

New Life in New Orleans

As All-Pro middle-linebacker Jonathan Vilma marches into New Orleans to become a Saint, he explains how a change of scenery can bring joy back into an athlete's life.

By Michael Dolan
Photography by Nathaniel Welch



JON VILMA KNEW HE HAD FOUND A NEW home the first time he ventured out for Chinese food. The All-Pro middle linebacker had only been in New Orleans for about a week after being traded from the New York Jets to the New Orleans Saints when a knee injury had prematurely ended his 2007 season. He had yet to appear at a Saints press conference, let alone in a Saints uniform.

As he walked to the counter to order take out (he didn't have any pots or pans in his new apartment yet), the diminutive Asian hostess greeted him. "Are you Jonathan?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Jonathan Vilma?" she asked again.

"Yes, that's me," he replied.

"Welcome to New Orleans," the hostess said. "We're a football town. You're gonna like it down here."

Vilma was shocked that anyone would recognize him, let alone at an out-of-the-way restaurant just a week after his arrival in town. "That's when I knew this was going to be great," Vilma says. "You can see the pride people have in their team."

Until last year, Vilma had had a storybook football career. He had won the national championship at the University of Miami on a team that probably could have beaten a few pro teams. In 2004, he was the first linebacker drafted, selected 12th overall by the New York Jets. His first season, he was named NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year by the Associated Press. The following season, he played in the Pro Bowl. In 2006, Vilma led the Jets to a surprising 10-6 record and the playoffs under first-year coach Eric Mangini. But Mangini was installing a 3-4 defense, moving away from the 4-3 style defense that used Vilma's sideline-to-sideline tackling skills. He started to

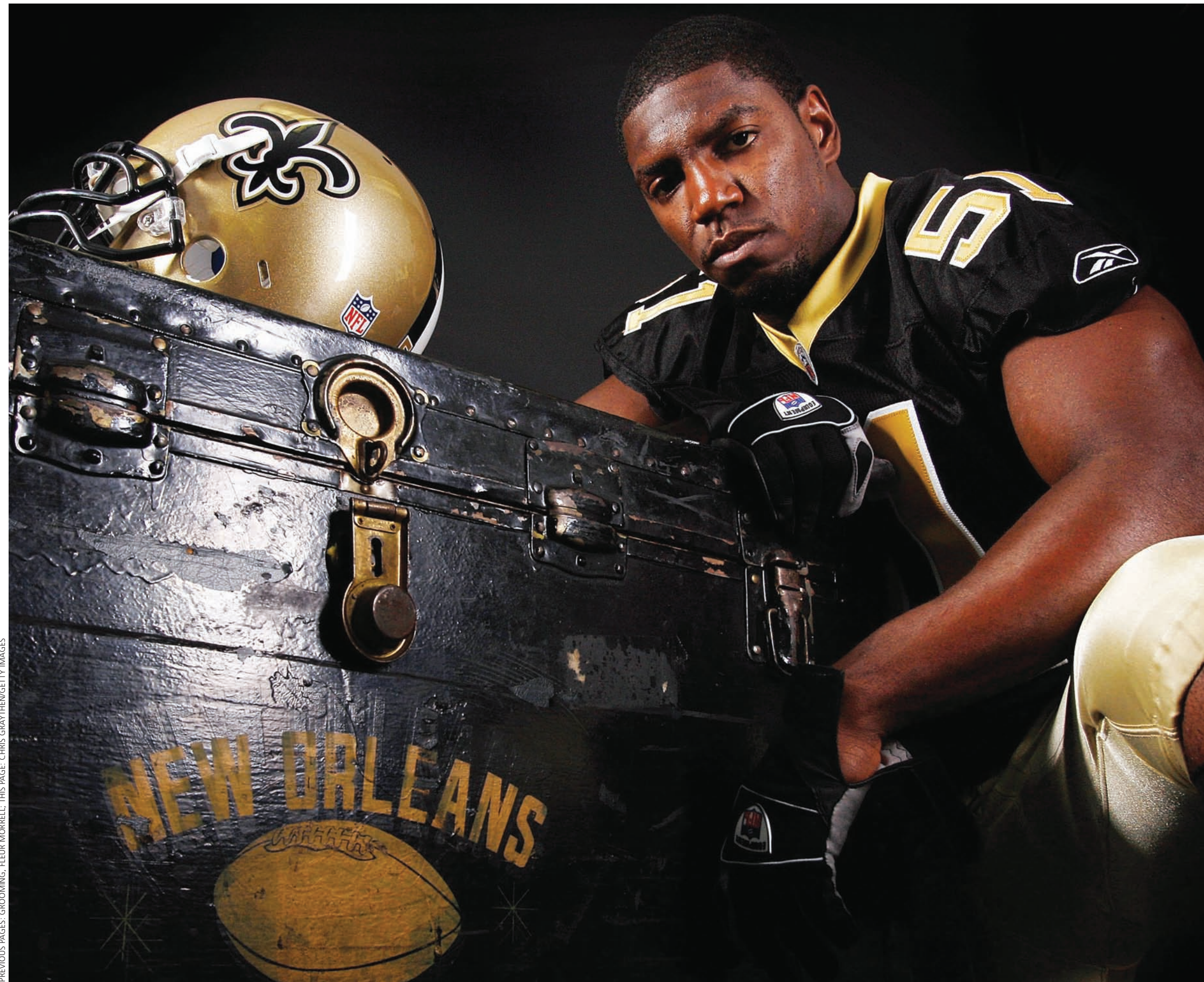
feel like a round peg in a square hole. A week-seven knee injury put an early end to a dismal season.

"Sitting home watching the team lose was the worst," Vilma remembers. "Knowing that we were losing close games and that I could have been making a difference was tough to take." After the season, Vilma and his agent met with the Jets. They both agreed that if Vilma wasn't happy and wasn't a good fit, the best thing for both parties was to move on. The Jets then traded Vilma for a 4th round pick and everyone was happy again.

Vilma readily admits he was fortunate that everything worked out as he had hoped, but part of the reason that it did was because he had a strong plan in place to get his career back to where he wanted it to be. Here are a few of the lessons he's learned, as he's relocated to a new town, a new team, and a new life.

1) Communicate What You Want

"Early on, we sat down with the Jets and had an honest discussion. Both sides decided the best thing to do was move on. They gave us permission to talk to other teams about trades. We had a few places in mind but New Orleans was always first on the list. The Jets did the best they could to get the most they could for me, but in the end, I think it worked out best for everyone."



PREVIOUS PAGES: GROOMING, FLEUR MORELL; THIS PAGE: CHRIS GRAYTHEN/GETTY IMAGES



Vilma's leadership on defense helped turn the Jets from a losing team to a playoff contender.

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2) Tap Into Your Network

"Before I came, I checked everything out. Reggie Wayne, who was a teammate of mine at the University of Miami, grew up in New Orleans. He told me, 'You're gonna love it there. It's a real football town. People love the Saints. The Hornets have started to come on strong now in New Orleans too. But everyone down here talks about the Saints all year long.'"

3) Location Isn't Everything

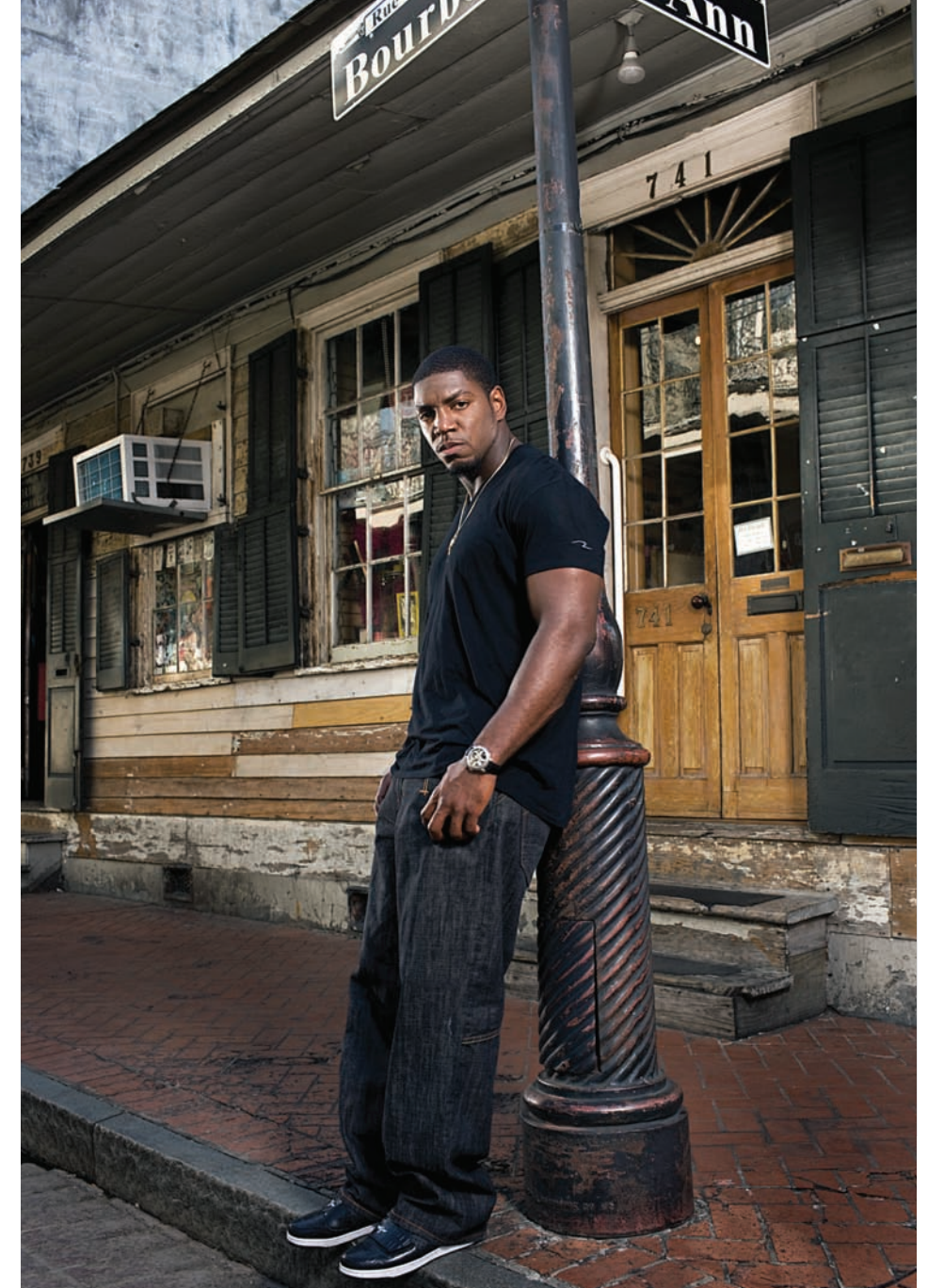
"When I first got drafted by the Jets, I was excited because I was a finance major and New York was the financial capital of the world. While I was there, I made so many contacts in the financial world and learned so much. But one thing I've learned pretty quickly is that the world has changed quickly, even since I came in the league. Your cell phone and email can keep you in touch with anyone regularly. You don't have to physically be in the city any more to benefit from what it has to offer. I still have business interests in New York. I'm an investor in a chain of bars called Brother Jimmy's. I'm also an investor in *The Source* magazine. I can still keep up with those things anywhere in the world."

4) Trust Your Team

"It's critical to have a good team around you. I have an agent, a business advisor, and a marketing person who handle a lot of my affairs. When someone comes up to me in the street with an opportunity, I take their card and pass it off to a member of my team. They vet everything and will bring it to me if they think it's a good opportunity and requires my time. Otherwise, they make it go away. Time is one of the most precious commodities in my life. By having a great team, I protect my time without worrying about missing out on anything."

5) First Things First

"From training camp to hopefully the Super Bowl, all I want to think about is football. My goals revolve around the football field. I want to win the championship. If I take care of my business on the field, everything else will take care of itself off the field. If you start to let all the off-the-field stuff drift into your life during the season, you're not going to take care of what got you here in the first place."



"If we win the championship, I can imagine the party on Bourbon Street," Vilma says.

6) Make Yourself At Home

"I think playing in a place that has a strong community is often overlooked. This is a big city, but it still feels like a small town in the best possible way. I've only been here in New Orleans for a few weeks, but I already see how close knit the community is, especially after Hurricane Katrina. These are good people who support each other, support each other's businesses, and take great pride in their city. As an athlete, you can feed off that energy. I look forward to being a big part of the New Orleans community. It's been wonderful to feel so welcome already. If we win the championship, I can imagine the party that we'll have on Bourbon Street. But then again, I can't imagine it. Can you imagine Bourbon Street being even crazier than it already is?" ★

If You're Moving

Pro athletes in team sports may have to pack up and find a place to live in a new city several times during their careers. Relocation experts can help you cope with the process of being uprooted. Chris Dingman's three-year-old company, The Dingman Group, has a network of real estate brokers in 41 states who are experienced in working with pro athletes on the move. Dingman's firm operates on referral fees from the brokers—he does not charge clients. "You're in good hands," says Dingman, a teammate of NFL Pro Bowlers Chad Johnson and Steve Smith in the late '90s at Santa Monica College. "We'll move all your furniture, we'll move your cars, we'll get you settled in so you can concentrate on your sport." dingmangroup.com —Richard Zitrin