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# The long and winding road to Super Bowl



**Dan Pires**

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Two games into the 1996 season the Patriots were 0-2. Needless to say, I didn't think the Patriots were going to be competing in Super Bowl XXXI in New Orleans on Jan. 26, 1997. They made it and I got to go.

Unfortunately, for me, getting to New Orleans would be a lot like the Patriots season: a few ups, a few downs and a lot of frustration mixed in with a bushel of anxious moments.

Getting a flight was easy. Just as long as I wasn't planning to fly into New Orleans. The closest I could get to New Orleans was to fly out of Providence into Birmingham, Ala., and drive the rest of the way.

Birmingham and New Orleans ain't even close.

The next thing was to find a place to stay.

That was the fun part.

I called all of my friends in New Orleans. All two of them.

Former Patriots cornerback and my good friend Maurice Hurst told me that he could arrange for me to stay in a relative's condo. He said he could "hook me up." All that it would cost me for five nights would be \$1,500.

"Gee, thanks Mo. I'll have to get back to ya," I said.

Right then I learned a valuable lesson: always beware when someone tells you they're going to hook you up.

The next call was to another friend, Doug Sunseri, who was Hurst's agent. Doug gave me a few recommendations.

The good part is that, after calling around, one of his recommendations did pan out.

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The bad part is that it was in Covington, which, in nativespeak, is "across the pond" and just over the bridge from New Orleans.

Some pond. Lake Ponchartrain is 26 miles wide and is always covered in fog.

I called Doug back to find out more about this place.

Doug said, "It's not the greatest place in world but it's someplace you can lay your head."

I asked him, "Doug, would you stay there?"

"Sure," he replied laughing almost hysterically. "But, why would I stay there if I live here?"

D-uh?

My first thought was "I'm gonna die."

The flight to Birmingham was uneventful.

Driving from Birmingham to New Orleans was even more uneventful. It seemed like every city and town I drove through ended in Burg and was surrounded by scrub pines.

The real fun started when I got to the motel, which looked like the place in the movie "Motel Hell."

I arrived at 1 a.m. and rang the bell of the trailer that was detached from the rest of the motel. An older gentlemen opened the door wearing nothing but his skivvies and a stained V-neck tee-shirt filled with holes.

"My, my. I've been expectin' 'ya. How y'all doin'?" he said. His name was Cuz and he sounded exactly like Foghorn Leghorn.

He gave me the keys to the room and pointed me to a room on the corner of the lower level. Once I got to the room I barricaded the door with a chair and went to sleep on the lumpiest mattress known to mankind.

The next day I made my way over to the world's largest party -- downtown New Orleans.

Everywhere you went in New Orleans there was music. Out on the streets you could hear music blaring and all over the hotel. Walk just about anywhere, you'd hear music. Blues, R&B and rock-n-roll. Music everywhere.

The NFL's headquarters was at the Hyatt Regency and it was there I had to get my media credentials.

What a shock. One night I'm chilling with Cuz and the next day I'm hanging out with Dan Marino, Shannon Sharpe, Blues Brother Dan Ackroyd and ESPN's Dan Patrick. That was just on the elevator up to the third floor.

For some reason, I got an invite to the NFL's VIP Party, which was held on Friday night before the Super Bowl in the Morial Convention Center. This place was big enough to fit in five football fields. Since it was Dick White's first night in town, he passed and cruised over to Bourbon Street for the evening.

At the party there were 20 buffet setups featuring all kinds of food. I spent most of the night at the Cajun buffet, where I sampled a bunch of alligator specialties. (Note: alligator sausage is no threat to linguica.) Also, there was plenty of music. I counted eight live bands. I couldn't even begin to tell you the names of all of the celebrities who were there. It would probably be easier to tell you who wasn't there.

On Saturday, Green Bay Packers coach Mike Holmgren and New England Patriots coach Bill Parcells held their pre-game press conferences in front of about 1,000-plus journalists. Saddam Hussein could have been in the crowd and you wouldn't have been able to pick him out. So much for getting a one-on-one with either Holmgren or Parcells.

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It was on Saturday night that I finally got to spend a little time on Bourbon Street with Dick serving as my guide. I thought it was a little strange that Dick knew where all the hotspots were. I could swear that I heard some folks say, "yo, New Beige is in da house" as we walked by.

One of the many highlights of the evening came when we ran into Senator Mark Montigny and a bunch of folks from Somerset.

The later we stayed, the nuttier it got. Everyone on the streets and in the balconies had drinks in hand and beads draped around their necks.

We left after you couldn't slip an onionskin between you and the person next to you.

Watching the Super Bowl on television is one thing. Being there is totally different. Dick and I both got up early on Super Sunday and drove to the Superdome at about 11 a.m. When we arrived in town, we drove into a sea of Cheeseheads. Cheeseheads were everywhere. ESPN estimated that there were 10 Cheeseheads to every one Chowderhead (Pats fans).

As game time grew closer, so did the crowds and the all of the rowdiness.

About 4 p.m., a NFL representative escorted us over to the Superdome.

To quote Bob Uecker, there I was, sitting in the front row.

During the game, I experienced a range of emotions.

Briefly, here they are:

I felt pretty good about New England's chances when they went up 14-10 in the first quarter.

During half-time I almost asphyxiated. Maybe it was because of all of the motorcycles that were part of the show and the poor ventilation inside of the SuperDome.

In the third quarter, I even felt slightly confident when the Patriots clawed their way to make the score 27-21.

Then, with just over three minutes left in the third quarter, Green Bay's Desmond Howard ran 99 yards to make the score 35-21. At that moment, it was as if someone reached down my throat and ripped out my heart. I knew all hope was lost at that very moment.

Basically, that's all I remember about the game.

The mood in the Patriots' locker room was like a morgue. It hurt me to see all of these burly, massive men sitting in front of their lockers crying. To see Bruce Armstrong, 300-plus pounds of humanity, sitting there with his hands covering his face and crying, is a sight that I'll never forget.

Even though the Patriots lost the game, I'll always have fond memories of my trip to Super Bowl XXXI.

And, like Bruce Armstrong and these Patriots, it's a feeling I'll never ever forget.

Dan Pires is a correspondent for The Standard-Times.

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