

Really Ready For Some Football

Saints' return tomorrow to Superdome - Vital to city's healing

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NEW ORLEANS – Clement Richardson steps out of his FEMA trailer wearing a T-shirt, gym shorts and black slippers over white athletic socks. As he moves down the temporary steps, he squints at the bright sunlight, then offers a greeting that's warmer than the late-afternoon temperature.

To his guest, Richardson's positive attitude seems remarkable considering he is surrounded by reminders of Katrina, the hurricane that pounded the Gulf Coast 13 months ago, busting levees and flooding communities such as the Lower Ninth Ward, where Richardson has lived for most of his 49 years.

Tucked behind the two trailers in Richardson's front yard is the gutted brick-and-siding house that his parents used to call home. His voice echoes as he passes from room to room. He would prefer to hear the sound of reconstruction, but the recovery effort has been slow to reach these parts.



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Clement Richardson pointed out where floodwaters crested inside his mother's house in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward during Hurricane Katrina. Richardson, alongside his 3-year-old stepson, Terrell King, plans to refurbish the home.

Across town, the sounds and images are completely different. Eight hundred and fifty men and women have been working round-the-clock shifts for seven months to repair and renovate the Louisiana Superdome for the Saints' "Monday Night Football" showdown with the Atlanta Falcons tomorrow. It will be the Saints' first game in the building since Katrina, and city and state officials view it as an opportunity to show the world that New Orleans is back . . . or at least on its way.

Richardson thinks about the \$185 million renovation of the Superdome and what's not taking place in his neighborhood, where some streets are dotted with empty lots where homes were lifted off their foundations and carried away. Then he shakes his head and says in so many words: Go, Saints!

"At first glance, it would seem like that, like our priorities are out of whack," he said. "But it's kind of like sacrificing a little to get something that's needed. I think we need something, all of us, to grasp onto right now. When you've lost everything, and then when you see this little beacon of light, the Saints winning two in a row, it kind of takes your mind away from the (nearly 200) people that were murdered so far this year, you

know what I'm saying? For me, it gives me something positive to holler about after the last year.”

Richardson isn't alone. From the Lower Ninth Ward to Uptown, residents are excited about the opportunity to show off New Orleans and the Saints. For the first time in franchise history, every seat to the team's eight home games has been sold and at least 40,000 of the 65,000 season-ticket holders are first-time buyers.

The pregame events will rival that of the six Super Bowls the Superdome has hosted. The National Football League is bringing in the rock bands U2 and Green Day for a pregame concert, and there will be a mini version of the league's FanFest that accompanies each Super Bowl.

Slightly more than 1,000 press credentials have been issued, including 535 to ESPN, which will broadcast the game. Even Al-Jazeera is among the countless media outlets that will be represented.

Last season, the Saints played all their “home” games outside New Orleans because of damage to the Superdome. First-year Saints coach Sean Payton said he wasn't truly struck by the significance of the team's return until he talked with a man last summer who told him he had just purchased six season tickets even though he was then unemployed.

Fans say that kind of commitment shouldn't be surprising.

“Yeah, it is terrible what has happened here, but I think we want to prove that we are able to get back on our feet,” said Cathy Hoffman, who lost her home when the flood walls at the 17th Street Canal gave way.

“I think people are very excited about the Saints; they've given us something positive to look forward to. And Monday night we'll let the rest of the nation see that, yeah, we've been through hell, but our team is coming back and our city is coming back. We're here to support them.”

Doug Thornton is regional vice president for SMG, the private company that manages the Superdome for the Louisiana Stadium and Exposition District, the government entity that owns it.

The building was supposed to be a safe haven during the Category 4 hurricane, but it wound up being a tomb of despair and a giant petri dish for many of the estimated 25,000 residents and tourists who sought refuge there.



NANCEE E. LEWIS / Union-Tribune
Saints fans celebrated in the French Quarter last night ahead of tomorrow's home opener against the Falcons.

Water damage to the building from a 50-foot gash in the roof knocked out the electrical system and backup generators, turning the dome's interior into a dark oven. Outside, the

temperature was in the 90s or higher. Inside, with no air conditioning or forced ventilation, the mercury was off the charts. The heat, combined with failed plumbing, no sanitation and tons of trash and debris, produced an overwhelming stench.

Thornton spent 5 ½ days in the Superdome before being evacuated, and he said he couldn't believe his eyes when he returned.

“When I left here it was bad,” Thornton said last week while leading a tour of the renovated building. “When I came back it was horrific. . . .”

Thornton understands why there are people who say they can't go back inside.

“I was in here for 5 ½ days and it's hard for me emotionally sometimes. I still walk the halls and see the faces of people and imagine what it was like a year ago.”

So does Paul Griesemer, one of the architects who helped with the redesign of the Superdome. Griesemer was a member of an advance team that surveyed the facility shortly after the evacuees departed and well before work crews removed 4 tons of debris and 3.8 million gallons of water from the building and its garages.

“I came down a couple of days before I brought the rest of my team, and those first few days were pretty dramatic,” he said. “We're down here in a dark building, flashlights, masks, Ibex suits, and at every turn you go in a door and you go, 'Oh, my God.' You have some awe of what you'd find. . . . I can't say that sitting in Kansas City that I could fully understand. But I could see the way that people were living for days, and it was amazing.”

Thornton said repairing and renovating the Superdome will cost \$185 million. The Federal Emergency Management Agency contributed more than \$115 million for repairing public buildings damaged by the hurricane. The state of Louisiana is allocating \$13 million, with the NFL pitching in \$15 million. The remaining \$41 million for improvements and upgrades was generated when the Louisiana Stadium and Exposition District refinanced \$195 million of debt.

That money, combined with Gov. Kathleen Blanco's executive order to streamline construction guidelines, made it possible for the Superdome work to be done so quickly. All of the renovation and upgrades won't be completed until July, but Thornton said the building is ready for football.



NANCEE E. LEWIS / Union-Tribune
Glen Menard, general manager of the Louisiana Superdome, has overseen much of the \$185 million renovation of the stadium, where tomorrow the Saints will play for the first time since Hurricane Katrina battered the Gulf Coast.

“That's what's so important,” Thornton said of tomorrow's game. “It's a rebirth of the Superdome, and for those people who can face the adversity and face the challenge and come back in here, it will make you stronger. It's made me stronger.”

Saints wide receiver Joe Horn said he recently met an 83-year-old man who told him he was in the Superdome during those hellish days. Horn said the man initially told him he couldn't bring himself to go back into the building for any reason. But after awhile, the man changed his mind.

“He said, 'You know what, Joe? I love the Saints and I'm going to face my fears. I'm going to go to the dome because I want this city to be built back up, and a good way to start that off is on 'Monday Night Football,' ” Horn said.

That Horn and the Saints could bring the man back to the building says a lot for the relationship between the team and the community. Saints General Manager Mickey Loomis calls it unique.

It's not as if the Saints have the championship tradition of the Pittsburgh Steelers, San Francisco 49ers, Dallas Cowboys and Green Bay Packers. In the franchise's 39 years of existence, you can count the winning seasons on two hands and its playoff victories on one finger.

Yet even during the team's worst seasons, such as in 1980 when it lost its first 14 games and fans wore bags over their heads and called themselves the “Aints,” the response never felt mean-spirited. The Saints were considered family, so fans could criticize them one minute, cheer them the next.

“We've always been a kind of take-it-on-the-chin type people down here in New Orleans,” Richardson said from the porch of his Lower Ninth Ward home. “They used to call it the City That Love Forgot, that's what they used to say about us in New Orleans. But we've been cheering for the Saints, Lord, for so long, and been disappointed so many times, so many times. But they're our team and we love them.

“They're a lot like us; they're resilient. Even when they get knocked down, they come back every year and try it again. That's how we are as a people.

“When the floods came and I was walking the water up to my chest, there was never a doubt in my mind that I was going to rebuild in New Orleans. It was important to me because this is my roots, this is where I've been all my life. And the Saints have always been a big part of my life.

“You know when I'm going to leave New Orleans? When the Saints win the Super Bowl.”

Richardson broke into a long, loud laugh.

“Well,” he said, “I guess I won't ever be leaving. Seriously, though, I do love my Saints.”