visitor to her classroom -- and not just during the two years when Deanna was an aide and he wanted to flirt. (She and Brett met in catechism when they were seven; they began dating when she was a high school sophomore and he was a freshman.)

Of her students, whose conditions ranged from common learning disabilities to severe developmental problems, Bonita says, "There was a time when people like that were locked away, but they have value.

They can be productive members of society. I always made it clear to my children they weren't any better than the kids I taught."

Around Kiln there was a developmentally disabled man named Ronnie Hebert, who served as an equipment manager on Brett's youth baseball team and helped out with Big Irv's squads. Sensing that the other players felt awkward about sitting next to Hebert on the bus or sharing a table at restaurants, Brett always made an effort to include him. The two forged a lasting friendship and remained close enough that a few years ago, Deanna surprised her husband by flying Hebert in to be the guest speaker at a fund-raising dinner for Favre's charitable foundation. Says Deanna, "That night is as emotional as I've ever seen Brett, aside from when his dad passed away."

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By Alan Shipnuck



Make-A-Wish sessions like the one with Anna have become a regular part of Favre's workweek.

Courtesy of The Walentowski Family

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Though Favre has never had difficulty connecting with people, he admits that early in his career he was too busy having a good time to reach out to others. Deanna had become pregnant when she was 19 and did much of the early parenting of daughter Brittany so that Brett could concentrate on football. Deanna and Brittany continued to live in Mississippi during Favre's first few seasons in Atlanta and Green Bay, leaving him unchaperoned. "It was out of control for a while," says Scott. "We'd go into a bar and just take over the place. Brett would be on top of the bar, pouring drinks. The people loved it, of course."

Favre's Vicodin addiction led to a 46-day stay at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kans. "I was able to see some things a little more clearly," Favre says of his time there. "I realized I had become sidetracked in a lot of important ways." In July 1996, shortly after he completed rehab, Brett and Deanna were married. That year he also started the Brett Favre Fourward Foundation, with a charter to provide aide to disabled and disadvantaged children in Mississippi and Wisconsin.

Over the last decade the foundation has given out \$4 million to dozens of charitable organizations, focusing its efforts on the kind of kids who remind Favre of Ronnie Hebert. One recent beneficiary was the Miracle League of Green Bay, to which Favre donated \$100,000 to help build a baseball facility with a specialized wheelchair-friendly artificial surface. In addition to the field, Favre's money went toward a high-end public-address system and the retrofitting of the playground equipment to make it more accessible to those with disabilities. "These kids always had to sit and watch before," says Bruce Willems, whose 16-year-old daughter, Kyla, is a regular in the Miracle League. "Now they get to play, and you can't believe what it does for their self-esteem."

In fact, some of the kids have developed big league attitude. Eleven-year-old Jacob Van Den Berg "won't go to bat until his name is announced on the P.A. system," says his father, Jeff. "The fact that Brett Favre helped build this place, that's a big deal to him."

Kids like Kyla and Jacob are kindred spirits with the children of Kiln's Gaits to Success, which provides therapeutic horseback riding for the disabled. With a stable of horses and 10 lush acres, it is not an inexpensive operation, and Carolyn Rhodes, the program's director, says simply, "Without Brett, we would not exist."

The link between Kiln and Green Bay became more explicit after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Mississippi coast in 2005. Bonita's house was flooded by the storm surge and had to be rebuilt from the ground up. (Since 1997, Brett and Deanna have spent their off-seasons in Hattiesburg, Miss., 70 miles inland, and their house was unaffected.) In the aftermath of the storm, Favre used a couple of Packers press conferences to appeal for help for his home state. An account was set up in Green Bay for contributions, and within eight weeks upwards of a million dollars had poured in. Says Mike Daniels, president of Nicolet Bank, which administered the account, "We had packages arriving full of change, with letters in crayon that said, 'Dear Mr. Favre, this is from my piggybank. Your friends need it more than I do.' "



A deep playoff run would be a fitting cap to a season that few could have seen coming.

Walter Iooss Jr./SI

The Door County Gulf Coast Relief Fund was also born in the wake of Katrina, though its roots could be traced to Super Bowl XXXI, when the Packers beat the New England Patriots at the Superdome in New Orleans, about an hour's drive from Kiln. During the week of the game, many of the Green Bay faithful made the pilgrimage to Favre's boyhood home, and the Broke Spoke, Kiln's main bar, became a sort of down-market Graceland. It was there that Pete D'Amico of Green Bay first met Big Irv, and a long-standing kinship with Kiln was born. Three days after Katrina struck land, D'Amico and his friend Tony Anheuser were in a borrowed truck, making the 22-hour drive to Mississippi, packing donated clothes, food, water and a couple of hundred steaks, which they cooked up every night in front of the Broke Spoke and handed out to whoever was hungry.

Since then, the relief efforts have continued to grow in scope; Green Bay volunteers -- electricians, roofers and other skilled tradesmen in strong demand on the Gulf Coast -- have made more than 20 trips to Kiln to help rebuild damaged homes. Just this October, during the Packers' bye week, 26 Cheeseheads traveled to Kiln. "My whole life has become about giving back the blessings I've been given," says the 66-year-old Anheuser, a retired home-furnishings retailer. "It's through Brett and the connection we have to Kiln that I've found my purpose."

When Favre hears these stories, he can only shake his head. "It's pretty hard to fathom," he says of his impact. But he does much more than just raise money and inspire others from afar. At a fund-raiser for Green Bay's Brian LaViolette Scholarship Foundation, Favre came on stage to play drums with the house band. "When that happened, a bunch of us old ladies in the crowd started screaming," says Sue LeTourneau, who helps run the scholarship program named for her late nephew, who died in a swimming accident.

Many athletes give time to the Make-A-Wish Foundation; for Favre it's a regular part of his workweek. So strong is the demand to meet the Packers' quarterback among Make-A-Wish kids with life-threatening medical conditions that Favre schedules a visit nearly every Friday when the Packers are not playing an away game. "It's an honor to be asked," he says, "but I'm not going to lie -- it's hard. There are times when it takes a lot out of me. These kids are so cool, but you can't ignore what they're up against and what their families are going through."

In September 2004 Favre met with a six-year-old from Neenah, Wis., named Anna Walentowski. She was suffering from Alexander disease, an extremely rare type of the degenerative brain disorder called leukodystrophy, for which there is no known cure. By the time her visit was arranged, Anna was on a feeding tube for 20 hours a day. In the preceding months she had repeatedly been rushed to the hospital with spasms of her upper respiratory system, which made breathing nearly impossible. "It was a dark, dark time in our lives," says Anna's father, Jeff. "Our little girl was deteriorating pretty rapidly."

Anna's parents feared she would not be strong enough to make the trip to the Packers' practice facility, but she rallied for the big day. Favre had recently been banged up, and the first thing the little pixie in a Packers cheerleading outfit said to him was, "How's your thumb?" The two bonded instantly. Anna's mother, Jennifer, remembers Favre giving her daughter hug after hug and gently helping Anna get in and out of her stroller, so the two could play catch with a Nerf football and later eat lunch with the team.

Before saying goodbye, Anna gave Favre a prayer card with her picture on it. Unbeknownst to the Walentowskis, Favre taped it to his refrigerator door that night, and it stayed there for the rest of the season. "Every day we looked at that picture and prayed for Anna and her family," Deanna wrote in her book, *Don't Bet Against Me!*

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By Alan Shipnuck

In the years since Anna's visit her condition has improved dramatically. This is no doubt due to specialized care made possible by the evolving understanding of leukodystrophy. Anna's parents think the meeting with Favre also has had something to do with it. "That one day they spent together never really ended," says Jennifer. "We would often talk about the visit and look at the photos, and she would

be asked all the time to tell the story. It became a big part of her life."

The tale took another turn when Deanna's book was published in September 2007, including the passage about Anna, a girl she knew only from the photo on the fridge and the effect she'd had on her husband. The Walentowskis were unaware of their cameo in the book until a friend called to tell them about it -- and to say that Deanna was in nearby Appleton at that moment for a book signing. The family hustled over to meet Deanna. Now nine, Anna still faces serious medical challenges, but against all odds she has continued to get better. "She looked so good, so happy," says Deanna. "I couldn't wait to go home and tell Brett. We had often wondered about Anna, about how she was doing. When I told Brett, it touched him. He didn't really have any words. He was pretty choked up."

Funny thing about the Favres is that Brett isn't even the hottest quarterback in the family. Dylan Favre is a high school phenom for the St. Stanislaus Rockachaws in Bay St. Louis, Miss., having just completed a sophomore season in which he threw 36 touchdown passes, a record for the southern Mississippi section. Brett has taken to mentoring his nephew, but they rarely discuss X's and O's. "That's probably for the better," says Dylan. "If I tried some of the things Uncle Brett does on the field, my coach would kill me!"

So what do they talk about?

"Leadership."

Pressed to define what that means, Uncle Brett says, "It's somehow getting 52 other guys to raise their level of play. To get them to believe in what we're trying to do. You do that by setting an example, by doing things the right way. I've always shown up, I've always been prepared, I practice every day. I practice hard. I study. No matter what happens on the field, I never point blame at anybody else. Everything I do comes back to leadership, the example I want to set."

Favre says he has not given a locker-room pep talk since the eve of the 2005 season. "And we went 4-12 that year," he adds with a chuckle, "so what does that tell you?"

Nonetheless, this season Favre has, by necessity, become more direct in his leadership. Green Bay is the youngest team in the league and especially green on offense; starting running back Ryan Grant is playing his first NFL season, and among the top six receivers only two have been in the league more than two full years. "[Brett's] become a lot more vocal, a lot more hands-on," says Favre's backup, Aaron Rodgers. "He's out there coaching the entire offense, from running back to wide receiver to tight end. In practice he'll break away from what [the quarterbacks] are doing to watch some of the other positions go through their reps. He's extremely engaged in everything that's happening."

By Alan Shipnuck

The evolution began with a challenge from second-year coach Mike McCarthy, who in the preseason told the future Hall of Famer that he flat-out had to play better. In 2006 Favre threw just 18 touchdown passes, his fewest since his first year with the Packers, and his 56% completion rate was the worst of his career. Favre has always been as much a point guard as a quarterback, forever finding creative (if chancy) ways to deliver the ball. McCarthy's orders for this year were to make safer decisions and substantially improve his completion percentage. "I wish I could make the story better by telling you there was a big knockdown, drag-out fight, but Brett's a pro's pro," says McCarthy. "From Day One he has embraced what we're trying to accomplish."

While Favre can still revert to his freewheeling ways, he has torn through the league with the most controlled, efficient play of his career. Grant has begun to assert himself, but with the Packers' ground game still coalescing, Favre is completing a career-best 67.4% of his attempts and has thrown only 10 interceptions. On Thanksgiving Day he carved up the Detroit Lions with 20 straight completions, two short of the NFL record, and he has already tied his Packers mark with seven 300-yard games. "He is playing as well as I've seen him play," says Lions coach Rod Marinelli, "and I've [coached] against him since 1996."

With a game-breaking passing attack backed up by an athletic, aggressive defense, the Packers look capable of a deep playoff run. It is a measure of how far this unproven team has come that after last week's loss in Dallas, no one was claiming a moral victory for having played the Cowboys close into the fourth quarter, even with Favre out and injuries sidelining top cornerback Charles Woodson and sack specialist Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila. "Winning is the only thing that matters here, and that comes from number 4," says rookie receiver James Jones, whose soft hands and elusiveness have him third on the Packers, with 43 receptions. "A team takes on the mentality of its leader. And this guy is the ultimate warrior. That can't help but filter down."

Favre's influence is felt in many other ways. His improvisational skills belie an obsessive preparation that forces teammates to keep up. Following the Panthers game, after Favre had relaxed at home with his dog for a while, he sneaked back to a darkened Lambeau to watch game film for an hour and a half. Not that his dedication to his craft prevents Favre from cutting up. "You play your best football when you're loose and relaxed and having a good time," he says. Favre has tried to impart that notion to his teammates, though some of his methods would probably not impress Vince Lombardi. He's notorious for surreptitiously squirting heating ointment into colleagues' jockstraps, and his locker room flatulence is legendary -- though if you can believe Green Bay insiders, it is delivered with a purpose. "There have been many times before a game when you can see the guys are kind of tight," says Edgar Bennett, Green Bay's running backs coach and formerly Favre's teammate for five seasons. "Brett always knows how to loosen them up. I don't want to go into too many details, but let's just say that the guy has some unique talents."

While Favre simultaneously inspires and relaxes his teammates, he also forms a palpable brotherhood

with them. No Packer has felt this more profoundly than receiver Koren Robinson, who has become Favre's personal reclamation project. A first-round pick of the Seahawks in 2001, Robinson has struggled with alcohol abuse for several years. As a Minnesota Viking in 2005 he was voted to the Pro Bowl as a kick returner, but in August 2006 the team cut ties with him after his second arrest for drunken driving. Green Bay took a chance and signed Robinson the next month, but four games into the 2006 season he was suspended by the NFL for a year because of a third violation of the league's substance-abuse policy, the fallout from one of his incidents in Minnesota. Robinson was banned not only from games but also from practicing with the Packers and using any team facilities. When the suspension was handed down, Favre blasted the NFL, accusing the league of turning its back on a player who he thought could clearly benefit from structure and support.

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In the year that Robinson was out of football, Favre took it upon himself to provide that safety net, regularly calling Robinson to check up and lend an ear. "For a guy of his stature to reach out, he didn't have to do that," says Robinson, 27. "To know he cared so much for me, it was a huge motivation for me to better myself and correct the things in my life that needed to get right."

Favre's compassion was born of his own experiences. "From a substance-abuse standpoint I was probably worse off than Koren," he says. "People don't realize that, because I was never suspended. But I've done all kinds of drugs, I've drunk too much -- the only difference between me and Koren is that I didn't get caught. But I've been there, and I know how lonely it can be."

Robinson, who is married to his college sweetheart, Joy, and is the father of an 18-month-old son, K.J., was reinstated in October of this year, and in five games has already made an impact on the field. His 67-yard kickoff return against the Panthers was the longest of the season by a Packer, and Robinson has been featured in the new five-receiver set Green Bay unveiled last month. Against Detroit, Robinson gave Packers fans a glimpse of his playmaking ability, gaining 50 yards on only two catches. He has scraped off the rust with another assist from Favre. Says McCarthy, "I think sometimes Brett looks to Koren a little too much during practice, just trying to get him involved, get his confidence up."

An NFL locker room is among the most macho places in sports, but Robinson's voice catches when he talks about his quarterback. "I am so blessed to have a friend like Brett Favre," he says. "A lot of what keeps me going now is that I want him to be proud of me."

"I'm already proud of him," says Favre. "I couldn't care less if he ever catches another pass. The way he has put his life back together is much bigger than that."

On the vast expanse of Robinson's right biceps is tattooed matthew 28:20. That scripture appropriately captures Favre's relationship with Robinson and the rest of his teammates: "[Teach] them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

The Favre household is about as casual as they come, but there is one immutable rule. "We don't talk about retirement," says Deanna. "Ever. This whole town is obsessed about what Brett is going to do, so at home it's off-limits because he needs to get away from it."

There is no doubt that Favre has plenty left physically to keep playing, a point driven home during the Panthers game, when he was six years younger than the other starting quarterback, Vinny Testaverde. Ask Packers receiver Donald Driver if Favre has lost anything off his fastball, and Driver says with a laugh, "My fingers can answer that. There's times after practice they tingle a little bit. Guy hasn't lost a thing, except maybe a little hair."

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By Alan Shipnuck

At this point in his career Favre is used to the aches and pains. "Mentally, it's much more demanding," he says. "Now I dwell on the negative a lot more. I'm thrilled to death we're winning, but with each game I feel more pressure to play better, to keep it going. Next play's got to be better, next game's got to be better. The better you play, the higher the expectations become, not only of yourself, but what others expect. It can flat wear you out."

Even as Favre has brought so much joy to Green Bay this year, he has been in the familiar position of playing with a heavy heart. The Favres suffered another personal loss this summer when Deanna's stepfather, Rocky Byrd, died of a heart attack at age 56 while the Packers were in training camp. Rocky had helped to fill the void left by Big Irv's death. This year, for the first time in his career, Favre did not return to Mississippi during the Packers' bye week, choosing to stay alone in Green Bay. "It would have been his first time home since Rocky passed away," says Deanna, "and I don't think he wanted to face that."

Family matters were in the backdrop as Favre considered retirement in the past two off-seasons. In recent years he and Deanna have been separated from older daughter Brittany during the football season. From first through eighth grade she attended school in Green Bay in the fall, then finished the school year in Hattiesburg. Upon reaching high school, however, Brittany insisted she be allowed to stay in Mississippi year-round. She lived with Deanna's sister's family, seeing her father in the fall mostly when she traveled to Green Bay for Packers home games. Brittany is now a college freshman, but eight-year-old Breleigh is following the old routine, splitting time between schools in different states. "It hasn't been easy on the girls," Favre says, "which is not something the public ever factors in."

Favre also longs to spend more time at his 465-acre spread in Hattiesburg, where in the off-season he works the land, including his dozen deer plots. Then there are the two thriving charitable organizations to look after, his Fourward Foundation and the Deanna Favre Hope Foundation. The latter was founded in 2005 to raise breast-cancer awareness and provide assistance for those battling the disease. Deanna has since become a sought-after public speaker, commanding as much as \$45,000 for a corporate engagement, all of the money going to the foundation. The pink Packers hats ubiquitous in Green Bay are another revenue stream. The foundation annually gives out dozens of grants for uninsured or underinsured women battling breast cancer.

As the Favres prepare for life after football, the people of Green Bay are also girding themselves for the inevitable. There is a funny feeling in the air around Lambeau this year: Every unexpected win is accompanied by a collective dread that it has inched Favre closer to retirement. Deanna doesn't exactly refute the notion. "He needed to go out like this," she says. "He deserved a year like this. I'm not saying he will or won't [retire after the season], and I don't know what I'd say if he asked me, but he's the kind of competitor who has to go out a winner. That's who he is."

Favre refuses to look beyond this week's game versus Oakland, but he does say, "Sure, I would love to go out with a trip to the Super Bowl, but it doesn't have to end that way. Had I left last year, or even the year before, it's been a great career. I'm content with it." Favre suddenly grows animated, leaning forward in his chair. "I don't know how it's going to end, but I do know this: Throwing a touchdown pass for the Green Bay Packers is pretty neat. I've thrown a ton, and every one of them was a helluva lot of fun."

Ask people around Green Bay for their favorite Favre memory, and you'll get countless anecdotes but rarely any hesitation. So many elite athletes captivate with their otherworldly physical gifts, but the common theme among the Favre highlights is the human element.

Jennifer Walentowski, Anna's mother: "In the Super Bowl against the Patriots, Brett threw a beautiful touchdown in the very beginning of the game, and he was so excited, he started running around the field. He had taken off his helmet, and he had both arms in the air, and there was such genuine joy on his face, such realness. Gosh, I'm tearing up right now just thinking about it."

Doug Phillips, whose daughter, Carley, participates in the Miracle League: "He hurt his ankle pretty bad against the Vikings [in 1995]. No one knew if he would play the next game [against Chicago]. He was on crutches all week, doubtful right up to kickoff. When he ran out of the tunnel at Lambeau, that was the loudest explosion I have ever heard in my life. And of course Brett threw five touchdowns that day."

Pete D'Amico, cofounder of the Door County Gulf Coast Relief Fund: "I lost my father a month before Brett's dad died. That Monday-night game against Oakland, the day after Big Irv died? I was crying that whole game. Just bawling. I know a lot of other people were too for their own reasons."

Donald Driver: "My favorite moment is from that Monday night against the Raiders, but it didn't happen on the field. Before the game I went to talk to Brett in his hotel room. He was hurting, obviously, but said he was going to play because we were his family too. It was pure love, pure brotherhood."

Sue LeTourneau of the Brian LaViolette Scholarship Foundation: "On his 30th birthday, I held up a sign in the stands here at Lambeau. When he ran onto the field, he looked at me and gave a thumbs-up. Oh, my God, I thought I was going to die right then and there!"

Mark Tauscher, Packers tackle: "My rookie year [2000] we were at Minnesota late in the year. Big game. At some point in the second half we were facing third down, and [center] Frank Winters misses a linebacker coming on a blitz. Brett gets sacked, but instead of jogging off the field he turns and chucks the ball at Frankie. And Frankie says, 'Well, get rid of the damn ball faster next time!' The whole team was laughing. It kind of loosened us up, and we went on to win."

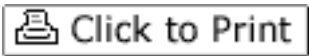
Mike McCarthy: "In '99, when I was quarterbacks coach, three of the first four games were comebacks in the final couple of minutes. The one that stands out was against Tampa Bay. There's about a minute left, and we call this play where if the rush comes, Brett's supposed to check down to the back. Of course, Tampa comes with everything they've got, but Brett just stands in there and throws a strike to Antonio Freeman for the winning touchdown, just as John Lynch and half the defense hits him in the jaw. On the sideline Brett's a little woozy; he's on oxygen; and I go up to him and say, 'What happened to the check down?' He says, 'Dammit, I forgot all about that. But, hey, I made the throw.' That's Brett Favre in a nutshell -- he'll take the beating, but he'll always make the throw."

Ask Favre for his own favorite memory, and he is quiet for a moment. "I've got so many plays running through my mind," he says, finally. "The funny thing is, it's not only about the touchdowns and the big victories. If I were to make a list, I would include the interceptions, the sacks, the really painful losses. Those times when I've been down, when I've been kicked around, I hold on to those. In a way those are the best times I've ever had, because that's when I've found out who I am. And what I want to be."

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