

Excerpt from Chapter Seven: *Back on a National Stage*

The East-West Shrine Game was the first of three post season all-star games that featured the top Division 1 athletes in the nation. The Senior Bowl would take place the following week in Mobile, Alabama and was considered the best of the three all-star games. Morgan had been passed over for the Senior Bowl and was not at all happy with his exclusion.

“Personally, I think I should be in the Senior Bowl,” said Morgan. “That’s my belief. The Senior Bowl is kind of the bowl you want to be in. Sadly enough, there’s politics involved. I know that with our team going 3-9, that hurt me. That’s just how it is. But what can I do? I can’t stress over it. All I can do is go to this game and show why I should be there.”

Brian accompanied Morgan down to Houston and the pair arrived on a cloudy Saturday morning. Coming from the University of Michigan, which has produced so many great NFL players over the years, Morgan had plenty of friends who briefed him on what to expect in the coming weeks.

Leon Hall of the Cincinnati Bengals told him, “It’s a long but quick process. It gets repetitive. You’re going to get sick of it, but you got to do it.”

Braylon Edwards, the third overall pick in the 2005 NFL Draft, advised Morgan, “You want to get paid and this is what you have to go through. Regardless of where you get drafted, it won’t be soon enough.”

It was helpful to have advice from players who had previously traveled down the same path. Nevertheless, every bit of advice was nothing compared to the lessons taught by experience.

During his first day in Houston, Morgan went through an expected round of orientation, but the next day would be full of surprises. That Sunday morning included a round of testing, the likes of which Morgan had never experienced. He was given a psychological test that covered everything away from the realm of his football acumen.

He looked curiously when he read the question, “Would you rather be a dog or a cat?”

Morgan also raised a brow when he saw another question asked a few more times in three different ways. He even scratched his head when he was asked to distinguish what he saw in a picture that was nothing more than a bunch of incoherent shapes garbled together. When that testing period was finished, Morgan welcomed the chance to move on to something else.

“I wasn’t expecting those tests and I also wasn’t expecting how

long they actually took,” said Morgan. “There were a few of them and man they were long!”

That afternoon, the players were slated to visit the Shriners Hospital in Houston. Since the game’s inception, it has not only brought together some of college football’s top athletes, but it has also raised quite a bit of money for the Shriners Hospital for Children. There are twenty-two Shriners Hospitals across the United States that treat children with orthopedic conditions, burns, spinal cord injuries and other deformities. Morgan welcomed the chance to pay these children a visit, but braced himself for a grim setting where he expected to see a sadder side of life. When Morgan arrived at the hospital, the reality of what he saw differed immensely from what he had envisioned.

Morgan didn’t walk into a quiet hospital room housed with an unfortunate child trying to recover from a life-threatening injury. Instead, he walked into a party. There was a DJ playing music, some kids had already started singing karaoke, other children were getting their faces painted and games had been set up all over the room. While Morgan surveyed all the fun, a basketball rolled over to him and bounced off his foot. He watched a group of young children scramble for the ball, not acting like sick kids. No more than a few seconds later, a young girl with severe burns on her face came running over to Morgan. She stopped in front of him and allowed some words to pass through her innocent smile.

“Hey, do you wanna sing some karaoke with me?” she asked.

Morgan grinned and didn’t even have to articulate his compliant answer.

One day very soon, many of the players in that room would go on to make millions of dollars in the NFL. And there will come a time when those players will be spotted by fans in their respective cities. When that does happen, grown men will turn into little boys and ask for autographs in voices filled with awe. But in the eyes of these children, the players were something different. They were simply a gang of new playmates who would help them enjoy a Sunday afternoon. The girl with the burns on her face had no idea that Morgan Trent was the starting cornerback at the University of Michigan. She wouldn’t remember a game-changing interception or a fourth down tackle just shy of a first-down marker. But she would remember the words to the numerous songs Morgan sang with her that afternoon.

After a few hours in the company of those children, Morgan and the rest of the players left the hospital. A week of practice would follow as the East and West teams would square off against one another on a daily basis. However, those battles now seemed rather trivial. Protected by helmets and pads, football players were often heralded as heroes and placed atop a pedestal. Many people across the

country knew Morgan's name in addition to the names of many of the other players who would take part in the East-West Shrine Game. But not many people knew the name of the little girl with the burns on her face. None of them knew about her daily battles and what she already had to contend with at such an early age. Her story would not make the front page of any newspaper nor would it be aired on any television show. Yet, before Morgan left the hospital, he went over and gave her a hug. He thanked her for singing so many songs with him and made sure to call her by name. He left behind a smiling little girl, enamored by a day of fun. In the days to come, there was a very good chance that little girl would remember Morgan's name. But it would have nothing to do with the fact that he played football.

As much as the game did for the Shriners Hospital, football was the main reason so many decision makers from the NFL assembled in Houston. The hometown Houston Texans did not have to make an arduous journey as the week's events would take place right on their own stomping grounds.

"We're fortunate to have it in our backyard," said Houston Texans head coach Gary Kubiak. "I put a lot into it, how they practice, how they handle themselves. We've gotten a couple of kids out of that game that played very well for us."

On Monday, Kubiak joined other NFL coaches on the Houston Texans practice field for the first day of practice. Morgan hustled out on to the field and was instantly amazed at just how many scouts had gathered.

"There were so many more scouts than I expected," said Morgan. "But I had to shake it off because if you're worried about the scouts, you're not going to play well."