

City throwing a party at restored Superdome

'Super Bowl-like' buzz builds for Saints' return to stadium that became symbol of Katrina misery



By Skip Wood
USA TODAY

NEW ORLEANS — Saxophone in hand, a Bourbon Street sidewalk as his stage and the New Orleans Saints at his side, street musician Karl Milton Pierce is nearing the end of a slow and soulful performance of *When the Saints Go Marching In*.

He finishes, sees no potential contributors for his tip bucket and immediately reaches down to turn up the volume on his portable radio. His beloved Saints are playing in Green Bay against the Packers. "Yep," he says with a wide grin after listening for a few seconds. "We're still winning."

Indeed the Saints did win Sunday, improving to 2-0 and setting up Monday night's nationally televised return to the home stadium they were forced to abandon after Hurricane Katrina.

And when the Saints finally do go marching back into the Louisiana Superdome to face the undefeated Atlanta Falcons, Pierce — who politely declined to provide his age — plans to be playing outside the facility as he did for years before nearly every home game. This time he will have company.

The Goo Goo Dolls and numerous local bands outside the dome. U2 and Green Day inside for a pregame concert. A black carpet — to match the Saints' black and gold colors — will greet the team when it arrives by bus at the Superdome. Former president George H.W. Bush will make the coin toss.

"Super Bowl-like" is how NFL executive Brian McCarthy describes the scene that has this slowly rebuilding city abuzz.

One person who will *not* be there is Sgt. Jimmy Anderson of the New Orleans Police Department, a life-long, die-hard Saints fan.

"He was there for seven days," fellow cop Pete Bowen says of his buddy's assignment immediately after the Superdome became a temporary and ultimately miserable home for some 30,000 Katrina evacuees. "I saw him when he got out. Not pretty. I don't think he's ever gotten over it. He says he'll never go back."

Anderson affirms as much. "Never," he says. "Just the memories, the smell, the stench. Everything. At times it was like scenes from *Night of the Living Dead*."

During the six days the Superdome served as a shelter, the roof was severely damaged, the dome's floor besieged by rain, its air conditioning shot, its plumbing clogged. Eleven people died, according to Superdome spokesman Bill Curl.

Anthony Jordan, 54, a New Orleans native who spent nearly 10 months in Texas before the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provided him with a trailer in front of his Upper 9th Ward home, understands Anderson's sentiments. But if he can obtain a ticket to the sold-out game, he plans to be there.

"I saw everything (Anderson) saw and maybe even worse," Jordan says. "I saw the man jump over the railing and kill himself. I saw everybody going crazy, tearing the Superdome apart, stealing things. I know the smell, too.

"But, hey, I had to get (air-)lifted off my roof to even get to the Superdome. Yeah, it was a nightmare, but I got no problems going back there. It's the Saints, you know?"

Indeed they are the Saints, forced to play their home games last season in Baton Rouge and San Antonio after spending the first 38 seasons in the Crescent City.

Adding to the excitement about their return is not only rookie running back Reggie Bush, last season's Heisman Trophy winner, but also that the Saints opened with consecutive road wins for the first time in franchise history and are 2-0 for the first time since 2002.

When several hundred fans showed up late Sunday night at Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport to welcome the team home, the players were surprised and touched.

"You have to live here," sixth-year Saints running back Deuce McAllister says, "to understand."

First-year coach Sean Payton is beginning to do just that. He has been approached by countless strangers offering support and expressing their excitement about the return. "You feel that responsibility," he says. "Pretty powerful."

Two other newcomers, Bush and quarterback Drew Brees, also have been taken aback by how much the recovering city hugs its team. "We're excited just as much as they are," Bush says.

Brees will enter the Superdome for the first time today, when the team holds a practice at the facility. He believes it will be a good start toward easing pregame butterflies, "just for guys to get over the, 'Hey, we're back in the Superdome' feeling. ... But really, for us, it's just another game."

Seventh-year Saints wide receiver Joe Horn, who was one of the more active players in seeking out displaced fans after Katrina, agrees. But not completely.

"Here's the deal," he says. "It's not just another game for the fans or the citizens of Louisiana. See, we can lose to the Atlanta Falcons, and the fans will be upset for a little

while, but they'll be more happy inside because they still have their team. The New Orleans Saints are back; the dome is opening.”

He also has no doubt his eyes will be more than moist when he runs onto the field for player introductions. “Oh, I'm going to cry,” he says with a sheepish chuckle. “I know I'm going to shed some tears. Damn right.

“I know what people went through, and I understand the emotional level. So there will definitely be tears — on one level, tears of joy, and on another level, tears flowing for the families that lost members in there, and the kids, and knowing that people still coming in the dome are able to swallow that pill and keep on pushing.”

Arthur Davis, the architect of the Superdome, which opened in 1975, remembers watching with dismay the televised scenes from the Superdome during those dark days of late August and early September 2005.

“Structurally, it was not damaged at all, and the roof itself was not damaged except for the (outer) finish,” he says. “Sadly, the damage was caused by man going in there and causing all kinds of horrible damage. It could have been a place of refuge, but it became a place of destruction.”

Even so, the problems inside were exacerbated by the leaking roof, which led to water damage in virtually every part of the building.

Tim Coulon, the governor-appointed chairman of the Superdome Commission, which oversees the facility, admits he briefly wondered about the building's future after his first inspection several days after the hurricane.

“The amount of debris, the greater damage from the water seepage. Sure,” he says. “But then there began to be naysayers who said it should be torn down, that it represented all the worst things about Katrina, and we didn't necessarily agree with that.

“It certainly wasn't ideal in any way, shape or form, but there were a lot of lives saved here.”

The decision to repair instead of demolish was swift. Structural and environmental experts deemed it safe. Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco deemed it essential to the state, which owns the facility.

Then-NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue would soon make clear to longtime Saints owner Tom Benson — who says he probably could get a much better return for his investment if he moved the team — that it was essential the league not bolt from a devastated city that happens to have hosted nine Super Bowls, six at the Superdome.

Tagliabue, whose league provided a \$15 million grant for repairs and improvements that cost \$185 million, urged the team leading the reconstruction to ratchet up the job.

Doug Thornton, regional vice president of SMG — the private management company for the Superdome — and the point man for the overhaul, moved up his estimations for “football-readiness” from early December to late September.

“And then, right before the Super Bowl, they called me and said it's going to be a Monday night game (instead of the proposed) Sunday game,” Thornton says. “Talk about pressure. But I think people will like what they see when they get here.”

He wants everything to be just so. “Some people ask, ‘Why would you rebuild the Superdome when you've got neighborhoods that can't be repaired?’ ” Thornton says. “The money being used for this was from the public-assistance program from FEMA on insurance disasters to cover state property. It has nothing to do with housing or individual allocations to people, so we're not competing. Besides, we believe this is going to stimulate activity that's good for the whole area.”

The Saints have won one playoff game in their history. Fans used to wear paper bags over their heads at games out of embarrassment.

“But if you're from here, the Saints still mean everything,” Peter Brown, 54, says as he nurses a beer in a small paper bag on a street near the French Quarter.

A friend, Tommie Clark, 80, who lost his home and soon will move to Texas, adds, “That Reggie Bush, he's got some promise.”

New Orleans fireman Andrew Lain, who also drives a taxi, never left the city. He lives in a FEMA trailer, awaiting repairs to his home. “It's hard, but the Saints coming back, that's huge,” he says. “People need them, especially now.”

But why? “For the morale as much as anything,” says Bowen, the cop who also is a co-owner of the French Quarter pub Boondock Saint. “Getting the Superdome after getting the Saints, that meant a lot to this city. Again, the morale. If they left, I don't think we'd ever recover from that.”

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