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Inside NFL Marriages: A seven year ethnographic study of love and marriage in professional football

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Inside NFL Marriages:

A seven year ethnographic study of love and marriage in professional football

by

Rachel A. Binns-Terrill

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Communication
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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Dedication

For Art Bochner, for believing in me from the very beginning and working with me until the very end. Your mentorship, insights, and work helped shape the way that I understand my experiences, myself, and my future. Learning from you was a gift. Teaching with you helped me to envision the teacher that I want to be. Thank you.

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And for Craig. You are the love of my life and my best friend. You were never what I thought an NFL player might be, but you were the best NFL player I ever watched play. Thank you for believing in my dream as I believed in yours. Your job, hard work, and passion for the game of football made this research possible. Thank you for
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Inside NFL Marriages:  
A Woman’s View  

Rachel A. Binns Terrill  

ABSTRACT

When women marry NFL players and subsequently become NFL wives, they are thrust out of the lives they have known and into a form of secondary socialization among other NFL wives. In this project, I use autoethnography and narrative inquiry, the first-person narratives of four NFL wives, interactive interviews with dozens of NFL wives, friendship as method, and my personal experience to describe the social interactions between NFL wives, the themes that emerged from the chapters, and the trajectory of an NFL wife’s identity formation and transformation during her time in the league.

I also use autoethnography and writing as a method of inquiry to explore my own story before I was an NFL wife, while I was an NFL wife and after I was no longer an NFL wife, to uncover the processes of change in my own identity as I navigated both graduate school and the NFL.
Part I

Chapter One: What’s the Story About?

A little over seven years ago, I sat in a small conference room at The University of South Florida as a first year graduate student in love with a football player, wondering what it might be like to be an NFL wife. Tonight, sitting in my office, moving ever closer toward graduation, now a former NFL wife, I wonder “Is there an important difference between a good life and a happy life or are these one and the same” (Bochner, 2012, p. 7)? I write in attempt make sense of the life I lived, the moments of happiness that I experienced and my life within the NFL that seemed “good” while it lasted (Freeman, 2009).

... Let me explain from the beginning:

In 2003, I entered a PhD program at The University of South Florida with definite goals and ambitions in mind. Inspired by my undergraduate studies and professors, I wanted to study love and decency in close relationships. The communication department at USF was a perfect fit. I was excited by the program and my advisors and couldn’t wait to become a researcher and a professor. As a wide-eyed first year graduate student, I had no idea just how many miles away from the walls of academia the next seven years would take me.
Less than a year into the program, I reconnected with Craig Terrill, whom I had met a few years earlier when we were undergraduates at Purdue University. Upon reconnecting, we fell in love and started dating. A few months later, he was drafted into the NFL by the Seattle Seahawks.

Unlike the young girls I knew who grew up wanting to marry football players (including close friends and even one of my cousins), I was scared to death of Craig’s future profession. I had never seen myself as a “girly-girl” or as someone who sacrificed for relationships, as I imagined the girls would who wanted to marry football players. When it became clear that Craig was headed to Seattle, I was forced to make a choice. I could either follow him to Seattle or stay on campus in Tampa. I knew that I didn’t want to abandon my academic dreams, but I was so consumed by Craig and our relationship that I couldn’t imagine living thousands of miles away from him on the opposite side of the country. The fact that long distance ended my two previous relationships further convinced me that if things were going to work with Craig, we would need to be in the same city.

After much deliberation, I followed Craig to Seattle for the fall semester/season with the goal of studying NFL life from a sociological and communication perspective. Using what I knew from my doctoral coursework, I set out to explore NFL life through ethnographic observations, interviews, and focus groups conducted with NFL wives as well as my own autoethnographic experiences and journaling.

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1 My narrative is detailed in chapter 8
I wanted to get at the heart of the issues, contradictions, dilemmas, joys, and pitfalls of being a partner of a professional athlete, in particular, an NFL wife\(^2\). My goal was to identify and convey the communicative processes and struggles these women face in negotiating dueling (and dual) selves and evolving identities in their romantic relationships with professional football players. How might I understand marriages in the NFL as an insider (Craig’s girlfriend) and as an outsider (a researcher)? In what ways could I present my findings to help NFL wives see their/our world in new ways through this project?

Being with Craig opened the door to many questions about what it meant for me, personally, to be the girlfriend, and subsequently the wife, of an NFL player. I wanted to better understand what attracted women, including myself, to this life and to professional athletes. I also wanted a way to intellectually explore my fears, concerns, conflicts, hopes and dreams as an NFL wife. I wondered how NFL wives understood themselves and how they saw others seeing them. Making my life a research project seemed the right path to take to move toward answers to these questions.

My initial goal was only to collect enough data for a course project or a journal article. I had no idea that Craig would go on to play for the Seahawks for seven seasons and that I would have more than enough data for a dissertation project. The more I immersed myself in the culture, the more I discovered new issues that needed to be added to the study.

\(^2\) The term NFL wife will be used loosely to include both wives and women in dating relationships with NFL players if those relationships resulted in marriage.
I found right away that in the football world, football is important. It is a strange and finite province of meaning (McLain, 1979; Schutz, 1962; Berger and Luckman, 1967), but it is the only reality that NFL players and their wives really know. When you’re living within the world of the NFL, it seems strange that the rest of the world doesn’t understand the importance of the games as more than games and a player’s performance as more than just fantasy football points. For some fans, football is constructed as leisure. Even for those who scream at their televisions or whose emotions follow their team’s victories or losses, football is still relatively meaningless. For me, and for those I studied, it was our lives.

This dissertation takes the reader into the everyday lives and the deep visceral experiences of NFL wives, including my own. My goal is to help readers (including the other NFL wives who may find themselves in these pages) understand what makes NFL wives’ lives intelligible, meaningful, and sensible by taking them into the stories in which these women live. It is only in retrospect that I am able to break away from the story to make sense of it. Doing so while still embedded and enmeshed in it would have been nearly impossible.

This chapter begins Part I of the dissertation. In chapter two, I share an interview that I conducted at the beginning of this project with Anne, a family friend who was married to an NFL player. In chapter three, I review the previous literature on sports
wives. In chapter four, I describe the methodological procedures that I used for data gathering, analysis, and representation.
Chapter Two: Interviewing Anne

By the end of my first summer with Craig, my life already felt punctuated by his NFL schedule. While he was in San Diego for the NFL’s Rookie Symposium, a mandatory three-day meeting for all NFL rookies, I flew to spend the weekend with my grandparents in Minnesota. I reasoned that the time away from Craig and away from my graduate school community in Florida would help me clear my head so that I might make sense of the emotions and fears that were swirling in my heart.

On our way to their house from the airport, I talked with my Grandma about the fear I felt about how the NFL might change my relationship. When I finished, without taking her eyes off the road, she said, “Craig loves you very much.”

“I know he does” I told her, trying to stop the tears from forming in my eyes. “I’m excited for him, but scared for us. I just don’t know what to expect from life in the NFL.”

“Maybe you should call Anne,” she suggested. “I bet she has some stories for you.” Anne was a long-time family friend who has lived just two doors from my grandparents for thirty years. She met her ex-husband, Cal, when he played football in the late 1960s. “Give her a call.”

Back at my Grandparents’ house, I dialed Anne’s number. “Hey, Anne. It’s Rachel.”

“Hey Rach, what’s going on? Are you in town?” she asked.
“Grams just picked me up from the airport. I am wondering if you might be willing to sit down with me sometime to share your stories about being an NFL wife.”

Anne laughed. “Stories about being an NFL wife? Are you sure you want to hear them?”

I giggled. I wasn’t sure. The stories I remembered hearing about her ex-husband were mostly about his promiscuity and lies. “Just tell me the good stuff,” I teased.

“I’ll walk down there in a few minutes.”

I put the teakettle on the stove and waited at the kitchen table with my grandma for Anne to arrive. My Grandmother, a native Canadian, kept her teakettle on the stove and heated it up when Anne or other friends came over to chat. Will the thirty years that separate Cal’s playing time from Craig’s make a difference in the stories she and I will tell?

“Hello?” Anne shouted. “Are you upstairs, Shirl?” she yelled to my grandma.

“I’m not,” my Grandpa called from the basement of their split-level home.

“Hi Donald,” she shouted down the stairs.

“We’re up here, Anne,” I yelled. “The tea is on the stove.” I placed three teacups on the table for Anne, Grandma Shirley, and me.

“Great. Hey, you have your tape recorder and everything,” Anne said.

“I’m prepared,” I told her.

“You’re going to change my name, aren’t you? Or call me “Wife A?”

“Of course,” I promised her. “We’ll call you Anne.”
“Other NFL wives would probably be willing to talk with you if you changed their names too.”

“I will do it for everyone who would like that, their husbands too.”

The teakettle whistled as steam fought to escape through the small hole.

“Perfect timing,” Anne said.

“Just let me pour the tea and then we can get started,” I told her. She and Grandma Shirley chatted about bargains at TJ Maxx while I prepared their tea.

I sat down across from Anne at my grandma’s kitchen table and pushed record.

“So, how did you meet Cal?”

“Let’s see, that’s an interesting story. It was December 1966 and I had only been in Minnesota for about six months. I was teaching and had an apartment in a complex over in St. Paul. A young couple that lived downstairs asked me one day if my friend and I would like to meet a couple of Viking players. The guys were looking for dates to go to their team Christmas party. Now this is interesting, because there was no shortage of dates for these guys. However, the coach then was a Southern coach who I don’t think approved of inter-racial dating. Most of the black guys who lived in Minnesota had white girlfriends, so they were looking for a couple of black women to take to this Viking party. So this woman who lived downstairs invited Cal and one of his teammates to meet one of my girlfriends and me. They came and met us and we agreed to go to the party. I made a bargain…I’ll go to your party if you’ll go to my party. I thought, well, I could bring a Viking to my school party and be the hit.”

“So you went?” I asked.
“I went. It was at some country club. We had a great time. There weren’t that many black guys on the team at that time. Just a small handful. Most of the wives didn’t work.”

“Were you together after that?”

“No, we met in December and then I didn’t see him again until probably that spring. He needed to go to my party. I was the hit. I was the hit, you know, the Viking player coming to the school party. He drove an orange Corvette. It was really exciting.”

“So then you were together?”

“No, then we didn’t see each other because I went home for Christmas and reunited with my old boyfriend. I think Cal and I reconnected again in the spring of ’67 and we started dating and then got married December ’67.”

“Wow, so it was a quick marriage after you started dating?”

“It was. I was naïve,” she laughs. “I was naïve, and he was a little more sophisticated than I was, so he just kind of swept me off my feet. I wish I was smarter; I would’ve done something different.”

I smiled, wondering if the feelings I translated as undying love might also be naïve. *Should I take things slowly with Craig?*

“Anyway,” Anne continued, “we moved here a year later and I was a Viking wife from ’67 through, I think it was right after the Super Bowl, ’70, ‘cause he got hurt the year after the Super Bowl, so after ’69, so not very long.”

“Was he different after he got hurt and wasn’t a Viking anymore?” I asked.
“Well, he was pretty weird the whole time. But, it was a different group of Vikings at that time. The old guard was hard drinking, hard boozin’, a lot of women, you know, I mean their away trips were orgies, I’m sure. From the way they used to talk, there was no shortage of groupies following. I think it’s the same thing today. Those groupies find out where people are staying and follow them.”

_I felt sick. One of Craig’s teammates from Purdue told me the same thing about groupies. “You just have to walk past them,” he told me when I asked him how he responded to them. Am I ready for women to hunt and follow Craig? “Wow,” I uttered, unable to articulate my thoughts._

I masked my fears with a smile and Anne continued, “After we got married, I was the only working wife. The games were usually on a Sunday afternoon, and then the whole team would go out to dinner afterwards, drink and party. I was the only one who had to get up and go to work the next day. Half the time I’d be sleeping on some couch or chair. Most of the wives were stay-at-home moms. I taught. I think one other wife was going back to school at the time, but it was a party life. I remember one time one of the players got in a fight at one of the parties, and that made the newspaper. All the old guys were there.”

“So most of the guys partied?” I asked, hoping there were exceptions.

“No, no. There was a group of Christian athletes who were more religious and less boozing than the others.” _Craig is spiritual, but not overly religious. Which side of the fence will he fall on? Does the fence still exist?_

“Did you make close friends with the wives?” I asked.
“I wouldn’t say the wives were a close-knit group. We really didn’t know each other. We’d only come together at those parties. I think when more black wives joined the team we were closer, but most of the wives were here just for the season.”

“Was there a best part of being an NFL wife for you?”

“I can’t tell you it wasn’t exciting. Being a player and having that nature of being a celebrity, you did get to meet celebrities, I remember. Bill Cosby came in town. We got to meet him. We mostly met other people who liked to hang around with other celebrities.”

“Remember when the Marshalls flew you all out to California?” Grandma Shirley asked Anne, remembering Cal’s close relationship with Jim Marshall.

“Yeah,” Anne answered, “And the guys, remember they weren’t making any kind of money then. As a teacher, I was making $7,000 a year in ‘67 and ‘68. I think as a player, he was making $30,000. It was a lot more money, but it wasn’t a lot of money. I think the highest paid player at the time was maybe making one million. But, you know, now days, they sign seven million dollar contracts. Even Alan Page, when Alan signed, he was a big time player. I think his starting salary was $25,000, but his bonus was like $100,000.”

“Things are so different today. Craig, as a sixth round (out of seven rounds) draft choice, was given a $60,000 signing bonus and a minimum first year salary of $230,000. Even though the average NFL career is only 3.5 years, the players are paid well for the years they’re on the team,” I told her.
“It was a big thing at that point to be a Viking. A lot of name recognition in the area. Not so much for the wives. Though when I had my accident, it did say “Viking Wife Injured in Crash,” she laughed. It was my second year teaching, my first year with a car.”

“Did you have any duties as an NFL wife or as a Viking wife?” I asked.

“Not really. We were kind of ignored, or not really seen as important entities to the player. Most of the women were homemakers. None of them had careers of their own that I remember. Certainly, the management didn’t pay much attention. At least not the Minnesota Viking management. When we went to that first Super Bowl, we all had to pay our own way. There was no transportation provided, no hotel accommodations. We were told to get down there on our own. When the game was over, after we lost, there were plenty of empty seats on the charter plane because a lot of the players just went home from there. They said we could ride back with our husbands, but we had already purchased roundtrip tickets.”

“Was it like that for most of the teams?”

“Well, the Kansas City Chiefs were a different story. Their wives were flown down to the Super Bowl and their wives all got mink coats. At least that was the story. I think for the remaining Super Bowls, the players’ wives got at least a pendant. The players got their rings and now I notice that they give the wives the pendants of the face of their ring to commemorate the Super Bowl.”

“Were you treated well other than that?”
“That first year, we were not treated very well. In fact, Bud (Grant) had this whole thing about celibacy. He thought that if you contaminated the players with sex the night before a game, they were going to lose their strength. That was the reason he didn’t want the players and wives together before the Super Bowl. So, he stuck them out at some flimsy motel way out at the airport. They were almost late to the game because the traffic was so bad and they were in Greyhound busses coming to the game. Of course, the Kansas City Chiefs stayed in the French Quarter, at the Sanesta, right in the heart, first class all the way.”

“Craig’s Purdue teammate, Drew Brees, said the players are still required to stay together at a hotel the night before their games. In fact, Craig even had to stay with his teammates the night before college games. They said it was to keep them out of trouble.”

“Maybe it’s different now, but ‘trouble’ then was another for word for their wives.” We laughed and Anne reached across the table to pour another cup of tea. “But what was it like being an NFL wife? It was hell, to tell you the honest truth. The players didn’t work off-season, so there was no money coming in and they all struggled financially. Of course, I worked, that helped. They’d go to training camp, and at that time, they didn’t get their regular pay at training camp. They got 10 bucks per day, kind of like a per diem – so they’d get like $70 per week at training camp. Their actual pay didn’t kick in until the actual first league game. It was lean times in the summer time when they didn’t get paid.”

“I read that players today make between $750 and $1000 per week of training camp. Veterans also make $200 per game. It sure beats the $10 a day they made back
then, but doesn’t compare to their regular-season pay. And during off-season workouts, they only make $400 per week,” I told her. *I’ve been reading the NFL Players Association page since finding out Craig was drafted.*

“That’s a lot better. Now they have a union that fights for them.”

“What was the hardest thing for you about being an NFL wife?” I asked her.

“Well the hardest thing probably was more personal than it was connected to the Vikings. It was my own husband and his own promiscuous ways. But I think the lifestyle condoned it and almost encouraged it. You know, the women and the drugs. I don’t know if you want to write that in the article. But at the time, the players were experimenting with cocaine and marijuana. In fact, I’m sure some of them became totally addicted. The parties were partly drinking and partly sniff and smoking marijuana.”

“During the season too?”

“Yeah! It was at the parties. Remember, I told you these parties after the game. Yeah, now not all the players. I can only speak for the group that I ran around with. It was a mixed group, it wasn’t all black players, but it was recreational drug use at that time. Whether they used it during the week, I don’t know, but it was always available at parties. It wasn’t just players. It wasn’t at the dinner parties I was telling you about. These were other parties, home parties that a lot of the guys had.”

“The couples hosted the parties?”

“You know, I think the only people that remained married of that group were the Washingtons, and I think it was only because of their faith. They were very devout
Catholic. You know, but I’m thinking of that group – everybody else divorced. I think
the husbands were all kind of, you know, playing around – taking advantage of their
situation, too. Even meek, quiet guys. When you throw them in that kind of a situation,
you don’t know how many people are going to succumb to temptation.”

My stomach felt sick again. *Would Craig succumb to the temptation? How can he know until he is there?*

Grandma Shirley chimed in, “and a lot of them had a lot of money and they never
had that before.”

“Yeah,” Anne said, “most of the black guys came from poor families. Football
makes millionaires of a lot of people. Sports in general. But it’s also a basic character
flaw too, Shirley. You know, the question is…are people with that nature attracted to the
celebrity status or does the celebrity status change, a person who wouldn’t normally act
that way? And I don’t know. I don’t know. I think it may be a little of both. It attracts a
lot of flamboyant, adventurous people. It’s that kind of a job too. Not to get you all...,”
she turned to me. I’m sure my eyes were wide.

“I don’t know if I can handle this,” I said, hiding the seriousness of my doubts
with laughter.

Anne continued, “But you know, you have to understand, the players are sought
after. There are groupies. They’re just like rock stars or any kind of movie stars. There
are people out there who will pursue them. Unless they’re strong, strong-willed and
practice fidelity, that will be their demise. It has ended a lot of marriages.”

“Do you think fidelity is the biggest issue couples face in the NFL?” I asked.
“Well that and usually, after football, they lose that whole connectedness, the time in the lime light, so most of them can be a real struggle to live with after the lime light is gone. Some of them like to live in the past. They’re always trying to recreate the glory days. If you talk to some of these players, you’d think they played yesterday and it’s been what? 30-some years. But they live off of the name recognition and the glory. Well, you know, football, of all the sports, it can be the shortest in terms of career, time wise. I think even at that point the average career was less than five years because of injuries, or what have you.”

“It makes it hard,” I said, looking down to make sure my recorder was still going.

“Believe it or not, money was always a problem too. You struggle financially in the off-season. It was good six months out of the year and bad the other six months. Some guys managed their money well. I can’t say my husband or I managed that well, but there wasn’t much to manage. I was only married to him a year…maybe two years while he played. You know, when we went to the Super Bowl, I think the loser pay was probably $15,000, something like that. We used most of that money to put down on a house. But that was it. The only big money they ever got. And, of course, after the Super Bowl, he was so deflated about losing, all that, he took off to California and spent all of our money. He bought some furniture, a fur coat for me and a car. He always liked the big cars, the flashy cars. And the police would always catch him in the flashy cars.”

Grandma Shirley nodded her head, “Your dad borrowed Cal’s Corvette to go to prom,” she told me. I laughed, imagining my Dad in a powder blue tuxedo, picking up his date in a bright orange sports car.
“How did Cal’s career end?”

“He was hurt in a game and then they cut him,” Anne told me. “I think after, sometime during the next year. Then I remember he tried to get workman’s comp, ‘cause I mean, this injury was on national TV. I’ll never forget the first time that claim came back, “Non-work related injury” – So he fought that, I think it was about a year and a half before he actually got some workman’s comp out of that. So the Viking’s cut him while he was injured, and then he had knee surgery at the end of that year. He went to Pittsburgh and tried out, but his knee never came back.”

Grandma Shirley looked up again, “I thought he went out to play in California.”

“Oh he might have gone out there, but he didn’t pass the physical. So, he went to walk on at Pittsburgh. I remember the boys and I went out there. They were just babies, ‘cause we’d adopted them the fall after the Super Bowl….that fall after the Super Bowl. With one on my back and one on the front, we went out to Pittsburgh and Cal got cut. So he came back with us on the airplane. And then after that, it was a pure struggle. Jobs hit and miss. But he still liked the lifestyle. He didn’t have the money, but he wanted the lifestyle to continue.”

I asked, “Is that a pretty common occurrence with the players?”

“I think other players’ wives had other issues. I think a lot of them centered around women. The breakups centered on them being unfaithful. The Marshalls used to make the newspaper trying to kill each other. Jim has a bullet scar on his stomach and she has a scar all up her arm where he pushed her through a window. So they were violent, but the new guys were not.”
Grandma Shirley laughed. “Was it Sheila (my Dad’s sister) who was over there babysitting, sleeping on the Marshall’s couch, and there was a gun underneath it?”

“Oh yeah,” Anne answered. “It was really a rough group of players at that point. They all went to college, but a lot of them didn’t finish. Alan Page was the first one who came with a degree.”

“He ended up as judge,” Grandma told me.

“Yeah, Alan played for a long time,” Anne said. “He made a lot of money. But Jim Marshall, as long as that guy played, his top salary, he played for twenty years; his top salary was $75,000.”

“Oh my gosh,” I said, thinking about the ever-increasing $230,000+ minimum salary.

“That was it. They just never paid him his full worth. Never. These younger players would come and he’d train them, they’d be making $200-300 thousand. But his top pay when he retired was $75,000. I don’t know why he never challenged it. I think maybe they had something on him, I don’t know.”

“Did you hear about a lot of players who were violent at home?” I asked.

“Actually, no. Just two of them that I can remember being wife beaters. Maybe a few of them, you know, not many though. Cal never was. And I don’t think Charlie was. One of the wives was a bit of a run around, but…”

“Did he beat her for running around?” I asked Anne.

“No, he divorced her, though. Just the two that I know of where there was actually some physical evidence that they were beaten. I think they just took out their
frustrations at home. They would lose it. One of them was white. But he kind of hung around the black guys more. Of course,” she laughs, “he wasn’t a Christian athlete, either, I don’t think. ‘Cause there was a prayer group, then there were the others. But even another guy, Joe, Joe was a drinker, brawler. Not necessarily with his wife, but they’d get so drunk they’d be sitting there fighting over who lost the game.”

“Sounds rough,” I said, shaking my head.

“I don’t know. I don’t even know how the players are today. I don’t know any of them.”

“What was the best part for you?” I asked Anne.

“The best part. Was there a best part? I, you know, well going to the games. It was an exciting time. It was a young team. That Super Bowl year was really exciting to watch. Especially that one game at the Met when they were behind like 21-3 and came back and won 24-21. It was cold, we were out there in the elements. It was 18-below.”

I gasped. “And that was the best part?”

“Well, just being part of a winning season, you know, with the fans, everybody was captured. And of course they went and lost, that didn’t help. But that whole momentum that year was really something to be a part of. Yeah, that was probably the best part. Remember, I wasn’t a part of it for very long.”

“Other wives will probably want to know where this story’s going to go before they’ll talk,” Anne warned me.

Grandma agreed, “Right. Right. Yeah, you’ll have to…”

“Be anonymous,” Anne added.
“With your last names,” Grandma said.

“Of course,” I promised them.

“But at home, there’s a lot of pressure on the boys to be successful in athletics. And, of course, Morrell was just not an athlete. He’d prefer to sing or dance. And Jesse, tried but he was so little that he didn’t have the physical stature. And Ray was probably the best athlete, but after that first year of football, he decided he wasn’t growing fast enough. He was too little, so he switched and did soccer and basketball. But by the time he got to high school, Cal wasn’t around. He wasn’t around because, let’s see, Ray was sixteen when we divorced and I don’t think Cal had been around that much, as far as attending events and stuff.

Grandma nodded and then added, “I just remember, no matter what they were doing, if they fell, Cal would say, ‘Safe!’”

Anne laughed. “Yeah, to try to distract them from crying. But…”

“Do you think the football lifestyle, detracted from him as a husband and father, or was that just who he was?” I asked her.

“It’s got to be a combination. It’s not a typical job. It’s like being a celebrity with lots of highs and lots of lows. If you aren’t a really stable individual yourself, I think it’s hard to go through those ups and downs and come out even-tempered. I think that’s why, if a lot of them are involved in physical kinds of interactions, it’s because of their frustration. It’s a cutthroat business. You either produce or you’re gone. A lot of the players, at that time, abused their bodies. They talk about the athletes today taking steroids and enhancing drugs to build their muscles and to make them more competent as
an athlete. I remember Marshall played twenty years and never missed a game. The
guys then, injury or not, they played through pain, through all kinds of injuries. So, they
really beat their bodies up. They got battered. So it wasn’t a real pleasant kind of a job,
anyway.”

Grandma Shirley asked, “Did Cal’s parents expect him to give them money?”

“No, actually, the only person who really loved him playing ball and the money
he made was his ex-wife, because she could finally get child support. Before that, he
only paid because I made sure he sent the money. He wouldn’t have cared.”

I heard a large belch echo up the stairs and knew my Grandpa Don was on his
way to the kitchen. “Ventured into the rib business,” he said.

“Oh yeah, Anne said, “right after the Super Bowl, Cal decided he was going to be
a restaurateur, went into the rib business. I remember, I was working there – and we paid
your whole family in ribs for babysitting the boys. They had never eaten so many ribs in
their whole life,” she laughed.

“And they were good!” Grandma said.

“They were good,” Anne said, “yeah they were very good ribs. But that business
didn’t make any money. Of course, Cal was going to be a restaurateur and make all this
money. He put a little money into it, not a whole lot. Then he called himself a
workingman. I went down and sold ribs at night. Used to come home every night
smelling like smoked ribs. Maybe that was the one thing that just got me about him…he
was always dreaming about being an owner of the business while everybody else was
busy trying to find a job or a career.”
“What else did he try?” I asked her.

“I remember it was a shoe store one time. I asked him, ‘Have you ever been a business owner?’ No – but he was going to be a shoe storeowner. He had all these plans and spent all this time dreaming instead of, maybe even working at a shoe store. I told him, ‘if you want to be a shoe store owner, go work at a shoe store. Learn the business.’”

“You tried to get him to go back to school,” Grandma Shirley said.

“Yeah. I remember when I became an administrator, I told him to go back to school, to get his degree. I was making enough money at that point, he was out of football, I said go back to school. But no.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t jump at the chance,” I said.

“Yeah. When we got divorced, he sent me a two-paged, single-spaced letter. Of course, he hadn’t written a single thing to me in the 18 years we were married. Called me ‘an administrative bitch’. I’ll never forget that. And how I never supported him…I thought, never supported your ass? I was the only one working for a long time. But, you know…entitlement. Maybe that’s it, they had this air of entitlement, they were entitled to whomever they wanted to like…they’re entitled to this, to that, because of their status.. Will Craig feel entitled to those things too? And I think a lot of them were little boys who never grew up. They were still just playing a game. I don’t know if a lot of them saw it as a real job.”

“I wonder if things are like that now,” I said. “Craig talks about going to work.”

Anne said, “Now, it’s a big business. Everyone has an agent. Their money is handled for them.”
“Bud said when he started coaching, they played because they loved to play,” Grandma Shirley remembered.

“Yeah, wasn’t for the money, ‘cause they sure didn’t make any money. The glory. Well, they played for glory, for booze, for women, whatever they could get, Shirl.”

Grandpa Don chimed in, “Drugs.”

“Yes, drugs, Donald, that too. Donald, remember me coming down here, frantic because Cal had gone to outpatient treatment for cocaine? I came home, went down in the basement, there he was, lighting up. ‘Donald!’ I ran down here to get Donald.”

“You were just all frantic,” Grandpa Don said. “I remember you brought your rings down here.”

“Oh God, yes, this is after the playing time. Cal was into drugs. I used to have to sleep on my purse. Remember that fur coat I told you about? He pawned that. He lost a car, too. I don’t know how he ever did that. He had that old Mercedes, remember? He had to have this old Mercedes. He bought it, then came home one day and it was lost. I think he traded it for drugs, ‘cause he was strung out there for a while. Then he moved back to California and took advantage of his poor mother. Lived in her house, was eating all her specialty foods. I remember them calling, he’s in here just…said they were going to have a Johnson & Johnson encounter with him. So then he came back. I don’t know what his lifestyle is like now, in terms of drugs. I’m sure he smokes a little marijuana. I don’t think he can afford anything else,” Anne said.
She continued, “But football life was worse after it ended. It was a different kind of worse. But I hung in there for 18 years. I think he worked half of those. I was counting one time. Less than half of those eighteen years.”

Grandma Shirley added, “And you hung in because of the kids.”

“Well yeah, at that time I just knew I didn’t want to be a statistic. Because the whole world was how I grew up…black single mothers raising children alone. I didn’t want to be a statistic. And then I sat there one time and thought, well hell, I’m doing it anyway,” she laughed. “Literally, I’m doing it. I might as well be a statistic. I’m doing it and it was worse trying to cover his expenses, he didn’t care.”

She continued, “I remember when Cal went to work for a car company out there. He was making a base salary plus commission. Of course, he had to sell cars to make a commission. I remember asking if he was going to give me part of the check for bills. He would say, ‘I can give you $300.’ And I remember saying, ‘$300? That’s what your car payment is. You’re not giving me anything!’ So I told him he could pay his own car payment and I would take care of the rest. And I wouldn’t count on him for anything else. ‘Cause you never knew what you could count on. Wasn’t like the old days when the husband turned over the whole paycheck.”

I wondered about my own expectations of Craig as a provider. If I married him, would I stay with him if he was on drugs? I can’t imagine not expecting him to use his entire paycheck for the bills if we needed it.
Grandpa Don closed the refrigerator with a diet coke in his hand and headed back down to play cards on his computer, “I’m going back to work,” he announced. I smiled. Grandma and Anne didn’t look up.

Anne continued, “I think when I finally told Cal it was over, it was because he wasn’t kicking the drug habit. He was stealing checks, writing them. So I was being overdrawn and not knowing when or how. I’d have to hide the rings down here. Anything he got his hands on, he would pawn. I remember my mother had died, there were only two things of value that she left in this world: Her diamond engagement ring, which my sister got and a gold coin on her chain my dad had gotten her that I had. When he pawned that sucker, that was it. I remember going to the attorney just crying, ‘I’ve gotta get outta here,’ I told him. I was just being pulled down into this black hole and I couldn’t get out. But that was the last straw. That was it. No more. I could take the women. I could even take the drugs, as long as I thought he would be helpful. But when he stole my mother’s heirloom, that was it. That was the end of it. I remember him saying, ‘Why do you want to get a divorce? Things aren’t that bad.’”

She continued, “And I remember looking at him and I said, ‘Of course they’re not bad for you! You’ve got a place to eat, sleep and shit,’ that’s what my mother used to say...eat, sleep and shit. ‘And that’s all you need.’ But I couldn’t be pulled down into that financial black hole.”

My recorder beeped, letting me know it was full.

“What’s that? Did I talk too long?” Anne asked.

“No, the recorder is full, but this is great.”
“I’m sure I’ve said too much. I’ve never met Craig, so I hope you’re not scared and worried now. I’m sure he couldn’t be as bad as Cal.”

Grandma shook her head. ‘Craig’s just a big teddy bear,” she said.

Anne laughed. “They can all seem like teddy bears. Just give it time and get to know him before you jump into anything to serious,” she warned me.

“I will,” I promised her. *I wonder if this project is a good idea. I am falling in love with Craig. What will hearing horror stories from NFL wives do for our relationship? Will having those expectations foster self-fulfilling prophecies of a negative relationship?*

“Remember, not all of those guys were like Cal, either. Craig might be wonderful. I hope he is!”

“Me too,” I giggled. We all laughed and then Grandma and Anne turned to each other and got lost in reminiscences about when their kids were young. I was lost in my own thoughts. *Am I strong enough to be an NFL wife?*

My purposes in interviewing Anne were two-fold. First, I wanted to interview her so that I might examine NFL life systematically through our conversation and the transcript. But privately, I wanted Anne to help quell my fears. I wanted to find myself within the happy details of her story. I wanted to hear that the NFL was the best part of her marriage to Cal that later crumbled. Instead, I walked away from our conversation even more uncertain whether or not I was ready to be in a relationship with an NFL player.
Anne’s story was neither glamorous nor easy. She raised her children largely on her own, supporting them financially while also trying to financially support her drug-addicted husband. She blamed the NFL for, at the very least, contributing to her husband’s sense of entitlement that led to his boozing and womanizing. Cal cheated on her and wasted their money on drugs and failed business ventures. He left Anne and their children for long stints of time and stole from them before she finally left him. I didn’t see myself in her story (to do so would have been terrorizing!), but I feared that it happened to her and so it could happen to me. Hers wasn’t the only story that she recounted of promiscuous football players. She recounted numerous stories of NFL marriages that ended because of infidelity and others that dissolved because of domestic violence.

Neither Anne’s relationship with Cal nor the NFL relationships she recalled were anything like the relationship that I wanted with Craig. I recognized that Anne was wounded by her relationship with Cal (Frank, 1995) and I set out to resonate with her story, but doing so would have put me in a vulnerable position. Instead, I wanted to toss her stories aside, telling myself that she was a different race, it was a different time, that drugs were more socially acceptable and the players didn’t make as much money then. But I knew her story couldn’t just be tossed aside as a long distant past. Indeed, there are stories in the news frequently about domestic strife between NFL players and their partners.

Instead, I tried to focus on the bits of hope in her story... “There was still a group of Christian athletes who were more religious and less boozing than the others... Maybe
it’s different now...I’ve never met Craig. I’m sure he couldn’t be as bad as Cal... I clung
to any hope she offered, but there wasn’t much. Frank (1995) wrote that, “storytelling is
for another just as much as it is for oneself” (p. X). I walked away in fear, knowing that
Anne’s telling of her story was as much a warning for me, a potential NFL wife of the
next generation, and a close family friend, as it was a recollection of her memories.
Treading lightly toward love in the NFL, I was convinced that if my relationship with
Craig was going to work then we would have to defy the odds that were seemingly
stacked against us.

To see how Anne’s story matched up with those of other NFL wives, I started
reading books and articles about relationships in professional sports. In the next chapter,
I detail the purposes of this dissertation and review the sports literature that helped shape
both this study and my thoughts on relationships with professional athletes.
Chapter Three: A Review of the Sports Literature

This dissertation focuses on how wives of professional athletes, in particular NFL wives, manage their identities and deal with relationship constraints and demands. When I began my research, I had the idea that women married to men in high profile careers faced unique circumstances that affected meaning making and identity-stabilizing processes in their lives. As a Communication student, I wanted to look at my own relationship and the relationships of other women in the community of NFL wives as we faced unique relational constraints and difficulties associated with the world of sports. I wanted to know what attracted NFL wives to NFL players and to NFL life in the first place, whether they felt validated, how they organized their relationships, and what relational dilemmas they faced. What did they disclose about their fears and hopes to their partners and to the other wives and what did they keep hidden? What actions helped sustain their long-term relationships and why did some relationships fail?

In this chapter, I turn to a review of the literature on sports wives, asking the question any student beginning a research project would want to ask, “What do we know about the relationships and marriages of professional athletes and their wives from the literature?”

The history of the studies of professional athletes.

Most of the research on the lives and relationships of NFL players centers on interviews of players or books written or co-written by players. Among them are books
written about the dark side of football, detailing infidelity, drug use, violence, and the
downside of fame (see Green, 1997; Sanders, 1999). Another popular topic that NFL
players have written about is faith (see Branon, 1996; Warner, 2001, 2009; Hoppe, 2004;
Alexander, 2007; Bidwell, 2007). A number of other books have come out recently as
cowritten biographies (see Simmons, 2006; Sayers, 2007; Ochocinco 2009; Brees,
2010). But none of the popular books written by NFL players focuses directly on
relationships between players and their wives.

Crute.

One of the first significant published studies inviting us into the world of wives of
professional athletes was a dissertation by Beverly Crute (1981). She studied the impact
of sport on the home and family by conducting twenty-five interviews with wives of
professional football and baseball players between 1976 and 1978. Seventeen of her
interviews were with wives of professional football players and the other eight interviews
were with wives of professional baseball players. She also utilized participant observation
methods by participating in both formal and informal sports activities, though she was
admittedly involved in all of them as an outsider, or a non-sports-wife. Gaining access to
sports players and wives as an outsider proved to be both problematic and time-
consuming.

Crute (1981) found that it was easy to watch athletes from afar, but gaining
private access to them was difficult. Both a professional athlete’s desire for privacy and
his ability to hire others to assist with privacy proved stumbling blocks for Crute in
gaining access to them. She found that neither athletes nor organizations jumped at the
opportunity for the athlete to be interviewed by an unknown student researcher.

Eventually, she found a friend who worked for a radio/TV station who arranged for her to interview a public relations director for a professional baseball team. The public relations director then introduced her to a player’s wife (who was working on her own master’s degree) who agreed to an interview. Her sample of baseball wives snowballed from that interview. She later found a contact who knew the president of a wives’ club for a professional football team and her football interviews snowballed from that initial interview. By the end of her interviews, Crute (1981) felt, “considerable trust” between the interview participants and herself, even friendship with some of the wives. Still, she was admittedly involved in the activities and interviews as an outsider, or a non-sports-wife.

In her dissertation, Crute (1981) interviewed twenty-five sports couples and covered topics including courtship and marriages of sports couples, life as a rookie for players and wives, the inherent mobility of sports life (especially for baseball players), and the division of labor in the home.

Courtship and marriage.

Sports wives who met their husbands after they were professional athletes recalled admiring their future husband’s status as a professional athlete:

…all the girls are attracted to them; I felt kind of WOW! (Crute, 1981 p. 98).

I was very much in awe of him…he had achieved perfection in something…at the time he was very cocky…I never let him know I was in awe of
him. He said to me on our first date, ‘don’t let it impress you that I’m a major league baseball player. (Crute, 1981 p. 98)

Some of the other women who met their husbands after they were professional athletes didn’t know that their husbands were professional athletes when they met them. One football wife told Crute (1981), “I didn’t know he played football” (p. 98). Another wife said, “I didn’t realize when I met him, how big a star he was. Some of my friends knew who he was. He was just a really easy going person, he wasn’t a bit pushy” (p. 98).

Some professional athletes tried to use their status as an athlete to attract their future mates (Crute, 1981). By presenting their status as a professional athlete, men may have set up certain expectations of sports marriage. One wife admitted, “…when Paul and I decided to get married, I thought, Yeah! I have arrived. This is going to be all downhill from now…” (Crute, 1981 p. 99). Another wife told Crute, “I used to think it was really neat and I used to be all caught up thinking that my husband was a #1 draft pick and that I was married to a professional football player” (p. 99).

Of the couples Crute (1981) interviewed, six of them began dating in high school. The women ranged in age from 19 to 25 years old and averaged 21.5 years. Wives in Crute’s study knew their husbands for between three months and seven years before getting married, with an average time of 2.9 years. Most of the women met and married their husbands before they were professional athletes. A majority of them also either quit school when they were married or soon after their husbands became professional athletes. 

*Rookie life.*
The experience of being a rookie in professional sports is as unique for athletes as it is for their wives. NFL wives who met their spouses in college (36% for NFL and 8% for baseball) were able to co-create a shared view about how they understood working as a professional athlete (Crute, 1981). A baseball wife explained:

I think if you don’t go through some of the hard knocks with your husband, and realize how hard they work to get here, you don’t really appreciate it…like anything else, that you’ve acquired easily, you don’t really know what it takes to get to where you want to go and what it has taken these guys years of hard work to accomplish. (Crute, 1981 p. 44)

Each year an athlete’s wife spends in the league helps her gain familiarity with the sport and the team. Looking back on her rookie year, one of Crute’s (1981) interviewees explained:

…every year your perspective changes, every year, you just look back on your first year and say, ‘Oh I was dumb!’ I suppose naïve is a better word…Oh it really is a change. When you first come in, if you’ve been involved in professional sports at all, you just think professional athletes are just something else any way. You come in with all those great ideas. I didn’t come in with the money ideas a lot of people come with, you know, those big numbers and figures that you’re going to be making that year. It’s much different than you think it is. All the people that you’re meeting – my eyes were so big. (p. 46)
As rookie wives, women have to learn the unwritten rules of the league, which may differ by team. The focus is on their husbands’ careers. Some of the rules Crute (1981) found to be universal included:

1. Don’t gossip about the personal lives of teammates or their wives.
2. Don’t talk about how any other player performed.
3. Don’t discuss salary.
4. Respect your husband’s coaches

By breaking any of those rules, Crute (1981) found that women felt that they could hurt their husbands’ careers or even cause them to lose their jobs.

*Geographic mobility.*

The geographic mobility inherent in professional sports takes a toll on professional athletes and their families. Because most athletes play on a team away from where they are from, seasonal housing is common. Among her participants, Crute (1981) found that living somewhere other than one’s team’s city was more common in football (nearly 80%) than in baseball (nearly 65%), likely because of football’s shorter work season. That is likely less so now in football because of the extended requirements for players to be present during the off-season.

Another factor in a player’s geographic mobility is a non-guaranteed contract. Crute (1981) found that many players rented apartments or even waited to see if they were going to make a team before moving their families. A sports wife told her:

We found this little 2-room apartment; it had a bathroom, a kitchen, a half of a bedroom and that was it…it was in the White Birch Motel…it was just too
close…We were eating in the kitchen and watching TV…We were just in bed all the time (laughs) literally, you know? There was no sitting room and so, if you had company, everybody piled on the bed and watched TV. (p. 53)

Buying a home in one’s playing city was not always a good idea. A sports wife told Crute (1981):

When we were with Philadelphia, we bought a home and were planning to stay there all year round and said, ‘phooey with this moving’. But we got traded so here we are moving again, we don’t want to…I’m kind of afraid to buy a home here and then get cut or traded, not that this is a bad area, this is just not where we want to live forever. So we decided to by a home where we did want to live forever, which is Denver. My husband is from there and that’s what we’re doing, but it’s hard moving. (p. 59)

Crute (1981) also found that when a player is cut or traded, his wife is often responsible for the move. Though their husbands are often taken care of, wives and kids are left to fend for themselves. A baseball wife explained:

…If the team were going to trade him, they would hand him his first-class airplane ticket, tell him what bus he is to take to get there and there is a boy to shine his shoes and a press secretary to take care of his luggage and meals and tickets. The club takes good care of him – but what about us. We are left to pack up everything we own, make arrangements to get to the new town, get the children out of school and get them ready. The Club does take care of him but they don’t always think of the wives and children. It’s left up to the wives to
drive to the new town, look for the new apartment, and I suppose it happens with other occupations too, but you also hear that the movers come and help relocate you. I think those are the ones that are a little more concerned for the family. (Crute, 1981 p. 61-62)

Some wives who had moved fifty to sixty times discussed coping strategies that they employed to combat occupational mobility. Their strategies included staying in their home city or bringing fewer things to the team’s city. They rented apartments on a month-to-month basis and tried not to establish any permanent roots in the team’s city. Others reframed the moving as an opportunity to travel. An interviewee explained, “I feel sorry for some of the girls who live in only one town” (Crute, 1981 p. 63). Another interviewee said:

I like to travel. I hate packing. I have looked for an apartment, but once I am there I really like being in a new town and finding out what goes on there, and the different kinds of people that live in the different parts that we have been in. We have lived in the Midwest, and we have lived in Florida, and Virginia and North Carolina, and Boston was a change from all that, so we have kind of gotten a taste of all of it. Ten, fifteen years ago, if someone had asked me if I would ever dream of seeing that much of the United States and what have you, and now Canada is on the road trip, and the opportunities are made available to you to do this sort of thing that you would not normally get to do. (p. 63)

Division of labor.
Crute (1981) researched how the occupational demands of football and baseball affected the division of labor within athletes’ homes. She hypothesized that because professional sports are characteristically masculine that sports homes would employ traditional labor division. Her data supported her hypothesis. When asked how they divide the labor in their homes, Crute’s interviewees said:

I cook and clean and I take care of the kids. Once in a while he does the dishes, he takes us out to eat. He doesn’t do any of this (housework), he never does anything, he never has and probably never will. …it’s not like you’re playing football and this is the off-season and you’re going to have to do half the dishes; that’s never been (the case). (p. 69)

He doesn’t do anything. He’ll…like after our daughter’s dinner, when she’s really made a mess under her high chair, if I ask him, he’ll vacuum it up, but he’s just not one of those people that anticipates those things. If I ask him to do it then he does it; he doesn’t complain or anything but he never anticipates anything like that. Never. One thing he does is pick up his dishes and carries them over to the counter, but he never thinks if I need help or anything like that. I guess because all his life his mother always did it for him. (p. 69-70)

…having a house is new to him. He’s only got one brother and his mother always did a lot for him. He very rarely mowed the lawn at home or painted or took care of anything, so now he’s got to learn to paint…and run a lawnmower. I do most of the taking care of the grass. He does take out the garbage. We spend a lot of time around the house in the off season, but in the on season everything
kind of slides. I take over some of the things he does and I try not to get on his back about it...I do the cooking and cleaning; he helps me with the heavy things like moving furniture to wash a rug or something. He’ll help, but basically he takes care of the garage area, the dog and outside big things. (p. 70)

Crute’s (1981) interview responses indicated that during the season there is little flexibility in the division of labor in sports homes. Of the twenty-five couples she interviewed, she found that twenty of the women did all of the cooking in their homes and the other five cooked but shared the duties with their husbands. Husbands reported helping with cooking, childcare, finances and yard work. Twenty-four of the men did all of the yard work while only one woman did any of the yard work. Of the sixteen interviewees who discussed finances, twelve of them said that wives were in charge of the finances, mostly by default because of the husband’s limited time to learn about cash flow and follow-through with bill paying.

Despite the numbers that suggest husbands do not help at all in the home, a few of Crute’s (1981) interviewees reported their husbands do more chores, or different chores, during the off season than they do during the season:

During the season, Matt doesn’t do much around the house at all so that leaves everything to me and I cook and clean…and I take out the garbage and he doesn’t do much at all. But when we get home, it’s reversed…the first year I worked during the off season and that left a lot on him and he would clean house and cook and do a lot of those things. (p. 71)
Crute (1981) concluded that sports wives are intimately involved in their husbands’ career concerns and production and that the husband’s work has significant impact on his family. The sport comes before all familial or personal needs. Perspectives on husbands’ careers are shared between a husband and wife. Work within the sports home is often asymmetrical and gender-typed with the wife taking on the brunt of the responsibility.

Though demanding, sports marriages can also be rewarding for the type of lifestyle they can offer and for the perks along the way. In Crute’s interviews, wives revealed perks such as not having to work if they did not want to, financial security, being able to meet people in important positions, prestige, free tickets to games and events, and traveling (p. 89-92). But not all wives in Crute’s interviews focused on the perks of professional sports life:

...when Cal’s home, I don’t do anything; I don’t clean house, I don’t do anything of my own personal interest. I just strictly take care of the kids, go to ball games, fix meals, do whatever Cal wants to do. When Cal goes on the road, this is my time for sewing and maybe cleaning the house before he comes home. I do just what I want to do and do it on my own schedule on my own time. (p. 92)

“Life in the big leagues is not ‘the good life; but rather an exchange of rewards and resources with certain occupational costs” (Crute, 1981 p. 93). “Sports wives give up their autonomy, but in exchange receive money, status, and the hope that life in a sports marriage will be fulfilling (p 95).

Fidelity.
Fidelity (or infidelity) seems to be a huge issue in professional sports. Crute (1981) described different ways in which the public finds athletes appealing:

For men, the athlete is the perennial boy/man who espouses physical fitness in a world of occupationally-induced flabbiness; for women, the athlete often epitomizes the incarnate sexual being; and for children, the athlete is the object of a cult of hero-worship. If we are to believe the portrayal in popular culture, the athlete is a person who is particularly virile and prone to numerous propositions from women. (p. 113-114)

Crute’s (1981) interviewees told her about their experiences with women desiring their husbands and their subsequent feelings of jealousy, “…there was this lady and she comes up and she wants to kiss him…I tell you, I said ‘no,’ we’re not passing out those” (p. 114).

There are a lot of women who just hang around the training camp. They don’t care if they’re married and have six triplets. It’s just that they could be with, or talk to, or touch, or know a professional athlete. That would be their ‘claim to fame’. (p. 115)

I was holding hands with my husband while this girl came up and threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. My husband was a rookie and had only been there a month…she couldn’t even have known who he was. And I was livid and I thought, how am I going to deal with this? (p. 118)

Crute (1981) found that baseball wives expressed a greater deal of concern about their husbands’ potential infidelity than did football wives. One reason given for the
differences in concern about infidelity was that football players were only gone for ten or so nights throughout the year while baseball players were gone more frequently and for longer periods of time (p. 116).

A baseball wife admitted:

I have two young children. I could divorce him and then fight for money and all that, but when my husband’s at home…and I really know very few married couples in pro ball that don’t get along, really, when they’re together, they get along…I could either do that or I can put up with it now. When he comes home, even though I know he’s been with a girl, I know he’ll never see her again. It’s not that he loves her, it’s not that he’s gonna run off with her. He’s gonna come home to me. I’m the one he loves and I’m the one whose shoulder he cries on, or when he’s done something good, I’m the one he’s gonna call. When he’s home, he treats me like a queen. (p. 127)

Many sports wives stated that problems with infidelity happened on other teams, but not their team (Crute, 1981). Reasons given included it being a young team/club, the players being nice guys, or it was a religious team.

In Crute’s (1981) study, divorce was uncommon during a sports career, likely because acknowledging infidelity or other problems was too costly. When an athlete’s career ends and the money and notoriety begin to wane, divorce rates may go up.

*Identity:*

Women who marry professional athletes can feel a certain loss of identity (Crute, 1981). Sports wives commented:
We meet people and I’m standing right beside him and I’m introduced to these people and they never make eye contact with me at all…and it gets me down sometimes. I feel like I could totally drop off the earth sometimes and nobody would notice. (p. 215)

I feel left out and lost in the background. (p. 216)

…people are showering him with praise and shoving me aside…it’s like being someone’s little sister. (p. 216)

…I find myself wondering if they would like me for just me not because I’m Jack’s wife. (p. 216)

I was on a TV show last year and I was saying that was one thing that bothered me, you know, nobody interviewed me, it was always (Tom McAlpine’s) wife. (p. 216)

Before we were married, I was important and people wanted to see me, they called me. In college, it was, this is Mary and people liked me and now that I’m married to a professional athlete, I - it’s not me anymore, it’s Larry. (p. 217)

Not only did some sports wives feel like they are invisible next to their athlete husbands, but others felt like they had become an extension of their husbands. One sports wife was even asked for her autograph by several little kids who admired her husband. Another wife voiced her concern, “I don’t want to blend entirely into my husband; I still want to have my own personality (Crute, 1981 p. 219).

Overall, Crute (1981) found that sports wives spend their time and energy working to further their husbands’ careers. She voiced concerns that women in their
twenties who were working only to further their husbands’ careers might hinder their own development and identity-creation (p. 222).

_Wives as “Helpmates”_

Crute (1981) identified sports wives as similar to wives of men in the military, physicians, academics, managers, and ministers, in that they have knowledge of their husbands’ work but contribute to their work from behind the scenes (p. 227). The role they play, Crute argues, is one of “helpmate,” or a woman who becomes the person she needs to be to help her husband succeed in his career.

In Crute’s (1981) interviews with sports wives, women seemed to identify themselves as helpmates within their marriages:

Basiclly, I think the way a wife helps her husband is just to be a good wife, you know, just like any other occupation. Because it’s his physical and mental ability that is out there performing, and if you’re a deterrent to his mental performance for instance, if you’re fighting all week, you know, letting other problems interfere, that maybe aren’t a big deal, that’s gonna deter your husband. (p. 229)

…just as his helpmate supportive partner. I kind of see myself as a reason for him to achieve his goals. Maybe that is putting too much stock on myself, but I feel like if I weren’t there, he would have less reason to do well. So…it is like a circular thing, where I want to do well or be well for him, to look nice, to keep myself in other things rather than just be one of the wives that just sits at home. (p. 229)

Sports wives identified their roles in the following ways (p. 232-235):
1. Adopt a “laissez faire” attitude in all marital matters
2. Stay out of your husband’s way
3. Cook to suit your husband’s dietary needs
4. Massage your husband when he needs it
5. Cheer for your husband at his games
6. Listen in conversations with your husband without expressing your own opinions
7. Show confidence in your husband’s morality and in his athletic ability
8. Run all errands; make your home run well
9. Do not interfere directly with any work-related matters

Overall, Crute (1981) found that the most easily accessible role for sports wives to play is that of “helpmate” to their husbands. Reasons Crute (1981) identified for sports wives serving as “helpmates” instead of working outside of the home included:

1. Husband’s income
2. Lack of personal career aspirations
3. Lack of work skills
4. Machismo Ethic (team should provide for athletes and athletes should provide for wives)
5. Children for which to care
6. Lack of education (because of dropping out to marry their husbands)
7. Husband’s schedule
In 1980, professional football players made an average of $56,000 and baseball players made an average of $127,000 (NFL Management Council Report; Baseball Commissioners Office; as reported in Crute 1981). Because their husbands made enough money to support their families, sports wives often felt guilty if they chose work outside of the home because it took time away from their husbands and homes. Both the team and the players discouraged wives from having jobs. By following her husband’s wishes, a sports wife finds greater stability within her marriage and home (Crute, 1981).

*Front stage/back stage.*

While behind the scenes the role of sports wife may not seem glamorous, front-stage portrayals of sports wife may be different. It seems that even sports wives have an idea of an ideal sports wife:

I think there is an image, but I don’t think very many of us fit it at all. I think a lot of people would imagine us to be ‘hoidy toidy,’ dress very chic, because all they think our husbands are making hundreds of thousands of dollars every year, and that we wouldn’t associate with people other than the professional athlete. I may be wrong but that’s what I feel. I don’t think any of us fit into that ‘cause we all have friends outside of the football players, we wear jeans everywhere we can, anytime we can. Some people don’t realize that some players on this team make very little money, and people don’t realize that. Even the people that are key players don’t make very much money at all. People think you live in a fancy mansion and drive expensive cars. Some do, some don’t. (p. 265)
...to the fans, you have to be kind of wholesome, you dress nice…I don’t understand exactly why…I guess it’s more for them than yourself…not so much here, but in California, I have to closely watch what I wore and how I acted; they are so star struck in California. (p. 267)

...I don’t want people to think my husband married a ‘yuck.’ I’m just me. I try to look decent. I think if it were the other wives, I wouldn’t worry about it, if they don’t like it, then fine. But with the public, there is Mike’s image that I try to keep up, so I try. (p. 267)

Crute (1981) categorized “types of wives” from her observations of sports wives:

**Frontrunner:** A wife who will stick by her husband when there is glory, fame and money but who “wilts” when the going gets tough and the career hits snags. Often this occurs when he “skids” in his ability, or after years of being traded around and/or not being played, or in the case of a severely handicapping injury. The wife decides that the “tradeoffs” are too unequal, that what she receives in exchange is not worth the commitment. (p. 271)

**Superstar Wife:** Married to an athlete with high status, occupational security, income or charisma. Generally a veteran of many years, she may also be accorded considerable status in her own right. While she takes her own image seriously, her role in corroborating her husband’s self presentation is an important one because of his high status. An apparent paradox of this role is that while she has greater responsibility in impression management with the public, she is accorded greater flexibility as well as privileges within the organization. (p. 271)
**Mother Hen:** Generally a veteran wife whose husband has been playing for several years. She functions in the role of the official socializer, taking each new group of rookie and/or traded wives under her wing and helping them “learn the ropes.” She provides and indispensable service to the clubs, for the information she provides helps insure a collective spirit among the wives, some consensus on roles and rules, and at the same time, validates her own status as an occupationally-important person. (p. 272)

**Ambassador:** Definitely a “club wife,” who can skillfully handle the media as well as the public. She speaks well on her feet, is outgoing and assertive, is often in demand as a speaker, and serves in the role of ambassador of public relations for the club. In some instances, her status may equal or rival her husband’s. Her personality and leadership may make her a more popular figure and occupationally useful figure with wives and the public than her husband is with teammates and the public. In her role as a representative of the team to the community, she functions to promote key alliances and to serve as an advocate of professional sport. (p. 272)

**Independent:** These wives maintain that a husband’s career is his own and may, or may not, intersect with her own. Consequently, she has a strongly developed sense of personal identity which often accompanies high personal aspirations. One variant of this type is the “careerist” who has her own career and/or is finishing school in order to pursue a career. In both instances, she has other time commitments which often result in her being peripheral to her
husband's work world. A second variant of this type is the “uninterested” who has absolutely no interest in sport, nor in involving herself in her husband’s career. She firmly believes in the separation of work and family systems. (p. 272)

Crute (1981) stated that she did not intend for this to be an exhaustive nor a rigid list of sports wives. Instead, she saw overlaps between many of the categories and meant for them to describe some of the roles sports wives took in response to their husbands’ careers (p. 273). By looking at these roles, Crute recognized that professional sports wives fell into the role of “helpmate” to their husbands, just as non-sports wives had for many years. *When athletes’ careers are over, so are their wives’ tenures as professional sports wives. What happens then?*

Though groundbreaking in the area of sports wives research, there were several drawbacks to Crute’s work. The substantive interviews with sports wives were conducted by an outsider (non-sports-wife). Crute had no established relationships with the women she interviewed and thus they were unlikely to share feelings, conflicts, and secrets about other sports wives, which may have been hidden or downplayed. She lacked membership in their community.

Also, many of Crute’s participants were retired at the time of the interviews. Her focus was on the past rather than on the future. Thinking retrospectively about their experiences undoubtedly produced different findings than would have stories that were told as they happened. Further, Crute showed little interest in how the sports wives
understandings of themselves, in relation to their husbands’ careers, may affect their marriages and families.

Finally, although Crute’s study may have been important and pertinent at the time, the nature of the league in the late 1970s, when she did her research, was quite different than the NFL today. In the late 1970s, the average NFL salary was just $69,000 ($179,000 when considering inflation to 2004 rates) (Coakley, 1982). In 2004, the average NFL salary was at an all-time high of approximately $1,000,000 (USA Today). Updated studies are needed to compare NFL relationships of those with higher net-worths than those Crute studied in the late 1970s.

NFL games are also more watched today and NFL players are thus more visible now than anytime in the past. How might increased salaries and higher visibility of the NFL player ultimately change what it means to be married to an NFL player?

Ortiz.

Crute’s studies were followed-up by those of Steven Ortiz 1982, 1994a, 1994b, 1997, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006), who has been, to date, the most prolific researcher of sports wives. He began by focusing his Master’s thesis on the effects of geographic mobility on sports wives (see Ortiz, 1982).

Ortiz (1982) looked for wives to interview by sending letters to players and their wives via the sports teams. Ortiz sent eighty-six letters of which only two were acknowledged. Like Crute (1981), he located his sample by having the two who responded introduce him to other potential participants.
Also like Crute (1981), Ortiz (1982) found it difficult and demanding to find wives who cared about his study or wanted to be interviewed. His original research was based on interviews with eight sports wives. One was the wife of a hockey player and seven were wives of NFL players. His research was limited by the similar experiences of the players and wives he interviewed. The NFL players were either late draft picks or undrafted players without perceived security on the team or in the league.

In his dissertation, Ortiz (1994) extended his research to include forty-eight sports wives, focusing on “the private pain of the professional athlete’s wife” (also see Ortiz, 1994). Of the forty-eight wives (including active, retired, and ex-wives) twenty-one were wives of professional football players. The others were a mix of wives of players from major league baseball, professional basketball, and professional hockey. He also talked with ten husbands in what he called “unstructured interviews.” He used his interviews along with participant observation and print documents as data. The purpose of Ortiz’s dissertation was to “peel away the layers of sport marriage as a traditional institution and examine how a husband's sports career demands an enormous toll from the wife” (p. 5). Given the title of his dissertation, When Happiness Ends and Coping Begins: The Private Pain of the Professional Athlete's Wife, Ortiz was not likely looking for an overview of the life of a sports wife, but rather for the stressors of being a sports wife.

Ortiz (1994) began his dissertation with his assertion that “sport marriage in modern society is a dysfunctional institution for wives” (p. 1). He later explained that marriages are dysfunctional “primarily because of (the sports wife’s) great personal cost involved in deferring to her husband and his sport career” (p. 5). He explained, “In the
sport marriage, one of the wife’s many jobs is to disguise the fact that she is miserable” (p. 7).

Ortiz (1994) found that a player’s salary, athletic skill, celebrity status, and length of sport career, are some of the criteria which frequently reflect a wife’s standing among the other wives and her husband’s teammates (p. 30). Likewise, women tend to spend time with those who are similar to each other based on their husbands’ skills, salary, status, but also based on the amount of time they have spent in the league.

Ortiz (1994) identified the following subcategories of wives based on their length of time in the league:

1. *Rookie wives* - First year wives

2. *Apprentice veteran wives* - Younger wives of journeymen players and rising star players with 2-3 years in NFL

3. *Seasoned veteran wives* - Older wives of journeymen players, everyday players, and marquee players with 4-9 years in pro football

4. *Senior veteran wives* - Older wives of journeymen players, everyday players and marquee players with 10+ years) (p. 29)

Sometimes the categories overlap. Ortiz (1994) explained that veteran wives may include younger wives in baby showers or charity events, yet they may still act aloof toward them.

Ortiz (1994) also categorized wives according to how he saw them and their view of the league. He placed wives into five separate categories that to him, as an outsider, appeared distinct and comprehensive. His categories included:
1. **Big Time Wife** – Buys into appealing aspects of husband’s career, denies realities of job, spends money freely, extravagantly, marries for the player, not the man, often has low self-esteem and is dependent on spousal involvement in husband’s sport career.

2. **Sold-Out Wife** – Initially refrains from buying into sports career – attempts to maintain distance – gradually as each contract improves on last, she is seduced by it – succumbs by enjoying perks, by becoming complacent, taking advantage of their way of life, and sharing outlook of big-time wife – frequently unemployed

3. **Down-to-Earth Wife** – Doesn’t buy into any part of husband’s sport career. Estranged from most aspects of career. Doesn’t trust any part of it or people in it – doesn’t take part of career for granted nor get caught up in it. Future-oriented. Lives for future and denies present – doesn’t attend many, if any, of games – rarely attends team functions, doesn’t associate with other wives, manages finances to keep going modestly, has own job, career, or business. Has own life.

4. **Burned-Out Wife** - Hates husband’s sport career, looks forward to retirement – cynical. Has own life outside of sport – may view husband as emotionless stranger

5. **Divorced Wife** – Left the sport marriage, wife may feel bitter about sport marriage or career, relieved to be free of both
In his typology, there wasn’t a category of a “supportive wife”. Does such a partner exist in professional sports? Might the role not be perceptible from the outside but evident from an insider’s perspective?

*Inside a closed world.*

Ortiz (1982; 1994) concluded that the world of professional sports wives is difficult for outsiders to permeate. Even when interviews are granted to outsiders, wives may still be guarded with their answers, just as their husbands are when they share their views with sports reporters. Ortiz’s (2001) admitted that he employed “acting strategies” when interviewing wives. This helps explain why outsiders cannot be let in to the closed world of professional athletes and their families (p. 199). He was merely “acting” rather than genuinely connecting with the wives. Further, if select sports wives were ever willing to open up to researchers, the context for and intimate personal and team circumstances surrounding their stories and comments would ultimately be lost on the outside researcher.

Ortiz not only struggled with being an outsider, but he also dealt with issues stemming from being a male interviewer interviewing women (Ortiz, 2003). Admittedly, as a male interviewer of all female participants, Ortiz’s pieces were written from a gendered lens. Ortiz later wrote about those difficulties and his attempts to “mute his masculinity” (see Ortiz 2004) when spending time with professional sports wives and about “the ethnographic process of gender management” (see Ortiz 2005).

*Ortiz on Sports Relationships*
Ortiz wrote a handful of articles analyzing professional sports relationships using his dissertation research as data. His topics included the observations of the conduct of baseball wives when traveling with the team (see Ortiz 1997), how sports wives cope with dependency in the sports marriage (see Ortiz 2002) and the exploration of control work in the sport marriage (see Ortiz 2006).

In his article, “Traveling with the Ball Club: A Code of Conduct for Wives Only”, Ortiz (1997) wrote about the unwritten code in which wives of professional baseball players must follow. The rules, as one wife suggests, are for both minor league and professional league wives, and must be experienced to be learned:

We always talk about the unwritten rule book of being a baseball wife. We have our own rules. There are these unwritten rules that you do and you don’t do. That’s why everybody thinks that every wife should have to go into the minor league system and not straight into the big leagues. (p. 225)

Ortiz (1997) explained traveling with the baseball team as an ultra-masculine arena in which women are afforded second-class citizenship. The rules that women follow are both created by and enforced by men – both players and those who run the baseball organizations. Though women are discouraged from traveling with their husbands, if they decide to travel, there are rules that must be followed. Some of the unwritten rules Ortiz identified in his interviews with baseball wives included:

1. Wives should be seen but not heard

2. Wives should not disclose to any other wives what you see on the road, including infidelity by other players.
3. Wives should refrain from using offensive language in front of the guys
4. Wives should maintain an ultra feminine appearance
5. When on an airplane, wives should stay in the front of the plane
6. Wives should not speak to husbands’ teammates unless spoken to
7. Wives should share their husbands’ performance of feelings after a win or loss
8. Wives should stay out of hotel bars (where husbands’ teammates may hang out with other women)

Most of the unwritten rules were designed by baseball players to keep their jobs and their marriages separated (Ortiz, 1997). Women follow the rules to avoid putting stress on their husbands. Ortiz (1997) explained:

As ‘code followers,’ the more concerned the wives are about their husbands and their occupational situations (poor performances, being sent down, sitting on the bench, or recovering from serious injury (Ball 1976; Haerle 1975), the more likely they are to also comply with…the code. (p. 242)

If wives do not comply with the unwritten rules, a player may be teased or ridiculed by his teammates. The most powerful players (those who have been in the league the longest with the most security on the team) are able to break the rules for their wives. Thus, wives of players who are not as powerful are likely to be the best followers of the rules (Ortiz, 1997).

Ortiz (1997) concluded that the unwritten rules wives have when traveling with the baseball team keep wives in subordinate roles and reinforce the dominant roles for the husbands. He questions whether these findings hold true in other professional sports.
In Ortiz’s (2002) article, “Constructing Dependency in Coping with Stressful Occupational Events: At what cost for wives of professional athletes?” Ortiz introduced control work in the sports marriage as a coping process for wives. He claimed that sports wives normalize stress related to their husbands’ jobs to help maintain stability in their marriages and families.

Ortiz (1994, 2002) drew parallels between relationships of those in sports and those in other high profile occupations by calling them “career-dominated.” Women in career dominated relationships, are “required to support and defer to the high-profile, high-status, high-salaried, and high-stress occupations of their husbands” (Ortiz, 2002, 5.1). In sports, like in other career-dominated relationships, the job/team comes first – the marriage/family second.

Much of Ortiz’s (2002) article focused on the stressors in sports and how women respond to them by employing the role of controller at home. Wives become highly-dependent on their husbands and their identities can be wrapped up in who he is and how he is doing during any particular season.

Stressors for sports wives in career-dominated relationships can include isolation, role conflict, and a lack of control over aspects of their lives including one’s husband’s salary, job stability, schedule, where they will live from year to year, and finally retirement (Ortiz, 2002). In turn, women often become the controllers of the home and family, allowing them to create purposeful occupations and feel like they are establishing identities of their own while still supporting their husbands and families.
Life changing events can be common for sports couples. Ortiz (2002) told the story of a hockey player who was unexpectedly traded. His wife, who felt confident in her husband’s job security was shocked and devastated. The day after her husband was traded, she was interviewed by Ortiz about the trade. She said, “I was numb. I had no emotions. I wasn’t shocked. I wasn’t surprised. I wasn’t anything. I was just going through the motions. I was empty. I was nothing” (p. 8.3). She described the experience as akin to finding out someone you are close to died. She felt completely out of control.

Ortiz found that the more a sports wife has turned to control as a way of coping with uncertainties, the more difficult it is for her to cope when things outside of her control go awry.

Strategies Ortiz (2002) suggested that sports wives should try to be both less dependent and less controlling. Specific strategies he laid out for sports wives included:

1. Recognize what is truly controllable and what is uncontrollable.
2. Pursue activities outside of the home
3. Develop interests unrelated to husband’s career
4. Work to maintain one’s own identity
5. Reduce need to please or make others happy
6. Reevaluate dependencies

Ortiz (2002) concluded that wives of professional athletes control their families and homes in part because they have very little control over their lives outside of their homes. His article ended with questions for further research on sports wives. He asked:
1. What is the cost for these resourceful wives of celebrated men?

2. Is burnout inevitable?

3. What is the basis of their coping skills?

4. Such survival skills may serve them well, and women in other career-dominated marriages can learn from these women, but over a period of time what price do these women pay?

In Ortiz’s (2006) article, “Using Power: An exploration of control work in the sport marriage” he introduced a deeper look into control work and gender roles. Ortiz focused on how athletes perform masculinity and how they engage in control work, though all of his data was gathered from athletes’ wives’ perspectives. His findings led Ortiz (2006) to introduce the idea of “spoiled athlete syndrome.”

Ortiz (2006) compared sports marriages to marriages of others involved in primarily male occupations including: medicine, religion, law enforcement, entertainment, military, academe, business, politics, and sports (p. 528). In these marriages, Ortiz contended that women are subordinate to their husbands and forced to defer to his occupation. He found that in his interviews of sports wives, husbands’ careers always came first, even if the wives were employed.

Athletes are spoiled from the time they are young. The term Spoiled Athlete Syndrome (SAS) was coined by a wife in one of Ortiz’s (2006) interviews. The symptoms of SAS include:

- Being self-absorbed
- Having a highly inflated sense of self
- The idea of male privilege
- Expecting star treatment
- Supreme importance given to one’s career and occupational world (p. 533)

The roots of SAS may be planted when an athlete is young. A wife of a professional baseball player revealed:

Brent’s mom had four boys, and she catered to them on hand and foot, and then he got into baseball. Even in his college sports, he always had this real awesome job to pay his way through college. Every step of the way it’s been that way. My biggest and most common complaint about the system is that these guys are babied, spoiled, and pampered – totally. In my mind, they lose a sense of reality. They have no responsibilities. The environment they are in conditions them to be this way. (Ortiz 2006, p. 533)

Wives may also play a role in perpetuating athletes’ sense of self. Another baseball wife explained:

I think baseball players’ wives take care of too many things for their husbands. They pamper them, wake them late, keep all the kids quiet in the house because daddy’s sleeping, postpone trips because of daddy, and induce babies because of daddy. It’s not normal. (Ortiz 2006, p. 533)

Wives are incorporated into their husbands’ careers by the behind-the-scenes work they do. The work athletes’ wives do for their husbands enables them to not only be stress free, but their work world becomes “family free” (Ortiz, 2006). Wives take care of
the home, the children, and find ways to help him succeed. In turn, a sports wife may find that her sense of self hinges on her husband’s occupational success. Ortiz (2006) found that

> The very roles, efforts, and labor that make it possible for their husbands to succeed in their careers provide these husbands with the power and control necessary to exploit or oppress their wives. In addition, regardless of the wives’ devotion to their families and the support they provide to their husbands, they often feel isolated, devalued, or oppressed in service of their husbands’ careers and possibly in service to professional sports in general. (p.552)

He concluded that those feelings could lead sports wives to become resentful of the sport.

Resentment may also be present for sports wives because of what the sport gets that wives do not: a masculine, public entertainer, an energetic, and likable guy. At home, Ortiz (2006) found that athletes who are husbands can be emotionally distant from their wives. One sports wife explained:

> What I saw in Brent was what I think people see in him on the field – the fun guy, the great sense of humor, the giving guy who would do anything for anybody. And, you know, that’s what I truly believed that he was like. But then he began giving more of himself on the field, and he had less when he came home. (Ortiz 2006; p. 536)

A baseball pitcher’s wife expressed a similar sentiment:
I look at Dennis and see him in front of these millions of people, out there on the mound, and to be able to keep his composure. Yet, at the same time, he comes home and I think, ‘I want him to be more of a man.’ That’s really what I’m thinking. (Ortiz, 2006, p. 536)

Much to their wives' chagrin, athletes are often reluctant to be as involved at home as they are at work. Ortiz (2006) wrote:

A husband’s difficulty in transitioning from his work role to marital and family roles is a constant source of disappointment for many wives. The transition may be difficult for many of these husbands because they are accustomed to proving their masculinity as part of their gender work, but they may not define such gender work at home in the same way they do at work. When the husband is home, his wife wants him to share power and control or to enjoy mutual control in their marriage. She also wants him to be more involved in their marriage and family (e.g., to accept more childcare responsibility and to be less passive in their decision making). However, these husbands may be reluctant to “take charge” at home, to share family responsibilities, to share or express certain emotions, or to effectively cope with everyday life outside their occupational world. (Mitchell and Cronson 1987, p. 536)

Ortiz (2006) theorized that a reluctance to take charge may be a control tactic that athletes use to avoid conflict in their marriages. He defined control as:

A process by which partners use interactional strategies in their efforts to control resources or access to resources, control each other, control a situation, or cope
with family, marital, and occupational stressors through control attempts and the use of control tactics for some desired control outcome. (p. 528)

Another relational control tactic athletes employ is using their occupation for posturing their potential upward mobility. Jill, the wife of an NFL player, gave an example of this tactic in use in her marriage:

Craig always says, ‘We wouldn’t have what we have today if it wasn’t for football. Or he’ll say, ‘How many professional football players are there in the United States?’ So he’s one of the chosen few. He’s special. He’s important. He uses that on me. But I think it’s just an excuse. It’s an easy way out. It’s a copout for certain things. (Ortiz 2006, p. 537)

In response to her husband’s control tactics, a sports wife may employ control tactics of her own (Ortiz 2006). Tactics used by a sports wife may include resisting her husband’s attempts to control her. In response, Ortiz (2006) found that in response to a wife’s attempts to undermine her husband’s control, he may give her more control, though likely only control over things that he doesn’t want to have to control.

During an athlete’s off-season, the balance of control in the home can shift wildly. Ortiz (2006) found that the spousal control work during the off-season includes performing traditional gender roles that further subordinate wives and empower husbands. Robyn, a sports wife, talks about her husband’s autonomy during the off-season:

Joel just leaves and goes out with his friends. It’s like he can’t go a week without getting away one night to go out with the boys, and stay out until two o’clock in
the morning. He has to do that. That bothers me too, and he knows that but he still does it, because I never get a chance to do that. I think I’m jealous. I don’t ever get to do that. If he’d say, “I’m going to go do this.” It would be fine. I wouldn’t care. But he just goes. I’ve asked him for twelve years to at least let me know what’s going on, I don’t care. Or he’ll go work out, lift weights and stuff, and then go and have something to eat with this friends, and then just stay out all night, and he never calls me. God, I hate that. (Ortiz 2006, p. 541)

Ortiz (2006) theorized that a professional athlete’s control over his family may be a result of his insecurities as both an athlete and as a husband. Other control tactics identified by Ortiz (2006) that professional athletes may use include teasing, selective listening, spoiling the children, relegating his wife to the role of mother, guilting their wives into trying to be perfect, and emphasizing his perceptions of her inadequacies.

Some professional athletes have dualistic attitudes toward women’s sexuality (Ortiz 2006). He found that they polarize women into either a good girl for their wives or bad girl/”tramp in the streets” for their groupies. A former football player, Dave Meggyesy (1970), who penned an autobiography, “Out of Their League” wrote:

Some players do have women they see regularly in various road towns and these women are discussed quite openly. But all the talk is enveloped in a puritanical view of sex and an insistence on the double standard: wives are virginal creatures keeping the home and the kids; other women are meat on the rack (p.181) (as quoted in Ortiz 2006 p. 545)
Ortiz (2006) wrote the attitude that leads men to polarize women may result from them “motherizing” their wives. Because motherhood and female sexuality are so distinct, so too may be men’s beliefs about their wives and their groupies.

Just a few paragraphs later, Ortiz (2006) hypothesized that “the spoiled athlete syndrome” may lead husbands to hyper-sexualize their wives. In response to her husband’s sexual advances, a sports wife may comply because she thinks it will help to keep her husband faithful or because she feels it her duty to have sex with him (Ortiz, 2006). Sharon, a baseball wife, admitted:

I think a lot of professional sports wives feel like that. It’s sex on demand. It’s like demand breast-feeding. Whenever he wants it, you give it because you think, “Oh, God, he might go get it on the road.” And after you have babies and they go on a ten-day road trip, you’re damned sure you’ve tried to have intercourse before you’re ready, and it kills you. But you think, “I just don’t want him to get it on the road.” So sex is a huge thing. (Ortiz 2006, p. 547)

Compliance to a husband’s desire for sex becomes a part of a wife’s gender work (Ortiz, 2006). She does what she thinks she is supposed to do to be a good wife.

The spoiled athlete syndrome only intensifies when athletes are on winning teams (Ortiz, 2006). Women who might not have ever noticed the player before become aware of who they are and are attracted to their celebrity/hero status on a winning team. The increased attention on a woman’s husband from random female fans can be stressful for sports wives.
As an athlete’s career and success in his career progresses, his wife might feel like she has lost the man she married to the sports star he has become (Ortiz 2006). Others, who may have married for the professional athlete and not for the man behind the sport feel that they lose the athlete they married as his career eventually declines or when he retires.

All of these processes are normalized by professional athletes and their wives (Ortiz 2006). Ortiz (2006) concluded that his research revealed inequalities within sports marriages. Women may feel subordinated or oppressed and husbands may feel empowered by their careers. Both women and men in sports marriages may use control work within their home to compensate for their lack of control in the husband’s career.

Ortiz also wrote methodological pieces about being seen as a therapist by sports wives (see Ortiz 1994) and a more complete piece on how interviewing became therapeutic for sports wives (see Ortiz 2001).

In Ortiz’s (2001) article on interviewing as therapy for sports wives, he discussed how he was cast into the role of therapist by several of his participants: “The interview sessions seemed to provide several of the wives with cathartic opportunities for self-revelation and introspective opportunities for self-discovery, both of which may possibly contribute to a potential for transformation in self and identity” (p 193). Ortiz (2001) admitted, “My openness in sharing my life experiences, thoughts, and views was quite useful in their framing of the interview situation (e.g., knowledge of masculinity issues, marital issues, what men value, sports, and their world) and in encouraging them to be open themselves (e.g., Hertz, 1995, pp. 432-433)” (202).
Several of Ortiz’s articles focused on his view that relationships revolve around control work (see Ortiz 1994; 2001; 2002). In his piece on interviewing as therapy, Ortiz (2001) wrote that sports wives seek to control their marriages and their emotions, and that they often deal with power struggles with controlling mothers-in-law. Following one of his interviews with an NFL wife, Ortiz wrote:

In discussing how our interview sessions enabled her to understand certain power dynamics and control issues, why she needed to be in control of their marriage during her husband’s professional football career, and how this led to problems with her husband and contributed to a power imbalance after he retired and found a career he enjoyed, Tammy told me, ‘I probably would’ve never thought about it or even seen that it was happening if we hadn’t been talking about it—you and I: this control thing and how it came to be and what’s going on with me right now. I hadn’t thought about it until our interviews. It’s funny, because he always says I control, control, control. It’s like, “Well, why do I always have to be in control?”’

I’ve grown into this controlling monster that he helped to create. So I think he has to take responsibility for it too. But I think the interviews helped me to see it, so now I talk to him about it. (p. 212)

As a result of Ortiz’s (1994) field work, he also recognized that professional sports marriages are mutually dependent relationships (see Ortiz 2002). He explained:

To feel needed, loved or validated, a wife will often depend on his [her husband’s] dependency on her to manage family life so he can focus on his career, and effectively cope with the demands, pressures, and stress involved. She, in
turn, depends on his dependency on his career. Her husband’s career dependency is fueled by what he derives from his career involvement, by the various occupational uncertainties and occupational insecurities that permeate a career in professional sports (Nixon & Frey, 1996, pp. 197-199), and by his often obsessive pursuit of athletic excellence or perhaps celebrity status. (p. 1.3)

Ortiz said he doesn’t view dependency of the wives as meaning they’re submissive or weak. But he did not discuss how NFL wives understand themselves. Do they understand their perceived dependency as making them submissive or weak in the eyes of others?

Ortiz’s research on control work and mutually dependent relationships leads to needed research on the evolving identities of professional sports wives. How do NFL wives see themselves within a sports marriage and how does that identity differ from how the women perceived themselves before marriage? In a study on family networks, Elizabeth Bott (1957) found that married partners most often described themselves as satisfied even though others, especially psychologists, see them as not. Is this the case with NFL wives? If so, what leads NFL wives to understand their relationships as satisfying? Future research may seek to uncover how individual NFL wives perceive the levels of equality in their marriages.

In their own words.

Several wives of professional athletes told their sides of the story in published memoirs. Among them are Sally Gardocki (1997) and Shannon O’Toole (2006), both wives of former NFL players. Gardocki (1997) focused on her own stories of her
relationships and time in the NFL. O’Toole, the wife of an NFL assistant coach who
played briefly in the NFL, shared both her story and the stories of others that she gathered
from surveys and interviews with players’ and coaches’ wives.

_Gardocki._

Sally Gardocki, who was also an attorney, was the first women to take readers
into the actual lives of NFL players from a wife’s perspective. She wrote about her
experiences in the NFL (Gardocki 1997). Though Gardocki (1997) claimed her stories
were based on actual events, she claimed to have fictionalized some of her characters “to
entertain her readers” (p #).

Though Gardocki claimed that her book isn’t a “tell-all,” she talks about watching
both single and married players stop to talk with women who lined the hallways of their
hotels:

“Some of these guys were married to women much more beautiful, classy and
refined than these groupies, yet were handing out their room numbers like
campaign workers distributing fliers outside a polling booth on election day!” (p.
117)

Gardocki (1997) also wrote about stories that are passed down through players’
girlfriends/wives to help keep players faithful. One such story was about a player’s
girlfriend who found a woman’s phone number in the pocket of the player’s jeans when
she was washing them. The woman flew out of the house in her pajamas and jumped
into her boyfriend’s Range Rover. She drove to his work where she found his Mercedes-
Benz in the parking lot. She then slammed the Range Rover into the player’s Mercedes-Benz over and over again, causing over $150,000 worth of damage to the two vehicles. The couple later got back together, but Gardocki used the story as an exemplar of the stories that are passed down from player to player, inhibiting them from cheating on their girlfriends or wives.

Gardocki (1997) stated that her purpose for writing was, “to preserve and share [her] life journey in more detail [than had her grandmother]. She wanted the book to, “Be your guide, like Virgil in Dante’s Inferno, helping you explore a foreign land” (p. 5) … because NFL wives, “have been an enigma to the public and that roles as NFL wives and mothers ‘have been relegated to small blurbs in large articles about our husbands” (p5). She claimed to “want to show you the whole picture, the image the camera didn’t catch” (p5). Gardocki (1997) stressed the importance of friendship and camaraderie with other NFL wives, especially because NFL players (their husbands) are not always accessible for support. This point was absent from Ortiz’s work.

Toward the end of her book, Gardocki (1997) detailed her nostalgic ride to Soldier Field for her husband’s last game as a Bear:

I knew Chris would never wear the orange and blue after today, never run through the canvassed runnel to the expanse of painted green dirt, and never look at Soldier Field [quite the same way again]. I knew my experiences in the big-shouldered town of Chicago were dimming, closing around me… (p. 250)

She then recounted the stories of several of her husband’s teammates who were cut before them. One of her stories was about her best friend’s husband being cut from
the Bears. She talked about how difficult it was for her to say good-bye to a friend with whom she had come to identify with in the NFL.

I pulled off the road, into the nearest parking lot, and cried. ‘Sonofabitch, sonofabitch, sonofabitch’ was all that ran through my head. Steve and Lynne were good people. She was pregnant with their first child. Why was this happening? Never again would we go to their house for Thanksgiving or Christmas dinners. Never again would everybody sit around their kitchen table playing ‘Balderdash’ or ‘Taboo.’ The group of wives who watched away games together would never again be complete, because the circle had been irreparably broken. In our group of wives, this was the first cut, and it was too close to home.

(p. 252)

Gardocki’s (1997) book ended with her husband’s last game with the Chicago Bears (after playing there for from 1991-1994), but Chris Gardocki went on to play for the Indianapolis Colts from 1995-1998, the Cleveland Browns from 1999-2003 and finally the Pittsburgh Steelers from 2004-2006. I wonder how her story might have changed if she would’ve waited until the end of her husband’s football career to write her book?

O’Toole.

Shannon O’Toole’s (2006) book, Wedded to the Game, was the first book written by an NFL wife who was also an academic. She holds a master’s degree in sociology from Western Michigan University. She takes a sociological view of the NFL through
interviews and surveys from a position inside the NFL as the wife of an NFL assistant coach and former player.

O’Toole (2006) received 75 responses to a survey sent to NFL wives and chose to interview 30 women in-depth. Interview topics include pursuing the dream of the NFL, how short NFL careers can be and what it’s like to raise kids in the NFL. She also discusses women’s roles in football, retirement, and the dark side of the NFL with infidelity and abuse.

“This book is about what it’s really like to live inside the NFL,” O’Toole wrote (p. xiii). O’Toole (2006) opened her book with her story of falling in love with her NFL-player husband, John Morton. She had a full scholarship to Western Michigan to play softball but walked away from the scholarship when she learned that her boyfriend had the chance to possibly make the team in Green Bay. “It wasn’t the money that energized me,” she explained. “It was the adventure – the travel and unique experiences it seemed to offer” (p. x). Just a few weeks after arriving in Green Bay, boxes still unpacked, Morton was cut by the Green Bay Packers. O’Toole was in shock and disbelief:

No. This wasn’t supposed to happen. I’d given up a full ride scholarship at a Division I college! I couldn’t get that back. Green Bay was supposed to be our new home. Everything had been falling into place. But without his football salary, we couldn’t live in this house. We couldn’t afford half the things we’d just bought. Where would we go?... Would we even be able to stay together? (p. xii)

O’Toole’s experience was disheartening. “Upon falling in love with an NFL hopeful, each woman must, sooner or later, face the practical consequences for her mate’s
dream on her own life goals” O’Toole reasoned. “The details differ, but nearly every woman must choose between what she wants to do – academically, professionally, or otherwise – and being with the man she loves” (p. 17).

O’Toole’s husband, John Morton, tried for five years to make an NFL roster, jumping around from team to team during training camps. He spent two years on practice squads, two in the Canadian Football League and NFL Europe (p. 21). After failing to make a team’s regular season roster, Morton became a coach in 1998 (p. 27).

Though similarities exist in other stories, O’Toole found that there wasn’t a “typical NFL experience” (xvi). Reasons for differences in experiences, among other things, included:

1. The league’s widely different salaries
2. Each player’s or coach’s level of fame or anonymity
3. The number of years in the NFL

The commonality among women interviewed? Strength. “They may not have started out tough and resilient, but the NFL has made them that way” (O’Toole 2006 p. xvi).

Looking the part.

From her perspective as a former player’s wife and a current coach’s wife, O’Toole wrote about playing the role of an NFL wife. “Players’ wives, in particular, feel pressure to look ‘the role’ of the NFL wife – that is, sexy clothes, flashy jewelry, and a great body” (p. 57). O’Toole (2007) then quoted NFL wives with similar perspectives:
I want to look nice when my husband comes out of the locker room if we, you
know, walk by the fans. Fans have a certain perception of NFL couples, so it’s
important to look nice. Some women want to be noticed, but a lot of them are
really down-to-earth people. (p. 57)

Another wife of an NFL player said, “You’re in the pro limelight. Any woman’s
natural intuition is: I want to look good. I don’t want to look like crap in front of these
people” (p. 57).

As women spend more time in the league, their need to impress others starts to
wean. Kim Ruddy, wife of Tim Ruddy, a former center for the Miami Dolphins who
played in the league for ten years, said, “Unfortunately, our world is made up of what
people think of you, and I think that women in the NFL are nervous that someone is
going to look down on them” (p. 57).

Another veteran wife offered advice to new NFL wives.

Don’t change or feel that you need to play the part of an NFL wife because there
is no specific part to play. Just be yourself. I’ve struggled with that. Should I
dress up? Should I get a bigger ring? You do waiver, and that is okay. (p. 58-59)

Likewise, Kim Singletary, wife of Mike Singletary, told O’Toole:

I have had to sort of teach myself that my self-worth and my value to society are
not based on how people look at me and treat me. When your husband is in his
heyday, people treat you like, Who is she? Unless you are the prettiest of the
Barbies, unless you are that top girl, it is always like you are less than somebody.
I have had to learn that my value is not tied up in how people treat me or look at me, or even talk about me or what they think I should be like. I really had to go to school on myself for that one. (p. 59)

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O’Toole (2006) and Gardocki (1997) painted a picture of football players as celebrities and told the stories of free trips and access to the best events and high culture. To an outsider, it would appear that the wives were living a fairy-tale life filled with material wealth, fame, and fancy banquets.

Angela Wilder (2004), former wife of basketball great James Worthy, wrote, “We think that by marrying a star – whatever kind of star we wish for – our dreams will come true” (2). Holly Robinson-Peete (2005), an actress who married former NFL player, Rodney Peete, reflected in her book about her life with an NFL player:

You get great tables at restaurants. You cut the line at the amusement parks. You get to go to every game you want – usually in the best seats in the house. And there are perks every time you travel. Upgrades, freebies, what have you. (p. x)

Despite her successful career as an actress, Peete attributed her “freebies” to being an NFL player’s wife.

But, Wilder (2004) warned, “There are no guarantees of ‘happily ever after’ even if you do marry a prince…Cinderella never had to deal with the challenges of living with her prince, and we never had to witness her struggle to maintain her own integrity and identity in the shadows of power” (p. 3). Ortiz (1982) concurred:
Many wrongly assume she lives in an idyllic world, or in a glamorous world filled with celebrities. Consequently, there are very few significant others she can actually confide in. Nobody wants to know she has problems. In fact, many wives are often told, ‘well, you’re making a million dollars, put up with the problems.’ (p. 9)

Researchers have identified several obstacles for wives of professional athletes. Obstacles include trouble establishing an individual identity, dealing with the hyper-masculine culture of the NFL, coping with and fearing adultery, and social isolation (Lustberg, 1997; Ortiz, 2002). Ortiz (2002) contended that sports marriages are “largely career-dominated marriages in which the athlete is self-absorbed and fully consumed by his career.” He reasoned that the husband’s self-absorption often leaves the spouse alone and in control of the family and marital decisions.

In turn, NFL wives experienced themselves through their performances of gender, class, and other social identities (Denzin, 1991). A sports wife named Sharon opened up to Ortiz (1982) about losing her sense of a personal identity:

All of a sudden, who you are is how good he is on the team. So if my husband is a lesser player, all these wives go around making excuses for themselves and their husbands. ‘oh, well, he doesn’t have much talent but he really does work hard.’ And…they get their kudos in other ways. By being super nice, having all the wives over, kissing everybody’s ass because, ‘I’m not a worthy human being because my husband’s second string.’ But it’s not even you out there. Or they think their husbands are great and they carry these airs like, ‘I’m great.’ And
they’re out there shopping, doing everything, and…it’s not you out there….Get a grip. You know? It’s this loss of identity as to their status rights on how your husband is doing…And there’s a real seniority…And I went through it. If Walt sucks, I suck, you know? If the Larks are losers, we’re losers. It’s ridiculous. (p. 59)

NFL wives sacrifice profusely for their relationships with NFL players (O’Toole 2006). Not only do they become virtually invisible as their husbands become ultra-visible, but they often give up their own dreams to support their husbands’ dreams. According to O’Toole, (2006) most NFL wives will not work outside of the home while their husbands are in the NFL. Many of them delay jobs for which they’ve spent their college-years preparing and sometimes they leave school just months away from a college degree. Instead, they choose family as a career and embrace their relationship with their husband and their roles as wives and mothers.

An NFL wife told O’Toole (2006), “I never thought that I could not do what I wanted, family-wise and in school too. Now I realize there are two different tracks: the married motherhood road and the professional career road. I didn’t even think about the two not meshing…but that was a fairy tale” (p. 78).

Because NFL players often split their time between two cities each year and during the season they are only off on Tuesdays and Friday afternoons, an NFL wife would have to have a nearly-impossible schedule at work to be able to spend time with her husband. Also, because most NFL players often bounce around from team to team, NFL wives may easily live in three different states in three years.
In a culture that increasingly values women having a career, NFL wives struggle with self-worth and self-identity (O’Toole, 2006). Because segments of our culture also adore NFL players, NFL wives may lose their sense of self and identify with their partners’ NFL status and feel it is their job to take care of them when they are at home (p. 72).

When O’Toole asked NFL wife Kim Singletary how she maintained her sense of self in the NFL, Singletary admitted:

I might be one of the casualties because I really didn’t. Everything was filtered through his schedule, his opinion, his time, his feelings, his physical body, his moods – everything was filtered through him. I maintained our marriage, at times, at the expense of myself. I allowed him to make everything about him. I never had problems being called, ‘the wife.’ I hear these young girls complain about that, and when they ask me about it, I will say, if you want the honest-to-God truth, it is like trying to turn around the Titanic. You are going to fight yourself. You just need to accept it isn’t about you right now. The fans, it will not be about you. The team, it will not be about you. His schedule, it will not be about you. His coaches, it will not be about you.

My friends and family, most of whom were not in football- they were about the only place where it was about me. The other 98 percent of my life, it was about him. It is kind of like acceptance. You are going to be so much better off if you just accept it. Forever? No. But for however long his NFL career is, this is just how it is. You cannot change the fans’ perspective. They worship him. You know his faults, and you know you write all his letters, but they don’t care.
They worship him. I just thought, why fight it? I hear girls now say, ‘I just want to have my own identity.’ I just think, okay, then you shouldn’t have married him. You have his identity. (p. 74-75)

NFL wives’ identities are challenged as they become defined by their husbands’ jobs (O’Toole, 2006). If an outsider finds out a woman’s husband is in the NFL, they relate to her immediately as if it is her primary identity. O’Toole (2006) admitted her own emotional ties to her husband’s job:

Throughout my husband’s career, I’ve made a conscious attempt to distance myself from his job. I don’t necessarily try to hide it, but I don’t encourage people to talk to me about it either. For example, on Mondays, when my coworkers are attacking the intelligence of our offensive coordinator, whose wife I call a friend, I ignore their comments and bury myself in work. On Sunday morning, as numerous churchgoers stop me before the service to talk strategy and give me advice to ‘pass on’ to my husband, I just politely smile and nod my head. When friends who are fans of a different team make it a point to email me after a loss, playfully taunting me about our team’s ruined chances for the playoffs, I lightheartedly laugh it off and try to talk some ‘smack’ in return.

But the truth is, I care a great deal about my husband’s job - and in ways that most people don’t realize. No matter how much some of us might try to minimize it, the NFL plays a big role in all of our lives. We might wish that people would recognize us on our own terms once in a while, but we are also very emotionally involved in our partners’ careers. When people criticize ‘my’ team, it
makes my blood boil, and after a win, I experience a deep sense of personal satisfaction. But it’s not my job. It’s not my defeat or victory” (p. 82-83).

When speaking about the team for which her husband played, O’Toole (2006) referred to it as “my team” (p. 83). Women throughout the league use vernacular that depicted a shared sense of identity. Ortiz (1982) overheard wives using a collective ‘we’ to explain how their husbands did during a game. O’Toole’s (2006) participants used terms such as “We signed a two-year contract” and “We got fired from the Steelers” (p. 85). Likewise, Thompson (1999) overheard sports wives discussing their husbands being traded. “The women often spoke in the first person plural (‘when we were traded to…’), or even the first person singular (‘when I was traded to…’) (p. 183). It can be difficult for wives to separate themselves from their husbands when everything they know is tied up in their husband’s career.

**Author bias.**

When reviewing the previous literature, I had to remind myself of the bias from which it was written. For example, Ortiz claimed that professional athletes’ lives are career driven, but his interviews were specifically with them as athletes, not as friends. How might his analysis have changed had he known the men as friends and interviewed them about their lives rather than only about their lives as baseball players? What if he had actually hung out with them, observed their daily lives, and established a friendship with them intimately enough for them to share their thoughts and feelings openly?

Wilder (2004), on the other hand, was the ex-wife of former basketball player James Worthy. How might her perception of the relationships of professional athletes and
their wives been different if she and Worthy were still married? How might she view herself differently? Might the loss of identity she wrote about be as much from the dissolution of her marriage as from the marriage itself? Do most marriages result in shared dreams rather than strictly individual dreams, or is Wilder’s distance and emotional connection from the sports marriage helpful? Is hers the collective story of sports wives or just the story of a woman trying to make sense of a failed marriage? How might a happily married athlete’s wife view the status of her dreams, goals, self-care, and growth?

The works of Gardocki (1997) and O’Toole (2006) were written from the perspectives of presumably happily married NFL wives. What might currently married wives gain from telling the story of their relationships in a positive light rather than by focusing on the negative aspects of their relationships? In their stories, their husbands are the heroes and the future is bright.

Gardocki’s (1997) memoir lacked the academic perspective O’Toole and Ortiz were able to bring to their work. Still, O’Toole’s book falls short of letting us into the experiences and stories of active NFL wives. Though she was an academic and her husband participated in NFL camps, O’Toole’s husband was coaching when she wrote her book. The lives of coaches and their wives differ significantly from the lives of NFL players and their wives. Players’ average salaries are higher, as is their collective celebrity status. They work far less hours and their careers are significantly shorter. How might money and fame change what it means to be an NFL wife and what happens when both of those disappear when the game is over?
Still, because they are relatively recent, the memoirs Gardocki and O’Toole are useful as individual accounts when trying to make sense of a woman’s NFL life. The academic research by Ortiz and Crute, though several decades old, served as a springboard for future studies, including this one.

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As I came to the end of this review of previous academic studies, I was left with the image of sports wives, including NFL wives, that was not at all appealing to me. To grant the validity of these portraits, I would have to conceive of an NFL wife as benefitting from the wealth of her husband but being subordinate, in control of her home but submissive, a person with with low self-esteem who has a completely abandoned her personal goals and dreams in favor of her husband’s ambitions. While this may be a partially valid description, and is certainly the impression given in these studies, I didn’t see myself that way and as yet I hadn’t met other NFL wives who appeared that way. Still, I was left with questions: *Is this a comprehensive account of a sports wife or is it merely an outsider’s snapshot taken and tweaked to entice readership? If one had more access and was also writing about their own experience as an NFL wife, would they describe themselves in the same way? Would more time in the field have changed the way they viewed these women? Can NFL wives be seen beyond the individual interviews collected in the past and instead as a collaborative community?*

In this study, I wanted to provide a fuller, richer, and more detailed account of these relationships. I wondered: *What would I learn about other NFL wives? What is*
their daily life about? How might the story change when told by an insider from the inside, with and among other insiders?

After working through the previous literature, I was left with more questions than answers. Most predominantly, I wondered -- *What will become of me as I become an NFL wife?*
Chapter Four: Methods

Armed with what I knew from Anne’s story on one hand and the literature on sports wives on the other, I delved into the research project that eventually became this dissertation.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the methods and procedures I used to investigate the lived experiences of NFL wives. I discuss how this project began and detail my entry into the field, what it meant for me to “be native” (Kanuha, 2000) and how the scope of this project widened as I spent more time in the field, seven years in all. Next, I discuss the research processes I used including autoethnography (Ellis, 1993, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2004, 2009; Delamont, 2009; Ellis and Bochner, 2001; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011), ethnography (Geertz, 1973, Goodall, 2001, Luttrell, 2000; Lyon, 1997; Van Maanen, 1988, 1995, 2011), focus groups (Kitzinger, 1995; Kreuger, 2009; Morgan, 1988, 1993, 1998), friendship as method (Brooks, 2006; Crang, 2005; Hesse-Barber, 2006; Rawlins, 2008; Tillman-Healy, 1996, 2001, 2003; Ellis, 2007), and interactive interviewing (Adams, 2008; Ellis and Berger, 2002; Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Finlay, 2002; King, 2009; Mey and Mruck, 2010). I then present a brief biographical description of my research participants and conclude by describing how I analyzed the data and represented my findings.

Guiding questions.
I didn’t set out to fall in love with an NFL player, or to become an NFL wife, but when I did, I was suddenly thrust into the world of the NFL, and NFL relationships. Captivated by their novelty, I wanted to know more. I chose USF to study close relationships and then, in Seattle, I found myself in a virtual laboratory of interesting and unusual (for me) friendships and marriages among NFL players and their wives. I had so many questions. How do NFL players and their wives interact? What drew them together? What keeps them together? What things do they do together and why? What do they mean when they say they love each other? How do they organize their relationships? Where do they find meaning?

When I arrived in Seattle, I knew that if Craig didn’t make the team after training camp, we would only have a couple of months as insiders in the closed world of the NFL. I hoped Craig would make the team and my project would become data for a dissertation, but when I started taking fieldnotes, I was only expecting to have enough data for a course paper or journal article.

Autoethnography.

I was inspired by Ellis’ (1993) idea of autoethnography, to which I had been introduced in a methods course. In 1997, Ellis advanced the notion that we should view experiences through the lens of our own life and relationships.

Autoethnography combines both autobiography and ethnography (Ellis 2004), while also encouraging writing as a form of inquiry (Bochner, 2001; Richardson, 2000). Autoethnography moves beyond autobiography and into the academic sphere.

“Autoethnography... is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays
multiple layers of consciousness” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). It calls for rich, candid
details in a well-crafted, cohesive story that connects the personal with the cultural
(Denzin, 2006; Ellis, 2004; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Neumann, 1996) and often contains
citations and theory (Ellis, 2004).

Ethnography, from which autoethnography was derived, is “a written
representation of culture” (Van Maanen, 1988). Ethnographers seek to explain the
intricacies of an otherwise foreign culture and those within the culture, to outsiders
(Maso, 2001). “As a form of ethnography, autoethnography overlaps art and science; it
is part auto or self and part ethno or culture” (Ellis, 2004, p. 31) Autoethnography is both
research and writing, a method that encourages the discovery and documentation of one’s
own lived experience (Ellis, 1993, 2004, Delamont, 2009; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner,
2011).

Some recent notable autoethnographic dissertations include Tony Adams’ (2008)
homosexual coming out story about the relational aspects of coming out of the closet,
Mary Poole’s (2008) ethnography and autoethnography on the stories of Baby Boomers
with whom she graduated in 1965, Cara Mackie’s (2007) narrative on achieving sobriety,
Matthew Brooks’ (2007) who explored masculinity as a relational experience in
friendships between men, and Lisa Tillman-Healy’s (1998) autoethnographic account of
her friendships with the gay men who played on her husband’s softball team.

Autoethnography encourages a reflexive telling of experience that elicits emotions
and recall in readers so that they might connect to the research on an emotional and
ethical as well as a cerebral level (Ellis, 2004; Van Maanen, 1995). Autoethnography
made sense for this project because I was in a relationship with an NFL player, the very type of relationship I wished to study. If I aim to explain the intricacies of NFL life, recording and scrutinizing the experiences, friendships and romantic relationships of other NFL wives, then shouldn’t I be willing to subject my own experiences and friendships within the NFL and my relationship with Craig to the same scrutiny (Goodall, 2000)?

Autoethnographies move us beyond traditional research into the world of the heart (Pelias, 2004). I hoped that the process of journaling would serve as “a process of discovery” (Ellis, 2004, 2009) for me, and for readers, as I reflected on my experiences, thoughts, interactions, hopes, and fears as an NFL partner.

I began my fieldwork by detailing the day Craig was drafted by the Seahawks, complete with ethnographic fieldnotes as well as my autoethnographic experiences. When Craig made the team and subsequently went on to play for seven years with the Seahawks, what began as my story (see chapter 8), became not just my story, but the stories of other NFL wives as well -- and the stories of the deep friendships we developed.

**Getting my foot in the door.**

I knew that documenting love stories and the history of relationships of NFL wives would be challenging. The private world of NFL couples is difficult to access and would require a significant involvement of time, activity, and effort. I would need to build trust and friendship (Crute, 1981; Ortiz, 1994). They had to accept me as one of them, which meant I would have to develop a history with each woman.
Before I moved to Seattle with Craig, I sat down to interview the only NFL wife I knew, Anne. She disclosed the intricacies and hardships of her marriage with a former NFL player, which ended in divorce. Her story was frightening, disheartening, and sad. Our conversation reiterated what I had learned about professional sports wives from the research literature: These women struggle to maintain an individual identity in the hyper-masculine culture of male professional sports, fearing infidelity, and feeling trapped in a socially isolating and restricted world (Lustberg, 1997; Ortiz, 2002).

In my relationship with Craig, I had never consciously feared adultery, social isolation, or a lack of identity. Part of my impetus for this project was to find out for myself, first hand, whether the previous researchers’ conclusions matched the lived realities of current NFL wives. Was Craig destined to turn out like Anne’s ex-husband who was a drug addict and stole money from his family that he used on drugs and failed businesses? Would my story someday read like Anne’s? I wanted to get inside NFL relationships, including my own. Frankly, I realize now that I wanted to prove the others wrong, but I had to remain open to the possibility that they could be right.

I soon learned that one thing that the other researchers were right about was that entry into the private lives of NFL wives was incredibly difficult (Crute, 1981, Ortiz, 1994). As the girlfriend of an NFL player, I thought that I would be trusted as a researcher, that the players’ wives would openly share the stories of their lives and loves with me. Instead, I found that a wall of protection was erected around NFL wives’ private lives. It protected women from the outside world of reporters and gawking fans.
and guarded the sometimes fragile identities of NFL wives, giving privacy to the
otherwise public eye focused on NFL players and their relationships.

The first Seahawks wife who I asked to sit down for interviews was the girlfriend
of one of the rookie players who was drafted with Craig. Initially, she accepted my
verbal request for an interview. When I followed up to set a date, she didn’t call back,
despite my frequent efforts to contact her. Eventually, a second NFL wife who I asked to
sit down for an interview told me that both she and the other player’s girlfriend were not
sure they wanted to be interviewed. She said that they worried about the impression of
their boyfriends the team would form if they talked to “reporters” about their
relationships. I assured her that the project was strictly for school but did not push the
issue.

At that point, I felt discouraged and despondent. The project seemed too difficult
and intimidating. Had I picked the wrong topic for my research? My interview with
Anne had happened so easily. I later understood that there were several factors that
differentiated Anne from the Seahawks’ wives I was meeting. For example, Anne’s ex-
husband had not been involved in the NFL for more than forty years, they had since
divorced, and she had gone on to raise her children and establish a successful
administrative career in education. The Seahawks’ wives that I approached were still
young, new to the league, and new to their relationships, which contributed to their
defensiveness. Most importantly, I had known Anne all my life. She trusted my
motivations for wanting to know her story. Also, because Anne had long-since divorced
Cal she had no need to protect him or their relationship from outside reporting or from the team.

Nonetheless, I decided that I could still study NFL wives sociologically, becoming one of them and living among them, even if I wasn’t able to get close enough to them for them to trust me with a one-on-one interview. I began to question whether my identity among them as a fellow NFL wife might be scaring them. Perhaps they feared revealing the truth about their relationships to someone who lives among them more than they would to a stranger who was only there for the interview. Would a promise to disguise their identity mean more coming from someone they would likely never see again than from someone who they may see weekly for years to come?

A few weeks into the regular season, I taped my first NFL wife interview with a rookie wife. She was an all-American softball pitcher in college who talked about being in the middle of a game when her husband was drafted. I taped the interview in the fan pre-game area before a Seahawks home game. It was loud and her husband’s out-of-town family was just a few feet away while we talked, waiting for her to finish. The interview only lasted for about ten minutes. She talked about her experiences in the NFL, her impressions of the league, the team, and the transition from being a star athlete to cheering for one. I felt successful for having interviewed an NFL wife, but I knew that my interviews and my relationships were going to have to get much deeper if I was going to create a meaningful research project.

I soon discovered that a desire to be a part of the community was common among NFL wives. NFL players and their families are a transient social organization. Thus, my
experience as an NFL wife, struggling to fit in with the ever changing group of wives on the team, was normal. Working through that struggle helped me set the agenda for my studies (Eastland, 1993).

The first real friend I made on the team was Lisa. Her boyfriend (now husband), Jeff, and Craig were both defensive linemen. Jeff was a highly-paid free-agent acquisition in his first year with the Seahawks after six years as a super star with another NFC West team. He took Craig under his wing on the field and, in turn, Lisa took me under hers. Jeff’s time and success in the league gave him credibility among his teammates. Hanging out with Jeff helped Craig establish a relationship with some of his other teammates as well. Likewise, spending time with his girlfriend, Lisa, helped me gain visibility to other Seahawks’ wives. When we met new Seahawks’ wives, Lisa often introduced me and then my project. “If she interviews you, you have to be honest,” she told them. “She wants to know what it’s really like to be an NFL wife, not just what we let on to others.”

Focus groups.

After almost two years in Seattle, Lisa was still my only close friend on the team. Together, we decided to place a note in the Seahawks’ Auxiliary newsletter (distributed to all Seahawks and their partners) about my project. As word started spreading about the project, Lisa agreed to host a focus group (Kreuger, 2009) at her house. The goal of our focus group was to utilize the “group effect” (Carey, 1994) to help participants feel comfortable enough to discuss uncomfortable topics. Only two other wives showed up. I later heard that one of the invited wives who did not show up stated that despite Lisa’s
assurances she was afraid of my intentions as “a reporter”. As a result, I became more keenly aware of the influence that I had on these women in my role as a researcher.

I started the focus group by giving each of the wives an interview guide to fill out. Then, the conversation followed, flowing in the order of the questions. Despite my methods courses, I didn’t have much of an idea what I was getting into. Bochner (2002) warned that, “We have to be ethically cognizant of what we take into research contexts and what we take away from them” (p. 46). I realized that Lisa and I were getting closer and we had pulled two of the newer wives into the unique social situation of a focus group. How could that be bad? I got my first reality shock when one of the women shared with Lisa her impression of her from before she got to know her (based on what she had heard others say about Lisa,) which stirred bad memories and emotions within Lisa, bringing her to tears.

I left the focus group discouraged, wondering if, as NFL wives, it was healthy for us to spend time together. How well did we really want to know each other? Our husbands were in competition for positions, even on the same team. One player’s success often meant another player would lose his job. How close can our friendships be if we don’t always wish the other players well? Are these relationships healthy? Could we, in friendship, hurt the team?

**Friendship as method.**

As time went on, and I established trust among other NFL wives, I used friendship as method (Brooks, 2006; Crang, 2005; Hesse-Biber, 2006; Rawlins, 2008; Appendix 1)
Tillman-Healy, 1996, 2001, 2003; Ellis, 2007) to study NFL relationships. For the first time, I was studying “us” instead of studying “them,” but establishing those friendships was not an expedient process. Because the NFL is a highly public world, NFL wives and players are not quick to let others into their private relationships. When changes happen within a team, the public often knows before the players. When players are cut, they may learn of their demise on television or the Internet before they’re told in person. One quarterback’s wife told me, “We were watching ESPN and saw the ticker across the bottom of the screen saying my husband had been traded. We thought it must be a mistake, but his agent called us a few minutes later to confirm the awful news.”

A veteran NFL player told me that despite a conversation earlier that day with the team management letting him know they were going to get a contract done, he found out the team wasn’t going to renew his contract when a reporter on television announced a multi-million dollar deal for a younger player who played the same position. He called the team and they confirmed that he was being let go.

When Craig was hurt and placed on Injured Reserve, his brother called from Indiana to offer his condolences before Craig’s coaches confirmed the move to Craig. Because NFL players’ public lives are so accessible, their private lives provide the only time they don’t have to perform for cameras or say the right things to reporters.

Toward the end of our first year in Seattle, Jeff asked me, “Are we friends or am I just a monkey in a cage that you’re studying?” His comment caught me off-guard. Indeed, I was still the researcher and he was still the researched, no matter how close our friendship became. Only time spent together, outside the confines of formal interviews,
helped assure Jeff and Lisa, among others, that I would not exploit them or their families. Eventually, they shared their secrets with me, telling me when to turn on the tape recorder and when to turn it off.

Over time, my master status among other NFL wives seemed to change from researcher to friend. To my surprise, my role as a researcher made it easier, for me personally, to seek out friendships. My desire to research NFL wives prompted me to seek out relationships with them; something I may not have done so readily beforehand. Brooks (2006) explained, "The tools of research are not necessarily antithetical to forming friendships. In fact, they may be instrumental in deepening those relationships… entering into those contexts as friend and researcher adds emotional and relational layers to one’s study.” My role as a researcher and as an NFL wife also encouraged other women to share their stories with me. They saw me as someone who could both empathize with their stories and who wanted to hear them. Our conversations, everyday involvement, compassion for each other, and shared vulnerability made the research deeper and more heart-felt (Tillman-Healy, 2003).

Most of the NFL wives knew that I was an ethnographer, and many of them asked questions about my research. By the third year, my status as a researcher only came up when NFL wives came to me with stories that they wanted “on the record” or when I brought up research topics to discuss with them. I did not normally remind others of my research project before engaging in conversations with them and most of our conversations had little to do with my research. But, if an issue or topic related to their identities or relationships as NFL wives came up that seemed pertinent to the project, I
wrote field notes when I returned home. During Bible studies, I didn’t ask permission each week to record my findings, but I often jotted field notes down in my journal as others spoke candidly about their lives. I questioned whether my project gave me the right to take notes of comments that were seemingly made in confidence. *What right did I have to go back to school, and then share their stories with others* (Ellis, 1995; 2007)?

Being together with other NFL wives was one of the only times we women could be candid about our lives and feel both protected and understood. *Would I be breaking the unwritten rules of the group by sharing those stories with others?*

Ellis (2004) wrote:

> I think we have to be tuned into ethical issues all the time. We must act ethically, and this may mean that we don’t always write what we want to write. What rights do we have to tell other people’s stories anyway? What rights do we have to tell our own? While I, as much as anyone, want to be able to tell my own story the way I want to tell it, I don’t want to forget that this privilege comes with complex responsibilities toward other characters in my narratives (p. 261).

Time in the field showed me that Ellis was right. The rules of loyalty within the NFL are not unique. As Barrington (1997) wrote, “Most people belong to some group that demands their loyalty. Telling the truth almost always breaks unspoken laws” (p. 67). Being close to NFL couples clearly required such loyalty.

For the first four years of this project, both at school and in the field, I lived in the liminal space between two worlds. Neither identity was fully palpable; nor was either identity escapable. The experience overflowed with dialectical contradictions. As an
NFL wife, I was expected to keep the secrets of NFL wives. As a researcher, it was my job to record their lives. Fine (1997) calls this “working the hyphen.” As we work the hyphen, we ultimately erode the “fixedness and categories, we and they enter and play with the blurred boundaries that proliferate” (p.72).

Initially, my blurred boundaries served as a red flag for many NFL wives. Like in many communities, it takes time to build trusting relationships in the NFL. As a veteran wife explained, “We are protecting ourselves from the outside – from those who do not know and cannot yet understand the uncertainties of life in the NFL.” Time helped move me closer to their/our world. Together, we straddled the lines of NFL wives, friends, and interviewer/interviewee.

For the first four years of this research project, I traveled back and forth, living in Tampa during the spring semester and Seattle for the fall football season. I found marginal status both in the field and in school. Classmates did not understand why I was gone for half of the year and professors, not privy to the amount of time I put in with my research community, doubted my commitment to the graduate program. They questioned my focus on my studies, believing I was more interested in my husband’s career than my own. For me, there could be no clear lines drawn between my husband’s career and my doctoral education. As long as he was playing football, I had a research community that would enable me to serve my research apprenticeship and complete a dissertation.

Conversely, other NFL wives questioned my commitment to my husband and to the team. For example, when the Seahawks played in Super Bowl XL, I had already been in school in Tampa for a month. I traveled on Friday nights, after classes, to Craig’s
playoff games. I flew back on red-eye flights on Sunday nights, arriving into Tampa early on Monday morning. Other NFL wives questioned how I could be gone for what was arguably the most important time in Craig’s career. Yes, I was there to cheer for him during the game, but I wasn’t there during the week when he needed me to, as one wife stated, “cook, take care of the house, and keep other affairs in order so that he could concentrate on football.”

In Tampa, I tried to use my fieldwork to think through new theories and research methods I was being exposed to in my classes that could be applied in my research. In Seattle, I was devoted to field work. If I wasn’t interviewing NFL wives, I was journaling about my experiences and sociological reflections. My project became me. I studied my life autoethnographically as a way of knowing the two worlds in which I was immersed, and of knowing myself (Ellis, 1993).

**Interactive interviews.**

As time went on, I spent more and more time with other NFL wives. At the beginning of Craig’s third year with the team, I felt like I was a veteran wife. Other wives trusted me because of the amount of time that we had been with the team. Some wives newer to the team even looked to me for guidance about how to navigate life as a Seahawk’s wife. As our friendships developed, the lines of interviewer/interviewee blurred further in both formal and informal conversations and interviews. These women wanted to hear my stories of life as an NFL wife, and I asked for theirs (Ellis, Keisinger, Tillmann-Healy 1997).
Being in Seattle for most of each football season allowed me to develop deep friendships with the other wives that would have otherwise been impossible to develop. We sat together at home games, watched away games at each other’s houses, planned and hosted baby showers, participated in charity events and weekly Bible studies, and spent time together with our husbands as well. Each of those interactions and experiences helped set the framework for our friendships. I found that I enjoyed spending time with other NFL wives, even if there weren’t research questions to be asked or observations to be made. Our seven years of friendship also seemed to encourage newer NFL wives and their husbands to share things with us that they might not have otherwise been willing to share.

In interactive interviews, all of those participating are invited to act as both researchers and research participants (Ellis, 2004). Interactive interviews not only recognize, but necessitate, that the researcher has a voice and invites that voice to be a co-author in the story. The focus turns from expected answers to an evolving story. Participants learn to trust each other as they establish rapport. Thus, interactive interviews require a lot of time to develop and deepen trust and friendship. Unlike traditional interviewing, interactive interviews can elicit emotions and change relationships.

The conversations I had with NFL wives were not only informative but also helped establish a closer bond between the other women and me. They served as “account making” (Bochner, Ellis, and Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Scott and Lyman, 1968) opportunities for us as we used the conversations to make sense of our lives both for ourselves and for others. As our friendships developed, subsequent interviews and
informal interviews were richer because of the trust established in the interactive style of the initial interviews (Ellis, et. al, 1997)

In the telling of our stories we learned and validated what we believed and who we had become. For example, when I felt insulted by a fellow NFL wife’s admission that she would not wear a jersey with her husband’s name on it because she was “not his property,” I realized that I was comfortable being recognized as Craig’s wife within the context of his football games. We also learned by hearing our own stories. Berger and Luckmann (1967) wrote “Men must talk about themselves until they know themselves” (38). After one of our interviews, a veteran NFL wife told me, “I didn’t even realize who I had become until I heard what I said.”

Our friendships inevitably influenced what would be shared and what would be left out of our conversations. In an interactive interview she did with two of her students, Ellis (2007) reported that because her husband was her students' professor, there were things she chose not to share about her relationship (Ellis & Berger, 2001; Ellis, et al, 1997). I too questioned how my relationship with my participants was influencing their stories: How does what I say influence what they say? How does who I am and what they know of me influence what they share? How does what I know of them influence the direction of my questioning?

In the 1970s, Ellis conducted comparative studies with two fishing communities on the Chesapeake Bay (see Ellis, 1986, 2007). Her intention was to remain objective and distanced, living among her participants and helping when she could (Ellis, 2004). She admittedly acted and felt like a friend (Ellis, 1986). Even while acting as a friend
within the community, she also assumed the position of an objective observer. Looking
back, however, Ellis realized she was neither a distant observer nor an objective reporter
(Ellis, 1995b). Later, as an impressionist researcher, she recognized that the field
ultimately changed as a result of her presence. Bochner (2002) explained:

As researchers, our own lives and experiences significantly influence what we
project onto the people and events we study; and the people and events we study
act back reflexively on who we become and what we do (p. 11).

Similarly, I not only observed what I saw in the field, but also reflexively
examined the roles I played and my experiences in those roles.

How does what other NFL wives say influence what I share? Indeed, we were
systematically influencing each other through recursive contingency (Steier, 1995). What
I do ultimately affects what they do. What they do influences how I respond. Both
reactions influence the action of others and others’ interactions influence mine and their
actions individually. The cycle is systemically without end. I realized that it was
important to proceed and analyze our conversations and interactions reflexively,
understanding them for what they were at the time, for the purposes at hand, and in
response to each other (Steier, 1991).

Because my roles as researcher and NFL wife were intertwined, identifying my
purposes within the interactive interviews remained a paradoxical conflict between
attaining inner-circle insight and embracing outsider objectivity. Steier (1995) explained:

We are never a neutral “I” in a social setting, but neither are we reducible to
variables to be factored into a research bias equation, even though such
characteristics can certainly be relevant to understanding our participation in that social setting. Indeed, we may be, to our reciprocators, many “yous” in the same setting (p.73).

Recognizing that we each bring multiple roles to each social setting helped give me a frame work for interpreting the stories I heard and the stories I told. Bochner (2002) wrote:

The stories people tell should not be understood as “maps,” “mirrors,” or “reflections” of the experiences they depict. They are fluid, co-constructed, meaning-centered reproductions of experience achieved in the context of relationships and subject to negotiable frames of intelligibility and the desire for continuity and coherence over time (p. 20).

Unlike other researchers who have studied professional sports wives (see Crute, 1981; Ortiz, 1994; O’Toole, 2006) I speak both from an insider and an outsider vantage point that was only made possible from over seven years in the field as the wife of a professional football player and a doctoral student.

**Research participants.**

For this research project, I received IRB approval for twenty-two formal interviews with NFL wives and three NFL players. Because of my involvement in the NFL community, I met with and discussed life in the NFL informally with over seventy wives and dozens of players who came and went. Many were friends, all were at least acquaintances. I spent hundreds of hours talking with NFL couples both in Seattle and at NFL-related events including the Pro Athlete’s Outreach Conference (that brings together
Christian athletes and their wives) and Teammates for Kids, a thank-you party thrown by
country singer, Garth Brooks for NFL players who donate to his charity. Though some
of those players and wives I only met once or twice, many became our friends.

IRB approved interviews were recorded using a digital recording device and then
transcribed. The formal interviews lasted between fifteen minutes and three hours. I
used an evolving interview guide with open-ended questions to trigger conversations. From those interviews alone, I produced over three hundred double-spaced pages of
transcribed interview text.

Data analysis and representation.

Before formally beginning the dissertation project, I used autoethnographic
narrative inquiry (Bochner and Ellis, 2003) to delve into my own story as it related to the
stories of those around me. Through the writing of my own story, I began to understand
my life as an NFL wife (Ellis, 2004; Richardson; 2000). I later used my
autoethnographic narratives alongside my fieldnotes and interviews to produce thematic
codes within the data sets akin to the kinds of codes used in grounded theory (Charmaz,

Grounded theory encourages the development of interrelated concepts (Charmaz,
2000). I interpreted the data as I collected it and then made a list of themes that seemed
pertinent to the research. I then went back and read through fieldnotes, journal entries,
and interview transcripts for those and other emergent themes. I highlighted
representative themes and made memos of their significance. I use much of that

4 Appendix 2
information along with fieldnotes from other interactions, as snippets in chapter nine to illustrate the emergent themes in the social lives of NFL wives.

I faced ethical binds when deciding how I would present my research. The other NFL wives were my friends. I saw their flaws, just as they saw mine, but I also grew attached to them. They and their husbands were people who Craig and I cared about. As a researcher, I felt obligated to tell the truth. Even if I remained neutral, attempting to describe reality but not judge it, there was a moral discourse implicit in their stories. To help limit the influence of a single voice -- mine -- in the telling of their lives as NFL wives, I decided to distribute the telling by asking three NFL wives to tell their own life stories (Atkinson, 2001). Ellis (1995) argued for “story as analysis, for evocation in addition to representation as a goal for social science research, for generalization through the resonance of readers, and for opening up rather than closing down conversation” (p. 21).

In tandem with Ellis, and to get deeper than thematic coding allows, part two of this dissertation focuses on first-person narratives of NFL wives. Chapters five through seven present the first-person accounts of the three NFL wives’ lives. After all, “This story isn’t only mine to tell” (Jago, 2002). I used their voices, along with my own (four personal stories in all), to contribute to the understanding of relationships in general, to better understand and describe in detail the particular relationships of NFL wives, and to better understand community socialization. None of the previous studies of the wives of professional athletes have incorporated this first person account form of storytelling.
After reviewing my dozens of interviews, I chose three women who I both knew as friends and whose stories exemplified life as NFL wives. They each agreed to share their stories as first person narratives. Each of the stories was compiled a bit differently.

I introduce the women and described the methods used to compile the interviews and tell their stories immediately following this chapter.

...

At the beginning of my dissertation project, I worried that all of my participants were at similar stages in the life of being an NFL wife. Crites (1986) reiterated Kierkegaard’s assertion that we “understand backwards, but we live forwards” (p. 165). As a result, I widened my studies.

Joy, whose story you will read in chapter five and Anne, whose story you read in chapter two, were both twenty years past their husbands’ playing careers, so each recollected their stories from a different vantage point than the younger NFL wives. The stories each of them told about their relationships have likely changed over time (Duck, 1988). Inevitably, “The past is reinterpreted in terms of the present and takes on an enhanced meaning” (Meador, 1998, 128). Perhaps hindsight offers an even better understanding of who and how we once were.

It is only in retrospect, through narrative, that one is in a position to survey the whole that is one’s life, and it is only through such a survey that there exists the possibility of obtaining the truth about that life, indefinite and ungraspable though it is. (Freeman, 1997, p. 387)

Bochner (2001) agreed with Freeman:
My journey toward narrative authenticity is thus my looking back from where I am now on the whole of my life (and my connections to the other people in it) in an effort to place myself meaningfully into a story that is, as much as it can be, a story of my own making. How, other than through narrative, can one draw a bead on the truth of one’s life, however unreachable and contingent that truth ultimately may be? (p.151)

While NFL wives who have spent more time away from the league may be able to offer an insightful, retrospective understanding about how their time as NFL wives affected their lives, current NFL wives, whose stories I recorded as they were being lived, offer a glimpse into how current NFL wives understand themselves and the world around them, and how they anticipate the effect on their future.

Part of what makes my research unique is my involvement as a member of the community I studied. I existed in the scene as a friend who was a native. For that reason, I also share my autoethnographic story as an NFL wife. I, like Ellis (1995) recognize that “...as social scientists, we will not know if others’ intimate experiences are similar or different until we offer our own stories and pay attention to how others respond, just as we do in everyday life” (p.69).

Chapter eight is an autoethnographic account of my life in the NFL. I originally planned to write my autoethnographic story from my fieldnotes, but the stories from my participants were edited from oral interviews. To offer the same candidness in my own autoethnography that others offered in theirs, I asked Craig to interview me. I would have had one of my interview participants interview me, but by the time I wrote my own
story, the other three women who gave their stories were already with other teams in various parts of the country. When turning the conversation into a narrative, I tried to maintain a sense of reflexivity, recognizing the different roles that I played and the biases each presented. Steier (1995) warned, “Researchers have typically referred to data gathered as “good” if it is felt that the data are being offered to the ‘her’ or ‘him’ whom the researcher wanted to be in that situation” (p. 74). Despite my desire to stay neutral, I wondered, “Is this as good as it gets...or could it be better?” As researchers we’re always wanting to be more perfect, even when perfection is out of reach (Hyde, 2010).

Steier (1995) explained:

The crucial point is that no one represents the way it really is. This issue builds on an awareness of these different conversations as ways of structuring and sustaining realities and requires an attempt to see a world or worlds in others’ terms but then to reflexively acknowledge that we are often translating reciprocators’ conversations into the language of our professional community. (p. 76)

In chapter nine, the final chapter in Part II of the dissertation, I critically examine the four first-person narratives, one story at a time.

**Part III of the dissertation is composed of the final two chapters.**

In chapter ten, I present the predominant themes that emerged from interviews and fieldwork during my seven years of living as NFL wife.
In the final chapter (chapter eleven), I describe the socialization practices and the trajectory of identity as an NFL wife and then discuss my return from life as an NFL wife to academia.
Part II: The Life Stories of NFL Wives

Allow me to introduce the women who shared their stories:

JOY, 57, is a petite and proper daughter of British immigrants. She became an NFL wife in 1979 when she married Jim Zorn, who was the starting quarterback for the Seattle Seahawks. Jim later went on to coach football, first at the collegiate level and then in the NFL. They have three daughters, all of whom played collegiate sports, and one son.

Joy, who was a coach’s wife when our time overlapped in Seattle, sent me an email in response to the mention of my project in the Seahawks Auxiliary Newsletter. She said she was interested in my project and would love to be interviewed. Because Joy had been involved in the NFL for over twenty years, I knew that she had seen the game from multiple perspectives and could offer a unique glimpse into life as an NFL wife. I talked with her informally several times about my project before finally recording her story via tape-recorder after she and her husband had moved across the country. At the time of her interview, Jim was the head coach for the Washington Redskins. I sent her a tape recorder with blank tapes along with an interview guide. She sent back nearly two hours of her recorded story. I transcribed her interview and then formatted it into the written narrative presented in chapter five.

SARAH, 34 at the time of her last interview, is a white woman married to a white quarterback. At the time of the interviews, her husband was the starting quarterback for
the Seattle Seahawks. They were college sweethearts. They have three children and she is completely in charge of their home. When she first got married, she wanted either to be the President of the United States or a Seahawks’ Cheerleader. By the time of our last interview, she was not sure if there was anything special inside of her but she was sure that she would continue to support her husband in his future endeavors.

Sarah and I had known each other since I first arrived in Seattle. In fact, she was one of the first wives I met. I had fieldnotes from conversations with her as far back as 2004. When I asked her to share her expanded story in my dissertation, she was happy to oblige. I had pages of stories from conversations and multiple informal interviews with Sarah, but I wanted to get her story from beginning to end, in her words, for this project. I sat down with her at her house on a weekday afternoon and recorded her story using my laptop computer. We folded laundry and she helped her preschool-aged son with computer games while we talked. Her recorded story lasted for just over two hours. I formatted her story into a first-person written narrative based on that interview and also used bits of stories and interviews from the past to show how Sarah evolved as an NFL wife in the seven years that I had known her.

**BETH,** 26 years old at the time of our last interview, is a tall blonde white woman from Canada married to a black man from the South. They have two children. His family hated that he was marrying her because she was white. Her family didn’t have a problem with his race. She finished her graduate degree but decided not to look for a job because she wanted to have a baby.
I met Beth when her husband was drafted in 2005. Her story was a compilation of three formal recorded interviews in addition to multiple conversations and informal interviews over our six years together as Seahawks wives. Our first interview took place at a mutual friend’s house. The next two interviews were conducted in her home. She and I had grown closer through the years and thus our interviews got deeper as well. During our final formal interview together, we sat in her bedroom and she told me about how she felt she had changed after becoming a mother.

Her first-person story was compiled from our interviews and conversations together. She and her husband moved across the country at the end of Craig’s final season in Seattle. At that time, I sent her a copy of her story with follow-up questions about life to add to the depth and recency of her narrative. Upon her final review, she asked me to change her name and the most obviously identifying information in her story.

**RACHEL, 31.** I am a caucasian woman married to Craig, a caucasian defensive tackle from the midwest. Craig played for the Seahawks for seven years during this project. We have one daughter and another on the way. I was in the first year of my doctoral studies when I met and fell in love with Craig. Before then, I was focused on academics with the goal of studying and teaching about love. When I chose to follow him to Seattle, my life became my research. This story is a combination of fieldnotes from conversations that I had with other NFL wives and my story as elicited in a formal interview with Craig.
Chapter 5: Joy

I first met Jim in the fall of 1976, the first year of the Seahawks' existence. I was working as a waitress to help pay my tuition at the University of Washington. My plan was to pursue a masters' degree in social work. Meanwhile, I was dating a guy that my Mom didn't like very much, so she had cut out a newspaper article about Jim to show me this "cute guy with an upstanding reputation" who was playing for the Seahawks. I, of course, dismissed her and the article with a comment something to the effect of, "yeah, right! Just how do you expect me to meet this guy in the first place and more importantly...I HAVE A BOYFRIEND!"

Sure enough, one day not long after that, Jim came into Huwilers and was seated in the section I was waiting on that evening. The other restaurant wait staff went CRAZY making such a big deal of "Jim Zorn being in my section." I didn't really understand the big deal because I wasn't much of a football fan. I didn't even know there was a difference between college and pro football, nor did I care. Even though my mom liked the idea of Jim after reading the article about him, my parents didn't understand or watch "that silly game in which the chaps just stand around and chat all the time." They were from England and thus soccer was the only "football" they ever watched.

Jim impressed me that evening by his cordiality towards me as his waitress and by how well he treated his date. In fact, I assumed they must be practically engaged because he was so respectful and gentlemanly with her.
About six months later, he came into Huwilers again, this time with a different girl. Once again, Jim was seated in my section. I was impressed that he remembered my name and he was surprised that I remembered his drink (fruit punch).

Finally, Jim came back in a third time. That time it wasn’t for dinner. He came in and asked for me. My fellow workers freaked out that Jim Zorn was in the restaurant asking for me. So, I went to see what he wanted at the front desk and he told me he was there to ask me out.

My social life had picked up a little bit at that time because I was recently out of a relationship with a boyfriend I had for a couple of years. Not only was I busy as a student, but now I had a few dates and was working a lot. My parents had recently separated and let me know that I would have to pay my whole tuition. So, I had picked up a lot more hours at the restaurant. As a result, I wasn’t available any of the times Jim asked me out and finally he just asked for my phone number. I gave it to him and then shortly after that he called and asked me out for a few weeks later.

Our first date was not typical of my other first dates. My roommates were all very excited that the Seahawks star quarterback was coming to pick me up and they expected a spectacular Mercedes or Cadillac. They seemed surprised that he was driving his little yellow Volkswagen Bug. Our plan was to go to a home-run contest but it was rained out so we just went and got burgers at a little hole-in-the-wall joint and then went window shopping.

I told him that I would be paying him back for the date because I didn’t like to be indebted to any men. I was very into Women’s Rights at the time. Looking back, I think I
was very angry inside, coping with my parents’ recent separation. My world was kind of
topsy turvy and the Women’s Rights Movement was an angry movement. I used it as a
socially acceptable way to funnel my anger. Jim told me that he thought that was
ridiculous and that if I continued talking that way he was going to turn the car around
because he had initiated this get together and so he felt like I needed to just accept it and
enjoy our time together. No guy had ever talked to me like that before. Most guys that I
gave that line to thought it was great that I was going to pay for the next date or even go
half on that date.

As our date went on, I was observing things that I found interesting about him. He
had a zeal for life but a quiet confidence. People kept recognizing him and coming up and
wanting his autograph and he treated people so nicely. He was very kind and had time
for people who came to talk him. He would even introduce me as his date, not just push
me to the side. I was always brought in to the interaction with the fans that we met along
the way.

I was curious about why he wasn’t into the Women’s Right Movement because he
treated me so much better than any other guy had treated me who said they were in favor
of the Women’s Rights Movement. I didn’t quite know what to think about Jim.

All of the sudden he asked me what my spiritual background was and where I was
spiritually. I had gone to church pretty much all my life, my mom had taken my brother
and me to Sunday School. I liked church and I had been taught all of the Bible stories
about Noah and his Ark and Jonah and the whale and a half dozen other interesting
stories. I just didn’t see what that had to do with me in 1977.
I kind of fumbled around a little bit with my answer and I think he figured out that my faith was not a very significant thing in my life. Unbeknownst to me, Jim had decided that he would only date a girl who had a belief in Jesus Christ. He was at the point in his life where he wanted to date more seriously and he knew he wanted to marry a woman who shared his faith. He didn’t want to “waste his time” with women who were going in a different direction. I think he had pretty much ascertained that I did not share his faith and did not have Jesus Christ as the authority for my life.

I thought he was a great guy but I wasn’t in a hurry to jump into another long-term relationships and he didn’t want to date me because of my lack of faith, so we kind of went our separate ways but kept in touch. I later learned that I really bugged him because my Women’s Right stuff got under his skin. Between that and my faith, he decided that I needed fixing. He decided not to get emotionally involved with me but to take me to things where I would be exposed to the “truth”. He took me to places when he was speaking and sharing his faith with a group or he would ask me if I would mind driving him to the airport and along the way we’d engage in faith-based discussions.

All of that was okay, and I enjoyed the discussions until he one day he asked me if I had a Bible. I wasn’t sure if I had one in my apartment down at the University but I found one that my grandmother had given me. He had me look up some verses that really disturbed me and really made me mad. One of them was in Ephesians. It was talking about how wives needed to submit to their husbands. That word *submit* just made me see red! I was so angry at him for having the audacity to point out that verse. I thought that the Bible just said, “God loves you have a nice day” and then had all those
other bible stories in it. I was so mad at him and then when I got off the phone I was kind of mad at God and felt like they were both really closed minded.

My whole world felt like it was unraveling. My parents were separated and possibly heading for divorce. I had recently broken up with that boyfriend that I figured I was going to marry, my future career plans were up in the air because I changed my major -- I just felt my whole world was going topsy turvy. So then, shoot, even God was trying to butt into my life by having controversial things to say in the Bible!

I started asking around to everybody I knew about what they thought about submission in the Bible. I asked my professors, people I worked with, and my friends. Then, one of my roommates said, “well, let’s look to see why God would ask wives to submit to their husbands.” I was amazed when we looked in the Bible. I didn’t realize the Bible had practical stuff for life. It blew me away. As I continued to read, I came to the point where I realized that I had to make a decision:

1. The Bible was true and I was going to live accordingly even if I didn’t like some of it.

or

2. The Bible wasn’t true and I could just throw the whole thing out, but I knew I had to throw out God and Jesus if I threw out the bible though because they were all three intertwined.

After much grappling on my own, one day when I was all by myself in my apartment putting curlers in my hair, I submitted my life to God. It was a major moment in my life. I was switching authorities for how I was going to live my life. Before then, I
had made my decisions based on magazine articles or what the latest research was in my psychology class or what my favorite professor had said was true.

    For the first time, I was admitting to God that I had been wrong, I had no idea that I was not living the way God wanted me to live. I realized then that Christ’s death on the cross paid that penalty for my sin and I didn’t have to earn my way to Heaven... it was a gift. As a result of my gratefulness for that gift, I wanted to bring my life under the authority of God’s word written in the bible.

    So I made that decision but I did not tell Jim. I didn’t want him to think that my faith was because of him and I didn’t want him to have the pleasure of thinking I had come around to his way of thinking. So I didn’t tell him and he kept asking me to different events. They were certainly not very romantic dates because he was still under the impression that I didn’t share his faith.

    After a month or two, he asked me if something had changed. He said he felt like there was a softening in my heart and wondered if I had made some changes. I told him “Yes, as a matter of fact.” He was excited and right away wanted me to start attending the Seahawks Bible study with him. I didn’t go because I didn’t want my faith in Jesus to be all mixed up with my relationship with Jim, partially because I didn’t know how long our dating relationship would last. I wanted to maintain my independence.

    At that point, I really admired and respected Jim. There were a lot of wishy-washy guys around and I liked the fact that he was principled, he was a gentleman, he was very polite and respectful, and he was kind to my mom. Yet, he didn’t really fit in my stereotype of what I thought a Christian was because he was really off the wall, funny
and competitive. He seemed like he was living life to the fullest. I thought Christians were kind of milk and toast boring. He really shook up my categories, so to speak. He was fun to be around because you never knew what was going to happen next with him.

There were also downsides associated with him being an NFL player. As the starting quarterback, he was Mr. Eligible Bachelor of Seattle. He had dated Ms. Washington, he’d dated a gold medalist ice skater Dorothy Hamill, and I felt like I was nobody. I was just a plain old college student. I wasn’t even sure if I was the only person he was dating, really. He told me I was, but I didn’t really know that and so for all I knew he could have had three girls that were equally as excited about him. Also, I had no idea that there would be groupies. Remember I didn’t even know that there was such a thing as pro football. I just never ever paid attention to it. I didn’t watch TV at all, I hated television even from a young age. I was more interested in reading or doing something else.

I bought my tickets to the first pre-season game in August. We had been dating through training camp that first year and I didn’t even know the players got tickets so my mom and I bought our own tickets. We sat really up high in the King Dome. I was shocked to see all the people with Jim Zorn signs. I saw the players all running around on the field and I knew the objective was to get the ball down the other end of the field but I didn’t know any of the rules. It was pretty mind blowing -- this whole world existed that I had no idea about.

After a couple of games I finally asked Jim, “I don’t know how to treat you after games. Do I tell you ‘Hey, you looked really cute in your outfit’ or do I say ‘Hey, I
thought you did a lot of good throws?’ Or ‘Hey, that was too bad that other guy on the 
other team caught your pass that one time. Too bad they all clobbered you and you were 
lying on the ground. Am I supposed to be in awe of you?’ I’ll never forget what he told me. He said, “You know what Joy, what you say to me really matters. I don’t 
necessarily expect you to understand all about the game but I want you to be interested in 
me and how I feel about the game and I just want you to care about what I care about. 
This is my profession and so I do want you to care about me but you don’t have to be a 
fan and you don’t have to worship the ground I walk on. And this is just a part of my life 
after all it’s my job but there’s a lot of other things that I would also want you to care 
about in relation to me.”

From the beginning of our relationship, Jim made it clear that there were going to 
be some rules to our dating. He had garnered most of the principles from attending Pro 
Athlete’s Outreach, conferences set up for NFL players and couples to learn relationship 
and life skills. People told me later that Jim sat in the front row of the relationship 
seminars, taking notes fervently. I thought that was pretty amazing for a bachelor. He 
didn’t make them sound like rules but he would tell me how things would be. He told me 
that he saw black and white that Christian men and women were not to sleep together or 
have sex before marriage and so I never needed to worry about that because that wasn’t 
going to happen. He was wise enough to know that temptations are very prevalent and so 
he said that there would not ever be any cause for me to stay over even if it was stormy. 
One time, I was at his house and it started snowing. He followed me all the way back to 
my apartment, which was about twenty minutes each way, making sure I got home safely
and then he went back. He said that he didn’t want to have the appearance of evil and have my car parked outside his house, even though we may be sleeping in separate rooms. He didn’t want anyone to even think that we were sleeping together and he also didn’t want the temptation.

We realized after a while as our dating continued that it was really hard to avoid temptations. After a game, for example, we’d come back to his house after going out to dinner and man oh man, the emotions would be flying high. So, I thought of the idea of starting a timer on the stove for 10:00PM or 11:00PM. As soon as that timer went off I’d just have to go because the later it got, the weaker we got. The timer helped set a parameter for us.

Jim was adamant about there being no games in our relationship, no manipulations, no half truths, only complete honesty. Still, he didn’t tell me how he felt about me for quite a while because the other unspoken rule was that we would never assume, even after we’ve been dating for a year or more, that we were going to marry each other. We could never have discussions like “Hey, when we get married”. If we wanted to talk about something like that we would say “Well, if I ever get married, I would like to do it this way” or “I would like to have this work this way,” so there was no assumption that we would be together.

Truthfully, he wasn’t really very good at relationships. Because he valued honesty so much, his tendency was to be blunt and to hurt my feelings. It was really rocky at times. We had a number of heated discussions because I was strong willed. I needed to maintain my own identity and not to become his little tag along.
It was disconcerting sometimes to see the amount of women who were almost worshiping him, shaking when they were talking to him. I could see their hands quivering when they were having him sign something. Because he was so honest, he told me about different things that happened, like when he was at training camp and women would practically invite themselves to his room. I was shocked. I felt like I needed to hold our relationship with an open hand because I had no idea how long it would last or if it would continue growing.

We dated for almost two years and he actually shocked me when he proposed because it was so out of the blue. He had been back to his home in southern California for a couple of weeks at Christmas time. The Seahawks did not make it into the playoffs in those days, so he had the time off. While he was gone, I decided that he must have a problem with commitment. We had been dating for two years but he’d never told me he loved me. In fact, he never really told me how he felt about me. I could tell that I was important to him but I thought if he had a problem with commitment, I didn’t want to wait around. I felt like our relationship had come to the point where something needed to happen. I was ready to tell him that I thought maybe I needed to move on if he was not going to be able to move any closer to a commitment. I was twenty-two and he was twenty-five and I felt like it was time for something to happen. I didn’t want to break up with him because I really cared about him. I probably loved him, but I didn’t know how long we could keep dating at that level without taking it a step further.

When he got back from California, before I had the chance to tell him how I felt, he proposed to me. It was so exciting. All of the sudden, we were going to be married.
We didn’t tell anybody for about a week. There were so many topics we needed to talk about, like how we felt about having children. We had all of those discussions that we had been avoiding. It was really pretty fun. He didn’t have a ring so he first asked my father and then we went and picked out a ring together. He was so busy in the off-season with appearances and such that he had to cancel something to find a weekend to get married and then a week to have a honeymoon.

We got married after just a three-month engagement. I had decided against attending graduate school right away because it was hard to get in with just an undergraduate degree. The graduate schools looked much more favorably upon those applicants that had experience working "in the field", and they weren't the least bit impressed that I had graduated Magna Cum Laude from the University of Washington. So, I had been working for about a year with troubled junior high girls in the Youth Guidance division of Youth For Christ. I wanted to keep working after getting married, but Jim wanted my schedule to be more flexible, especially during the off-season. I really was so thrilled to be married. I just couldn’t believe that I got to be married to this incredible man. We had a really cute 800 square foot house down on Lake Washington. I thought, “Oh my goodness, could anything be more wonderful?” I felt like I had it all. It was so perfect that I feared that maybe something terrible was going to happen and something would be taken away from me.

Our relationship was passionate. We had lots of disputes and arguments while we tried to work out how to be married. We were just two selfish people trying to figure out how to live together and work as the Bible says. We went to separate churches, but we
did some Bible studies together. He also suggested that we memorize some bible verses. He was so strict, it had to be exactly the right thing. I couldn’t just say “Well, it sort of says this” he insisted that it was exact. To this day, those are some of the verses that I can still remember word-for-word.

Three months later, I got pregnant. When I found out, I had just given my two-week notice at work. I went from being a single working woman to a stay-at-home married woman and pregnant all within about a year. Getting pregnant made things more difficult in our relationship. Our first year was definitely the rockiest. Jim had all these fun things going on in the off-season and I just thought oh my goodness now that I’m pregnant am I going to be able to do any of it?

My hormones went crazy because of the pregnancy just about the time when Jim left for training camp. I was crying all the time because I didn’t want to be pregnant after just being married a couple of months and I didn’t like the idea about how pregnancy and children could change relationships. I knew it wasn’t going to be fancy free anymore. I imagined a mom as a woman wearing a housecoat all the time with curlers in her hair and burp stains from the baby on her shoulder and the husband calls her mom. That didn’t seem romantic and I just didn’t want that.

I had to work through some of those emotions. I always felt conscious of being out in public in Seattle because Jim was so recognizable at that point. As I got more and more visibly pregnant, I thought I looked more and more awful. I was self-conscious and imagined people were thinking “Oh good grief, how did he get stuck with that big fat woman?”
One night we went to a homecoming game at a high school and Jim was asked to crown the homecoming queen when she was announced at half-time. The young woman who he was dating the first time he came into Huwilers was there with a bunch of her friends. They were all cute and perky former collegiate gymnasts. They were jumping around and acting so excited to see Jim. They were probably excited to see both of us, but I was feeling so self-conscious that I just assumed they were only excited to see him. Meanwhile, I felt like a big tub of lard. When we sat down in the bleachers I asked Jim “You don’t have to kiss that homecoming queen when she gets crowned, do you? Can you just stick the crown on her head?” He gave me some kind of wishy-washy answer. I said “I really don’t want you to and I already feel insecure and I’m going to feel even more insecure if you kiss this cute little high school girl.” He wasn’t very empathetic or attentive, he was mainly focused on the football game.

He went down at half-time and, would you believe, the girl who was elected homecoming queen was one of our friend’s daughters, a guy who Jim had known for a really long time. He felt like since he knew the young woman that it would be appropriate to crown her and give her a kiss on the cheek. Well, I was furious! Steam was coming out of my ears I was so mad. I felt like it was a direct slap in the face. I was feeling fat and dowdy, sitting up in the stands, and my cute dashing quarterback of a husband that everybody was swooning over was kissing the 18-year-old homecoming queen. I went at him all the way home. I was so mad and he just felt like “You’ve got to be kidding me, Joy.”
I’ve always thought that NFL marriages are very exposed, certainly ours was. NFL players are different from businessmen in that their bodies are what make their living. Most of the time they work out so they look great and women think they have all kinds of money. The stereotype is that they’re incredibly eligible guys. I’ve met many NFL wives and girlfriends who feel or act insecure in who they are or in their relationships because they know other women are attracted to their husbands or boyfriends. We’re all just women, but we can feel very needy. It’s a yucky feeling.

Anyway, I fought through my insecurities while pregnant and our daughter, Rachael, was born in March of 1980. She turned out to be a huge blessing. I really enjoyed getting to be a mom. Three years later, we had our next daughter and four years after that we had our third daughter.

I remember feeling sorry for myself on the weekends when I would see my neighbors with their families out in the yard next door. I was kind of a single mom all the time. I used to feel sorry for myself even in those days, but oh my goodness, I look back on that now and think what on earth was I complaining about because certainly a typical coach works many more hours than a player does. It was a struggle for me. Even though Jim was a GREAT dad, it bothered me that while my life had been completely, 100% changed, his seemed to continue like it always had. If I even wanted to go work out, I had to ask him if he would be available to watch Rachael, while he could just kiss me goodbye and walk out the door to go work out, because it was a requirement for his job. He never had to check with me to see if I could watch Rachael. That all sounds so stupid to me now, but it was a really big deal to me back then at twenty-three years old.
My favorite part of being a mom has always been the privilege of experiencing the growth and development of a unique individual- made in the image of God! To get to experience the miracle of a baby being born followed by the amazing day by day growing and learning that occurs has been a remarkable joy for me that continues even today.

When our three girls were born, we were living in the Seattle area close to family and long time friends. I think it's a different experience for the players and wives that move back to their "home," often in another state in the off-season, followed by re-locating once again during football season. When we moved to a couple of other cites during Jim's last years of his career, I found it difficult to find baby sitters I felt comfortable leaving my children with both because we were new to the area and because people knew my husband was an NFL player. As a result, we had lots of time together with the girls, exploring new cities and areas of the country. I began home-schooling during that time, too.

Jim retired from playing football late in 1987, after that year's NFL strike. He retired because there didn't appear to be a team willing to commit to signing him to their roster for any significant length of time. With a wife and three children, he didn't feel it would be right to keep moving his family around the country just to try to stay in the league as a fill-in when a quarterback on a team roster was injured.

I had given birth to our third daughter in November of that same year, so my emotions were already flying all over the place. I remember feeling helpless to encourage Jim through the difficult time of transition from his job as an NFL quarterback that he had loved so much. He had no idea what he wanted to do next, so I was very
grateful when someone encouraged him to do some career testing and counseling. The unknowns were emotionally difficult for me and when we sold our home the next spring even though we still didn't really know what God had next for Jim, it was a very unsettling time for me. The Lord really used that situation to show me that my security should be in Him and His trustworthiness rather than where I was living and what the future held. Little did I know then that it was to be a life-long lesson in trusting God throughout many moves and times of uncertainty.

As our children got older and Jim transitioned into coaching, I saw it as very important to have a good attitude about what Jim was doing. I didn’t want the kids to resent the hours Jim spent coaching, or that he couldn’t always attend their sporting events or piano recitals. I made a conscious effort to talk about how grateful I was for how hard daddy worked. I would tell the girls that there are lots of jobs that men have to work long hours. I explained that some men didn’t work for many hours but they chose to go play golf or something so they still didn’t spend very much time with their families. We were grateful for Jim because we knew that he would be there if he could be.

For the most part, Jim has done a great job our whole marriage of making me feel that I’m a priority to him. While coaching, when we faced moves or difficult situations, he would say “Look, if this ever gets so it is too hard on our relationship or too hard on our family, I can quit and do something else. You and our kids are far more important to me than coaching.” That helped me to be able to be supportive of him because I didn’t feel like I had to compete. I didn’t have to criticize his job and his profession to feel
better about myself because I already knew that I was more important to him than his job was.

I remember one time Jim sat down with all of us and said “Hey, everybody this is the time that if I’m to make a career change now would be a good time. If we all feel like this is too much pressure on our family then I could be a businessman or do something else.” And each of our girls said, “Oh dad, that would be so boring. We like you being a coach.” It was a really cool thing for Jim and I to see that the girls felt like coaching was a part of the tapestry of our family. It was working and they knew they came first. In fact, our eldest daughter, Rachael, later told the Washington Times:

My dad’s life isn’t football. His family is his life. Football happens to be his job.

When he had time off, we were at home. I remember telling him once that he should play golf like the other dads. He said that he would rather be with us.

(Elfin, 1998).

... 

The best thing for me about being married to an NFL player/coach has been the relationships. Not only have Jim and I met amazing people, but our children have been exposed to so many different people. It’s been a great advantage for them and has made all of our lives richer and expanded our horizons. We’ve learned all kinds of interesting things about different people’s cultures and ways of doing things.

Because the NFL is so performance oriented, everyone is always in competition to keep their positions or to try to get the next rung up the ladder. In turn, sometimes when they come home they’re still geared toward performance. Sometimes I can make what I
think is an innocuous statement but he’ll immediately get defensive. In the off-season it
might not have bothered him at all, but during the season he’s so sensitized from being
criticized all day.

Jim and I have had many, many conversations about that. He tends to be very
detailed oriented. You’d think he would be more sensitive to others after being criticized
all day long or having fellow coaches looking over his shoulder. He always tells me that
he’s paid to find mistakes with the best athletes in the world. Meanwhile, I run the
whole household myself, I’ve managed things I haven’t even had time to tell him about
and then he’ll find one thing that I either did wrong in his estimation, or I forgot to do. I
felt like he would find the one thing I didn’t do and not comment on the 250 things I had
done. Oh my goodness I would get so mad. I don’t know if all coaches are that way.

I’ve had to give a bit of leeway and grace because I know he doesn’t mean it
personally. He’s only home for half an hour before he goes to bed at night and so he
wants to point out something that he sees. Because he’s not home very much during the
season he feels like he doesn’t have a lot of time to do the positive affirmations ahead of
time and then to slip in the little negative or critical point he wants to make and then
follow-up with more affirmations. He just has to get to the point because he doesn’t have
very much time.

I am sure you would get an earful if you asked Jim just how often he has felt
criticized by me, too. I did, and sadly still do, criticize him for many things... some of
which probably were/are valid and others were/are unfair and uncalled for. Likewise, I
have had to learn to not state everything I'm feeling or thinking. Sometimes my feelings
are not reliable and sometimes I think wrongly. I do, however, think that Jim and I have a very honest relationship. We don't hide much, if anything, from each other. We've learned to think before we speak most of the time.

From the very beginning, I wanted to have a good relationship with Jim, so sometimes I think I responded to him in a way so as not to upset him. But ultimately, a marriage built on one person's fear of displeasing another would be a sorry excuse for a relationship. As we both continued to grow as individuals, and especially as we both continued to grow in our individual relationships with Christ, we learned to love less selfishly and serve one another with greater abandon. My focus is still on how to love Jim more effectively— in the way he wants and needs to be loved. I know he can never fulfill all my needs, wants and desires— no human can. But I feel and know I am loved deeply by my husband and I am grateful to God for the man He has made Jim to be and the fact that I get to be his wife! Is he perfect? No, but I love, admire and respect him more today than ever before.

... The worst thing about the NFL is how quickly a person’s career can be cut short, particularly by an injury. Sometimes their bodies just can’t do as much and so they are let go from teams, which is a hard thing as a player’s wife and as a coach’s wife. In all positions in football you’re always just one step away from the door, or one injury away from the door, or one or two crummy performances away from the door. It’s an entertainment business and they make their money as long as they can perform. It can be easy for players to start thinking of themselves in the terms that the public does: either
they’re fantastic or they’re terrible, whichever extreme the media or fans decided. That can really reek havoc if he’s not a very secure individual who’s identity is coming from somewhere other than his performance on the field or on the coaching sideline. They can be built up to the point where they’re practically being worshipped or be made into a criminal, the crummiest guy alive in the NFL. Marriage is hard anyway, and that can make it difficult to maintain a relationship. If players aren’t able to process that properly and realize that it’s just people’s opinions, and that football is not who they are, it’s just what they do, then their identities and relationship can really suffer.

As a wife, it is hard to live with the uncertainties of the NFL because many of us gain our security from where we live. We like to put roots down and have friends and neighbors and maybe jobs and it’s very difficult when at anytime we have to move. It’s hard when whole families are affected when the player is cut or injured. That leads to that transition time when football finally is done.

I home schooled the girls, which made the multiple moves easier because Zorn Academy moved with us so they didn’t have to switch schools. They had a stressed out mother to deal with because of the necessary disorganization that comes from the upheaval of moving. We’d have to take a couple of weeks off from school while we got boxes packed and moved. I never seriously regretted not working outside the home or pursuing my once-sought after degree, but there certainly were days during the twenty-four years of raising and home schooling our four children that I thought, "What on earth am I doing? Is this really what God intends for me to be doing with my college education and love of learning?" At times, I thought about going back to school, but once Jim began
coaching, he and I agreed that the all-consuming hours worked by college and NFL coaches would require me to hire nannies to raise our children if I was to have time to take classes and complete homework. Also, I sensed that God called me to home-school our girls and I strongly believed I would be disobeying Him if I pursued what I wanted over what our family needed (a stable, consistent home environment for our kids in the midst of much moving and change).

I think for most couples and families retirement is the most difficult time because, inevitably, part of the guy and part of his wife’s identity has been wrapped up in the NFL. Whether that has been a good experience or a bad experience for them, nevertheless, it is a big part of your life. Many players are recognized in public and the fact that they were an NFL player gives many people an automatic response. When all of the sudden that’s not there anymore, it changes things.

I can think of a few guys who have easily transitioned into another career where they are equally successful as they have been in the NFL, or maybe more successful. Perhaps they weren’t superstars in the NFL, but their connections from the league have positioned them to move into other careers. One of Jim’s teammates who went on to finish up medical school and become a doctor didn’t have the typical transition struggles that I have seen so many former players have and for coaches too.

A player may be in his twenties or thirties and he is already “retired” and looking for another job. Some of the guys obviously go into coaching, some of them into some kind of broadcasting, but other than that, the NFL doesn’t prepare them for much at all. It’s hard as a wife to know how to encourage a guy who is so down. He may be
defensive because he feels crummy about himself or doesn’t quite know what to think of himself if his identity has been wrapped up in who he is as an NFL player. Jim and I sat down with the Largents the other day and we were talking about the couples we knew from our playing days with the Seahawks and it was really sad. We listed maybe seven or eight couples that are divorced out of maybe fifteen couples who we were friends with. So, there are obviously some marital pressures that come along with playing in and retiring from the NFL.

With our girls, I only home schooled until high school. As a mom or a dad you can’t go to school with your ninth grader to make sure that other people include her and make her feel comfortable in her new environment. I really admire my kids for being secure enough in who they are and just adventurous enough to do that. There were some turbulent times for them when they were frustrated with some of the stupid stuff that goes on at high school. Perhaps because they had been sheltered by life in the NFL and not subjected to a large number of their peers, they thought all the high school drinking was stupid and were disgusted by the language some of the students used and how they disrespected the teachers. They thought it was dumb but at the same time they wanted to have friends. All three of them struggled to maintain who they were without looking down their nose at others. They wanted to maintain their own identities but still be open enough to have friends. In all three cases, despite their struggles, the girls ended up having good high school careers that let them go on and choose a college that they could go to and enjoy.
Life as a mother and a wife in the NFL is unique. I think that wives need to reach out to be a friend to other wives on the team because there’s nobody else who really understands completely what it is to be a NFL player’s wife. For example, many people on the outside think that we as NFL wives have the most glamorous, marvelous life that you could ever imagine. They have it glamorized so that we make millions of dollars and walk around with furs all around us and big diamonds and have these hunky husbands and life is good. The reality for most of us is that when our husbands are playing we are in our twenties and early thirties, we’re far away from home, we don’t have the support of our good friends or our moms. There’s a disparity between what you think you’re suppose to be feeling and what you are actually feeling. Everybody else thinks NFL wives are living fantastic and glamorous lives. The reality is can be very difficult. For example, it’s hard for a wife to know how to encourage your husband who is being criticized by all of his coaches. It’s hard to not feel catty if your husband is second string -- it’s really hard to have a good attitude about that first string guy, much less his wife because our human tendency is to find something to pick apart because we want so badly for our husband to get to be that starting guy.

There are a lot of things working against wives having good relationships with each other. Not only are our husbands sometimes competing against each other but also because we come from different backgrounds and may have very different philosophies of how to live, how to spend money or how to raise kids. Still, I feel strongly that that NFL wives can be one another’s best support system. The strongest teams are the ones
where the wives have figured that out and have really developed strong relationships and have a sort of support group amongst themselves.

Jim's best friend on the team was wide receiver, Steve Largent. Even before I knew Jim, he, Steve, and Steve's wife, Terry hung around together. When Jim and I began dating, Terry immediately reached out and befriended me and we discovered we got along well, too, so it became a comfortable foursome. In fact, so comfortable that when we got married a couple of years later, Steve was Jim's Best Man and Terry was my Matron of Honor!

Although we were close friends, Terry and I had many other friends amongst the wives and girlfriends on the team and we often did things together. The wives I knew the best were undoubtedly the ones who regularly attended Bible study. As the starting quarterback’s wife, I felt a responsibility to reach out to all of the wives and girlfriends, especially when they were new to the team. The policy I had was that any activity I had a part of planning would ALWAYS include ALL of the players' wives and the girlfriends we knew about. Of course not all would come, but I felt it important that ALL feel welcome and receive invitations to everything.

I believe the women who attended the couples' Bible study or the wives' study saw the importance of not being cliquey and reaching out to the other wives on the team, but I can imagine at times the Christians could have been viewed as exclusive, since the friendships often ran deep amongst the women who were learning and praying together. We spent a lot of time together, hosting baby and wedding showers, an organized discount shopping expedition, a few different gatherings at one of our homes with invited
speakers, working on wives' charity projects such as a team/family calendar and cookbook, and events such as fashion shows, luncheons/dinner/auctions, etc. Sometimes, before too many of us had kids, we'd get together to watch away games and once I even remember attending a wives slumber party! One of my most embarrassing moments was when the Seahawks' wives had to play the Mariner wives in a game of baseball before one of the Mariner games. I was TERRIBLE and it was humiliating!

The remarkable reality is that I am still friends today with many of those players' wives I first met some thirty-plus years ago! Terry Largent is still my best friend- and Steve is Jim's. It has been so much fun to live in the same city as them for the past three years here in the DC area. It's our first time living in the same city since 1983. I could list at least five or six other women with whom I have also kept close ties.

Sometimes the players’ wives are mad at the coaches and maybe that even extends to the coaches wives. I understand that and I get that. I can remember being really mad at Jim’s coaches one time when he was demoted from first string to second string. Oh I was so mad that I wanted to go throw eggs at Chuck Knox’s house. I understand that and I think that’s a normal thing. I would encourage players wives to be mad at some of the coaches but not to be mad at the other players’ wives. Those relationships are to be nurtured. You might not end up being best friends with everybody on the team, and that’s okay, but at least treat one another with graciousness and dignity and respect. Out of all those women, you’re bound to find a couple of friends that will probably be lifelong friends. We certainly did.
Today, my faith is the most important aspect of my life and it colors everything else about me. Because my faith in God is the foundation of my life, and of Jim's, too, we have sought to build our marriage and our family upon the principles God communicates in the Bible. For example in marriage, according to the Bible: Jim is to model himself after Jesus by loving me enough to even be willing to lay his life down for me. As the wife, I am to be subject to Jim just as I am to the Lord Jesus and see that I respect my husband, too. Yikes! This is hard sometimes...OK- most of the time. Have we done everything perfectly? Ha! Absolutely not and even after thirty-two years of marriage we still don't! But thankfully, this is where God's grace, forgiveness and mercy become so significant. We are thankful for the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives that prompts us to admit when we have wronged one another and grants us the ability and motivation to forgive and forgive and forgive again.

The Bible is rich with many other principles for living our lives. Another that has motivated me to be open to God's leading, in respect to faith leadership amongst NFL wives, is the command that "Older women" (and yes, at fifty-four that's surely me!) "are to be reverent in their behavior........so that they may encourage the young women to......" It is followed by a list of instructions of what to encourage young women to do and believe. I don't ever want to presume, but I certainly want to stay open to the possibility that God might provide an opportunity for me to come alongside a coach's or player's wife and provide encouragement He intends for them.
Chapter 6: Sarah

I grew up in a really good family. My parents gave me every opportunity educationally and athletically, which allowed me to go to a top college. They paid for me to go to some good sporting camps. They believed in me, which helped to give me a sense of believing in myself.

Our family’s top priority was academics. We weren't allowed to get a B without getting in trouble. My brother was a straight-A student and went to Yale. I was not a straight-A student, but my parents made sure I was always in the top classes. They fought teachers to get me in the top classes, even if I wasn’t qualified to be there. I was one of the youngest students in my grade and I always struggled and had tutors.

I dreamt of being an actress in front of the screen, but none of the choices I made ever led me that way. Academically, I always chose the business route. My goal was to be successful somehow, to run a company. I knew that I was going to have a job and a career. I never really thought about being a mom, and certainly never thought about being a stay-at-home mom. I was more concerned about where my athletics were going to take me.

I dreamed and dreamed of the Olympics and of athletic glory. I wasn't one of those girls who dreamt of my wedding day. It was more about me and my athletic career, athletic glory, and exciting wins. In my mind, I thought I had a lot of athletic ability. I am not a world-class athlete but when you have parents that tell you “you are great,” that
helps a lot. God worked my life in a great way. The right coaches saw me. I was a goalie, which allowed me to get more visibility as a niche player.

I didn’t have a major boyfriend in high school, but I dreamt of a dream hunk boyfriend. He was Ricky Schroeder: blonde hair, blue eyes...very attractive. My dream guy was definitely athletic and successful. He was not an average Joe. He was special. It sounds so shallow now, but at that age I didn't think about a caring, loving, good dad. None of that was on my radar. I never got that guy in high school, which was a gift from God because I had a lot of innocence and naivety left when I finally met my husband.

I met Matthew during June orientation at Boston College before the semester even started. As soon as I saw him, I instantly had a humongous crush on him but tried to pretend that I didn’t. During pre-season, I saw him all the time. I was there for field hockey. He was there for football.

There were so many blonde freshmen on my team that he didn't even know I was the goalie. He just knew there was a pack of blondes. He didn't know who, but he liked the whole group of us. One night, a big group of athletes got together to go to “Who's on First” in Boston. When we all got on the T to go back home, I purposely sat next to him. I was heart in my hand about him, but tried to play it cool. He was so cute. Matthew talked the whole way home. He likes to talk. He told me everything, his whole family history. The stories I still hear now are the first ones I heard that night. We talked that whole night and then finally, around two in the morning outside one of the freshman dorms, he gave me a kiss. I was so excited and crazy about him.
We hung out all the time after that. We'd stay up for hours talking, never wanting to leave. I used to say, "Mary has a little lamb" because he never left my side. We were together constantly. Neither of us set out to be locked into a relationship, but we found joy in each other.

I didn't really compare myself to other girls until I got to college. I knew from hearing girls talk in high school that bigger boobs were more attractive to guys than smaller boobs like mine but I thought, “It is what it is; I'll make it work.” In college, I started realizing that I was supposed to care about labels and my weight. My roommate was an anorexic bulimic so I learned a lot about the reality of eating disorders. Then, being around other female college athletes, we all started comparing body types. We all wanted to be leaner, taller, and more muscular...mostly to be attractive, but also for a competitive advantage.

When Matthew and I started dating, I was jealous because I was comparing myself to other girls who I though had an interest in him. Some of the girls on the soccer team were just Barbie dolls. They weren’t necessarily after him, but I thought, “why wouldn't you want him? He's wonderful, he's adorable, he's the best looking guy in the world!” When I look back it seems so silly, but that’s the mentality I had.

My field hockey coach, who I think was anorexic, used to weigh me before practice because some of the girls on the team told her that I had an eating disorder. I didn’t. I was trying to lose weight and stay fit, but I still ate. Matthew used to say, "I'm going to go to your coach and vouch for you because I see what you’re eating.” I later
found out that the girl who told my coach that I had an eating disorder was the girl who Matthew cheated on me with. Needless to say, she wasn’t my favorite person.

On top of the coach picking on my weight, she wasn’t that phenomenal of a coach so I got frustrated with that. No one trusted her, but I treated her differently than a lot of the players. I thought I owed her respect because I felt endowed for the $100,000 scholarship she gave me. I respected her outwardly, but not inside. She made people red-shirt, sitting out for a year, for her own purposes when it might not have been best for that girl’s life or field hockey career. As a captain, I still feel like I should have done more to protect the other players from her.

Some of my self-doubts in college stemmed from her and some just stemmed from being a girl. In high school we didn't work out, we just played. I was a size eight. I didn't know I was supposed to want to be skinny or fit. After my freshman year in college, my Dad bartered dental work with a woman who taught karate to work me out. We jumped rope, did sit-ups, and ran on the beach with a weight vest. I started to learn how to be an athlete and train. That's when my body started changing, and then somebody said, "Wow you look really good," then I thought, "Oh okay, I'll keep doing this."

Even now, if I talk about eating healthy my mom gets mad. She says, "I love food, food's great." She loves to cook and if no one eats it she gets mad. She hates that I’m so healthy. It drives her nuts so I don't even tell her. She thinks it's too much, it’s crazy, that I’m over-the-top. She was not an athlete, no one pushed her to be. She didn’t have that kind of support.
It’s not that they pushed us to be athletes, they just kind of opened the doors for us. My brother might say differently, but I never felt pushed. They just paid for me to go to camp and paid for me to have equipment. They were very supportive. My Dad rearranged his whole dental schedule every week so they could come to every game. He drove to Boston twice a week, two and a half hours, up and back for my games.

They were incredibly supportive. Sometime in college, my dad told me, “You’re going to have a job after college, you’re going to do accounting.” He explained that the knowledge of accounting would help me with whatever I needed in a job after that. I bought in to his logic. I don’t know what I was thinking. I liked writing and the creative arts, but I never pursued it. I dreamt of being a sports broadcaster, yet I was just taking business courses so nothing ever really connected. I loved my philosophy class and my law class. I had some things that I really loved but they weren’t in line with the jobs I was looking at. I was very confident that I could get any job. I was very confident.

I knew that Matthew wanted to be in the NFL, but he wasn’t in the national newspapers and Boston College was not a really good team. I knew he was smart and he did well academically. He was creative in how he was successful. I never worried about what he was going to be, but I wasn’t sure it was going to be an NFL player. I was so in love with him, I just wanted to be with him I didn't care what he did.

I was focused on what I was going to be and I felt like I was on a great path. I was very confident. I thought, “I’m going to do accounting, I’m going to get a job from this job then someone else is going to want me because I do such a good job here and an opportunity's going to open.” I also remember my dad saying that accounting is a great
career for a woman. Accountants can have kids, work part-time, and move around to any
place they want. For some reason, I felt like, with Matthew, I was going to be moving
around. I don't why. We had never even talked about marriage, but I lived and died by
him. I just loved him. It’s so awful to say, I was so independent, yet I was just so in love
with him.

My senior year, I made the United States Field Hockey team. I was supposed to
go to San Diego during my spring break to train. It was right after the Atlanta Olympics
so it was going to be another four years until the next Olympics. I thought, "Is this what I
want? Matthew is here and I want to be where he is.” So I gave up field hockey. I
remember saying “Okay, this is it, it’s over; I’m hanging up my stuff. I’m not going to do
this anymore.” I didn’t want to be away from Matthew. Ultimately, it came down to
that.

Matthew and I graduated at the same time and then he did a 5th year of football.
Out of college, I set out to get a job right away. My first job out of school was at Price
Waterhouse Coopers. I made a salary of $30,000/year. We thought we were so rich. I
received a $1,000 signing bonus. That was a big deal. I was his sugar momma. I lived
two miles down the street from campus, so I’d still come to campus all the time.

I didn’t know Matthew was going to get drafted. He wasn’t even invited to the
combine. There wasn’t any really success in college that I thought of. A local guy in
Boston wanted to be his agent, so Matthew signed with him. Then a Green Bay Packers
coach came to his pro-day, and then they flew him out to Green Bay. That was huge. He
only met with one other team, the Giants. He drove down to see them.
Then draft-day arrived. We were at his house all day. Two of his close friends were there playing basketball with him. A phone call came during the sixth round and it was the Packers saying they were going to draft him. The intense excitement was really kind of surreal. I was in the house just kind of sitting there, everyone was screaming and jumping around and I was eating a cheese wheel in the back room. I didn’t know what him being drafted meant. Right away his dad, who is a former NFL player, said, “It’s going to be hard to make this team.”

Matthew went out to Green Bay and I was still working in Boston. I never thought of going out there, partially because his Dad made it sound like it was going to be hard for him to make the team. I heard from Matthew’s parents that some NFL wives followed as soon as their boyfriend or husband was drafted. I never once thought about leaving my job to go out there. I thought, “He’s going to try this and when it doesn’t work I’ll be here working, advancing my career. I’ll be the stable one and we’ll make it.” I was so naïve, just living life day by day, pay check by pay check.

Within a couple of months after drafting Matthew, the Packers signed Klinger, who was a former first round draft pick. We were in Matthew’s bedroom and his walls were covered with Sports Illustrated covers. He stood up on his bed and pointed to one of the covers and said, “This guy. I've been laying in my bed since I was in high school looking up at this guy, and now that’s who I am supposed to compete with?” He was an older player, maybe 31 or 32 at the time. Klinger made the team, and by the grace of God they kept Matthew on the practice squad.
I was still working as an accountant and trying to become a CPA. I was studying for my tests -- it was the biggest thing in my life. Even while working to advance my career in accounting, I had other passions. I was still trying to be something else sports related. Somehow, I just thought things would work out. I wrote a letter to NBC to be their correspondent for women’s sports. I wrote a letter to 'Sports illustrated' to write for them. I got rejected. I didn't even hear from anyone. I realized then that I had taken a path away from all of the things that moved me. I didn’t love what I was doing, but I took pride in what I did.

Matthew and I dated for another two years. I lived by myself in Boston while he continued to fight for a spot on the Packers team roster. I went out to visit him once or twice during each season. It was a big deal when I went out there because we weren’t married. I couldn’t stay with him because his parents would disapprove, so I stayed in a hotel.

You asked if I ever worried about him cheating on me when he was in Green Bay. I didn’t. I felt like I knew where he was at all times. His saying about Green Bay was, “There's nothing here, you don't have nothing to worry about.” He’d say that all the time. He was protected that way. Luckily, he was not somewhere like Miami where more temptations might’ve presented themselves. He wasn’t out clubbing, that’s not what they did in Green Bay. He was always with one of his newly married teammates whose wife was out there. They and another older player who had a wife and kids invited him over for dinners. They were all Christians, so I felt like he was in a marriage-friendly
environment. I lucked out. I probably should have been more worried because he was probably a lot more vulnerable than than either of us realized.

During the spring of his second year with the Packers, I ran in the Boston marathon. That same weekend, he asked me to marry him. It came out of the blue. I wasn’t thinking about marrying him, I was just living my life.

The night before, we were at a diner-type restaurant having dinner. I don’t know where it came from, God must have just put this thought in my ear, and I said, “Don’t ever propose to me in a place like this.” I later learned that he had his hand in his pocket ready to take the ring out and propose to me! He had to change around his whole plan. The next night, “My brother has a recruit for BC that he has to take out, we should go and check-in on them.”

So, we were driving through Harvard Square and he said, “I can’t find this bar.” We parked and got out and we were walking to Harvard Square and all of a sudden he turned around and got on a knee with the ring in his mouth and he asked me to marry him. I was so happy. He was everything I wanted. He was it.

I immediately started dreaming of an amazing wedding. My parents gave me a budget, but I was so shallow. I thought, “I must have a church with stairs, you walk up… it has to be a beautiful church…” We even interviewed different priests. It was ridiculous.

That summer, I moved in with his parents and lived there that whole year. His brother’s fiance lived there with us too. We didn’t get married till the following year, so we had a long engagement.
I was still Catholic then. Around that time I started going to his parents’ Christian church because I had been living with them. They sent us to a Christian marriage weekend which we totally blew off. We got there and we went to the movies. We did get some nuggets, so it was good that they sent us.

We got married the following June during his off season. We went on a week’s honeymoon and then Matthew flew back to Green Bay. Soon after that, his brother and I drove across country to Green Bay with all my stuff in my car. It was fun.

We lived in Matthew’s rented apartment where a bunch of the young players on the team lived. Things moved quickly for me. We got married, I moved across the country, and we built a house in Green Bay, which we shouldn’t have done. He was the backup quarterback at that time, and I think we were pretty confident he was going to be the number two quarterback to Brett Favre. Danny Wuerffel was the other quarterback on the team then. Who builds a house as a back-up quarterback? It was crazy. It was a $300,000 house - about 2,500 square feet, which was enormous to us. Every other house in the neighborhood had brick all the way around it, but we didn’t have enough money to do brick all the way. We had brick on the front with regular siding on the back and the neighbors were totally ticked.

In August, he went to training camp and I got a job. Deanna Favre had just started a small bank. I was an accountant, becoming a CPA, so they hired me. I helped them write policies for the bank, set up the computer systems, and anything else that needed to be done. I went in with the partners and met with the CFO’s of the companies who wanted loans. I researched the companies and if it was a good company to give
money to, we went over their financials and they asked what I thought. I also did teller stuff, group mortgages, and home mortgages. I did all kinds of stuff.

I wanted Tuesdays off because Matthew had Tuesdays off. Green Bay was such a football-crazy town that they let me do it because he was a Packer. It probably helped that Deanna, Brett Favre’s wife, owned the bank. Most Tuesdays, Matthew and I would go to Milwaukee to do an appearance. He’d make about $500 for an appearance and then we’d drive back. It was awesome. In Wisconsin, the players are so popular that just about any of them can do appearances and get just about anything they want for free. We furnished our house that way and we had two cars that were given to us just for him doing appearances at the car dealership. It was insane to us, two kids, that people were just handing us so much money and so many free things.

Soon after I moved there, we started attending a couples Bible study with the team. I’d never been to a Bible study before then. Most of the couples who attended were new Christians like us. The Wuerffels were the exception – and they were amazing. A local pastor led the Bible study at his house. We studied a book called the ‘Disciplines of Life.’ It was on faith, money, and marriage. One week he challenged us to take a sum of money and give it away and then come back and tell our story. I took $100 and drove down the street. I saw a Mexican guy walking on the sidewalk. The rule was that I had to proclaim my Christianity to the person. I got out of my car and pretended that I had been running. As quickly as I could, I said, “God has blessed me with this money I want to bless you.” Then, I turned around and I sprinted to my car and got in. Matthew chose a drive-thru window to pass on the money. We were all kind of new Christians, so it was a
really special year. I was just checking out Christianity. Kabeer, one of Matthew’s other teammates who was a single Muslim at the time attended the study. Now, he is a die-hard Christian. He had lots of questions about Christianity that were answered there. We all did.

I was only in Green Bay from September until December. The Packers only made it to the first round of the playoffs. We lost to San Francisco. Brett was going through a lot then. He had just gone into rehab the year before Matthew got there and he was detoxing from the drugs and the women. There was one story that Matthew told me about taking a private jet with him and the other quarterbacks where some wild things went on. The antithesis of Brett was Reggie White, who was also on the team. He was an AMAZING Christian man. Matthew was just enthralled by him. He really started his Christian walk there with Reggie.

Reggie White and Danny Wuerffel were amazing Christian leaders. We became friends with Danny and his wife, Jessica. They blew our minds. When I met Danny, I thought, “Wow. Is he an angel? Honestly, is there a glow coming off of him?” People didn’t talk like he talked. We were coming from Boston, where it was just a rat race. I thought, “They’re going to give us a ride in the airport for free? What are they going to want in return? What’s the deal here?” I couldn’t imagine that their intentions were only to help us out. And Jessica was so anti-materialistic, anti-anything of the world. She was joyful and kind and wanting friendship. I had such a guard up against friendships with other girls from my experiences in college. I didn’t trust the intentions of other
women, because on the field hockey team everyone seemed like they were trying to gain a competitive edge over the others.

Jessica shocked me, I could just be myself with her. She wasn’t how I expected an NFL wife to be. My first experience with other NFL wives came soon after I moved to Green Bay, when Brett Favre had invited us to come to a bar after a game. I remember going upstairs and all of the players were in a private room. The guys were playing pool and the wives were talking about their boob jobs. I was so not fancy...I was trying hard to be, but I was not where these women were. I wasn’t jealous or trying to compete with them. I thought, “Wow, I don’t want to ever be that shallow”.

Still, I was excited about the team aspect of connecting with other NFL wives. I felt like I was a part of a special club because I was on the team. I thought of the other wives as my little group or my team. I wanted it to be that way. I thought, “Matthew’s on the Packers, I’m on the Packers. We were going to fight for this team to win and that’s all we care about. We love the Packers, we think about the Packers.” I expected the other wives to be into it like I was into it. Some were, and some weren’t. I expected them to know as much football and to know who’s on the team, who’s not on the team, to care about doing things for the community as a Packer group.

There were a lot of young girlfriends and wives at the same stage as me, without kids. I spent a lot of time with them. We had fun. Like us, they were just trying to make the team, special teams guys, all-out kind of players. We were all hanging on by a thread. No one was making major money. All of us were all kind of in the same boat, just
enjoying each other, enjoying being young and having enough money to not be worried about how we would pay the bills.

Around Matthew’s coaches, I was very respectful. I was very quiet, not a loud-mouthed wife. Matthew didn’t tell me how to act, I just knew to keep my mouth shut about certain things. His mom would say things to Mike Holmgren that I would never say like, “Don’t talk to my son that way!” But she was so beautiful and flirty that she could pull it off. From me, it wouldn’t come off that way. I could never talk to a coach that way or be that playful with them. As a wife, in public, I toe the line and treat Matthew’s coaches the way I treated my own coaches. I wasn’t very playful with my own coaches. I was always very respectful. I was just there. I listened to them. I didn’t talk. I did what they said. My job was to make them respect and like me, not to be a boat-rocker. I want to be seen as a quality person, a responsible person. I felt like I was being judged as the athlete too. That had been my identity for so many years.

When I met the amazing people in the NFL who were Christians, I wanted to love Jesus, or at least to understand Christianity. I wanted to have what Jessica Wuerffel had, her kindness and her joy. I wanted to be seen as that kind of person. But how do you get to a place where you love Jesus? I definitely started changing a little bit, little pieces of me. The first change was that I stopped swearing. Before then, I swore a lot.

Around that time, I started hearing Christian music for the first time. Then I started thinking, "Hmmm, this is interesting." I started to like it a lot, then learning the words. I never read the Bible before then, so I didn't know any verses. When I found out
that Christian music was made up of Bible verses, I thought that was really cool. The music started to move me.

It was sometime during that first year or so when I really started to think of myself as a Christian. When we got married, I told my parents that we were going to start going to a Christian church where Matthew had been going in Green Bay. They didn’t really give me much grief about it. I know it’s a big deal for them but they let it go because they don’t like to cause conflict.

We were traded to Seattle the next off-season and I was pregnant with our first child. When we got there, Mike Holmgren said, “My grandchildren’s lives depend on how you do here.” I remember Matthew and Mike being up at the podium saying, "Our goal is to get to a Superbowl.” I felt like that was a huge promise we were making to the city. It was terrifying. Matthew and I were both thinking, “This could go really bad.”

I’d never seen Matthew win an NFL game. He’d only played in pre-season games and he was the holder during kick-offs. In college he did well, but it wasn’t like he threw touchdown after touchdown. He threw picks, crazy picks.

I was really scared. The Seattle sports writers were negative and after him; it was hard. Mike f-bombed Matthew up and down, time and again, and blamed every bad thing that happened on him. I felt like he was using Matthew as the scapegoat when things didn’t go well. Matthew didn’t play well. He was hurt. The team wasn’t that great. I remember running in downtown Bellevue, swearing out loud at the coaches because I was so mad at them and I was so scared.
A couple of months after bringing us in, the Ravens cut Trent Dilfer and Holmgren signed him in case Matthew didn’t work out, to cover his butt. He came in with an attitude like “I just won a frickin’ Superbowl, I’m not going to be sitting on the bench.” Trent had been around long enough to know that Matthew was probably going to get his butt kicked and he was going to step right into the starting position. And that’s what happened. Matthew got his butt kicked.

Right away in Seattle we met a whole new group of amazing Christian couples. Matthew’s quarterback coach, Jim Zorn, and his wife, Joy, were amazing. Molly Huard and Brock Huard, the other quarterback on the team were amazing to us. We had come in to compete with them and they were so gracious and helpful to us. Cass Dilfer, Trent’s wife, had three kids and she got pregnant the next year with their fourth. She had to be so bitter about being cut and about Matthew starting over Trent, but they were Christians and were so good to us.

The women on the Seahawks showed me with their actions what it meant to be a Christian. That first year, we were still the starters. They were so good to me. I didn’t even know them and they threw a baby shower for me. It was awesome. They probably did it just because it was routine, but it was great. They showed me how Christian women act and that they put competition aside for fellowship. Cass invited me in her luxury box the week Matthew started in Trent’s place. I said, “I have this older couple coming with me to the game.”

“They can come too,” she said. I think they happened to win the game.

Matthew played well, it must have killed them. Well, maybe not, but if it didn’t kill them
it was hard. Matthew began the season as a starter but then got hurt in his first game. The Raiders ripped his shoulder and beat the crap out of him on the field. He played hurt the whole season. Eventually the fans started booing Matthew and calling for Dilfer. It wasn’t long before he was the starter and Matthew was his backup.

Chuck and Barb Snyder were the team couples study Chaplains. Barb ran the women’s study and they ran the couples study together. They had been a part of the Seahawks Bible studies since 1975. They were ingrained as the marriage leaders of the team. Everyone said, “Oh Chuck and Barb fixed my marriage.”

Barb was all about wives submitting to their husbands. We butted heads because during the Bible study I would say, “Just a minute -- I don’t think that I should stay home just because I am a woman who should submit to my husband...” But she just kind of stuck with it.

“This is your role and you're submitting to your husband and you should take care of him. That's what the woman should do,” she said.

It was a time of immense change for me. I wasn't working and I was embarrassed that I wasn't working. I had such a complex about it. I started every conversation with, “Oh, I went to BC, I'm a CPA. I worked for 3 years, etc.”. I had to work it into every conversation because I was so insecure that I didn’t work. I’d be talking to someone and I’d think, “I can’t believe I just did that again. I just had to tell them that I was smart.” I did that with everyone I met. When I went to charity events where we were hobnobbing, I thought that because he was a quarterback and I was his wife sitting next to him, I needed to let everyone know that I wasn’t just his wife.
I wasn’t working because I was pregnant and about to have my first daughter and I wanted to be home with her. I knew deep down that staying home with my children was the right thing to do. I said, “Someday I’ll go back,” knowing that once I had a child I wasn’t going back. I knew that I wanted to take care of my daughter until she didn’t need me to take care of her anymore. I thought maybe that would be until she was in high school. I told myself, “Who’s going to hire me because I’m going to take leave right away? I didn’t know anything about transferring my credentials to the state of Washington.

I felt financially secure with Matthew. I didn’t feel like I needed to work. Matthew had just signed a contract, I think he made a million dollars that year. We felt like the richest people in the world. It was crazy. We were making about $60,000 the year before. I also grew up seeing that my Mom didn’t work because we were financially secure, she just worked for my Dad in his dental office. Even though I had those innate feelings, I still wanted to put forth an image like I needed to work and that I wanted to work.

I wanted to prove to myself that I was smart and accomplished. I had an MBA/JD scholarship that I received through the NCAA and I had five years to use it. I always reminded myself that I had that scholarship to go back to law school. It helped me feel like I still had something going. After five years, I wrote a letter to extend the scholarship. They granted the extension but after a few years and two more children, I just forgot about it.
I knew that I was going to be at home with the kids and I felt more and more financially secure with Matthew. I also had the Christian NFL women as examples who were staying home with their kids and showing me that life is all about being a mom and supporting your husband. They helped me justify my actions. They helped me say, “This is the right thing. This is the Godly thing.” I was never completely at ease with my decision not to work, but I felt like Bible studies and the Christian women on the team gave me ammo in the argument for why I was doing it.

The truth is, if I had a really cool job I’d be okay working. My sister in-law, Elizabeth, is the host of a popular talk show, she has a clothing line, a cookbook, her own line of power bars...if I had a really cool opportunity like hers, I’d be doing the same thing she’s doing. My dream jobs probably aren’t compatible with Matthew’s career. I could have seen myself running a cosmetic company or some other interesting type of company. I would have loved to have written for Sports Illustrated Kids or Women's Athletics. I couldn’t, though, because I didn't have any writing experience. I’d only done business. But, if I’d had that opportunity, I think I would have taken it.

It was a process for me to be okay with the idea of being a stay-at-home mom. I felt like, why did I go to school and work my butt off all those years? I wanted my kids to think their mom was amazing. I didn't know how they could hang on to anything about their mom if their mom was a stay-home mom. I wasn’t super fashionable, there wasn't anything that I had, other than just me, to offer them, no special talents. It didn’t feel like enough that I was just me.
After our first season in Seattle, we bought a house. The day after we closed, Matthew got a call from his position coach telling us that Trent was going to be the starter the next year. It was so hard for me. Matthew was growing as a Christian and learning and trying to figure it all out himself. That helped him stay pretty even keeled. I wanted to hate Trent.

As an NFL wife, becoming a Christian made all the difference. I remember Barb Snyder saying, "You have to go through a trial in a God-honoring way to really solidify your faith." I knew that hearing Trent was going to be the starter was a trial for me. It was something for me to move through, not just to live in. It was a challenge to figure out how I was going to make it through.

Matthew did not play well in the pre-season games. Trent solidified himself as the starter, but then sometime during that season Trent sat out because he was hurt. Matthew, as the backup, got to start that game. I remember it vividly. They were playing in Denver. I drove over to another wife’s house to watch the game. I had a one-year-old and a newborn in tow. We got there about five minutes into the game. I opened the door to her apartment and she said, "Matthew's already thrown two picks." It was his worst game ever. I was devastated. I thought it was the end of the trial for us when Matthew was starting again, but we were still in the thick of the storm.

I was freaking out, but I had great advice coming in like, “Turn to God, turn to God, turn to God.” I didn’t know how to turn to God, so I listened to Christian music and it was therapeutic. I had great Christian women around me on the team who I could turn to.
They would ask, "Are you doing okay"? I would try to say the right things, and sometimes if you say things you can kind of bring your attitude along with it. Matthew was really strong, and he wasn’t in the dumps so I would never let him see how upset I was. He didn’t want me to freak out.

“Don’t freak out, you can’t freak out,” he’d say. He was trying to deal with it too.

Looking back, it was a tough time, but it went by quickly. After about two years of trials, Trent got hurt and Matthew had to play again. There was no one else. Mike admittedly thought, "Whatever, I'm going to lose my job, every coach is going to lose their job because we're not having a winning season." They went with Matthew by default. They started throwing the ball and it worked out. It was totally God’s grace that it worked out. It wasn’t an amazing end to a season, there were ups and downs, but Matthew played well enough that all of the coaches kept their jobs.

Soon after that, many of the wonderful Christian women who had been mentors for me left for one reason or another. Most of their contracts were up and they were signed by other teams.

The following year, the Dilfer’s son, Trevin, died. Cass and I were never best buds, but that year both Matthew and I were devoted to the Dilfers. If they wanted to go out, we went out. We were completely focused on them. I would do anything to make Cass laugh or have fun with her. Trent led a couple’s study on The Purpose Driven Life by Rick Warren. It was really great. It’s amazing how minuscule football can seem after such a tragedy.
The next year, Trent signed with a different team and no one showed up for our couple’s study. We weren’t close enough friends with any other couples on the team that wanted to study the Bible with us, so it was just us with Chuck and Barb. The same thing happened at the women’s study.

The next year, we didn’t even have a women’s study because no one showed up the year before. We made the decision to transition away from Chuck and Barb for couple’s study, thinking we needed to bring in new blood. Matthew thought that what we were missing was integration of the black players and the white players together in one Bible study. He was hell-bent and on changing that culture somehow. The problem was that he and Shaun Alexander, the team’s star running back who was black, butted heads all the time. Eventually, one of the interracial couples on the team kind of broke down the racial barrier.

Then, in 2005, we (The Seahawks) had an amazing season. Going to the Super Bowl was so exciting. It was surreal, like a dream come true, more than I could have ever imagined. It was so exciting. I was so happy for Matthew and his family. It was such a gift. I felt like it was the pinnacle of excitement and joy, like it was what our life was going to be about. The Super Bowl opens so many doors financially and security-wise for players, and I think especially for quarterbacks. I remember thinking, “This is it, we’re set. Matthew has reached the Super Bowl level of respect.” I so badly wanted the respect for him that only a Super Bowl could bring.

We had signed a big contract the year before, so I felt like Matthew leading the team to the Super Bowl meant that the money that we got was validated. We had just
leased a Hummer and we were living in this huge house with all kinds of advanced technology. I thought, "Oh my, what are we doing? We are driving a Hummer, who do we think we are?" Pro Athlete’s Outreach, the Christian conference for NFL players that we attend, was all about making the wise decision. We had all kinds of new money and it was up to us to make good decisions with it. It was on my heart big time. I didn’t want to waste the money God had blessed us with, but that’s what I felt like we were doing.

The security that the Super Bowl brought for us wasn’t forever financial security. It was more about the here and now. I don't think too far into the future because I feel like Matthew and I are smart and we could always get a job. It was more about us still loving the NFL and wanting to be able to stay in the NFL.

Getting ready for the Super Bowl was so much fun. I was really focused on helping Matthew win the game. I'm not a party animal so I wasn’t even thinking about Super Bowl parties. I was only thinking, “We need to win this game. How am I going to help Matthew win this game? Let’s stay focused.” We flew in with the other players’ families on the private Seahawks charter. That was fun.

At my mother-in-law’s prompting, I went shopping for new clothes. She told me I needed to step up my look because Matthew was going to play in the Super Bowl. I bought a Gucci bag and I felt so guilty about that bag. In fact, I gave it away a couple of years ago. Someone from the team called me because they were asking wives to give their best purse for a fundraiser purse giveaway. I felt better after it was given away, but still, I shouldn’t have done it. There was no need.
A few years ago, one of the other wives had a “purse party” where we bid on fake name-brand purses. Just last night I went to a charity event and I brought the fake Chanel that I bought that night. I threw it under my coat when we got there. I was embarrassed to have such an expensive-looking purse. I think I would have been ten times more embarrassed if it was real. I don’t know why. I want fancy purses. I would love a Louis Vuitton bag, but I don’t know if I can not feel bad about having it.

Having fancy items like that just seems materialistic to me. I know it's okay, but I feel undeserving. I don't know why. I don’t know who would judge me. I think I’d be embarrassed in front of my family, except that my sister buys fancy purses. Maybe the difference is that she works and she buys them with her own money. I’d also be embarrassed to carry an expensive bag in front of Matthew’s family. Matthew’s mom is always put together great in great clothes, but she is a bargain shopper and always finds the best stuff for great prices. I’d be embarrassed that they would look at me like I was wasting money that Matthew made. If I was working, then I would feel okay about it. I don’t know why I feel that way. Matthew never asks me about what I buy. If I said, “Matthew, I really want a Luis Vuitton bag or I really want a Chanel bag, can you please buy one?” He wouldn’t even think twice. I guess I’m worried about the perception of other people seeing me wasting money that he makes. Isn’t that awful? But I still want it.

Getting back to the Super Bowl, I remember walking into the stadium thinking, “You know what? If this had never happened, if we never had all of this excitement, we’d still be okay. You don't have to be feeling this right now; you'd still be an okay person.” It was a very weird feeling.
The game was terrible, a horrible loss. At the party after the game, a woman I’d never met before came up to me and said, “You have no idea what God might have just spared you from. Being the quarterback who just won the Super Bowl doesn’t always bring the tangible rewards that you think it might.” I thought about that a lot. She was right, we didn’t know.

When we got back to Seattle, I was still so energized by the Super Bowl and so into the Seahawks that I wanted to do everything I could to make them the best team ever. I don’t think I ever felt equipped to lead women’s Bible study, but I felt like it was my turn to take on the responsibility. I always felt like if you lead people then you’re responsible for them so you can’t half-ass it -- and I know that the Bible says that. To me, it was no joke... you don't mess around with leading women toward Christ.

I sought out women on the team who were smarter than me to help me lead the study. One of those woman was Deanna Engram. I appreciated that she was black, too, because that opened the door for more of the black women on the team to participate.

We ended up going to a golf club for our women’s Bible study and paying $300 per session to be there. I didn’t want to pay that much, or even to host it at the golf club, but that seemed like it was most convenient for most of the women to attend.

The next year, Deanna’s husband signed with a different team, so I was kind of on my own. I started hosting women’s study at my house. Everyone was invited. The women who showed up were at all different places spiritually -- some had never been to Bible study before, some had never opened a Bible before. It didn’t matter to me whether they only showed up for the free babysitting, if they just wanted to socialize, or
if they were there because they lived in a state where they don’t know anyone. If they were brave enough to show up, I was happy to see them. My goal was to create an oasis when they walked in the door to an awesome, warm, welcoming place to feel included and welcome. I loved having the wives over, I loved the social part of it. When I came to Seattle, I spent a lot of time in other wives’ houses. That was the big deal. I was happy to be able to do that for other wives.

There are common threads that seem to run through the lives of NFL wives. Our husbands are under a lot of pressure and we take on some of that pressure. We seem to always have some issues with in-laws, either our husband’s family or our own family. There is a lot of money in the NFL and money plays a big deal in our lives and it causes stress. Pressures increase as the season goes on. A lot of women have trouble finding a role for themselves in this new life. Some of us with kids struggle balancing raising kids the right way and taking care of our marriages and our husbands. One of our non-NFL speakers described NFL life as “A cauldron of pressure, everything normal women face and more”.

Our Wives’ study, for me, was a place where we could be vulnerable and share our hopes and struggles with each other. I wanted it to offer something good to anyone who showed up, whether they’re Christian or not. Maybe later in their lives they’ll say, “I heard about that once.” Whether they put it into practice right away or not, getting that nugget in there is a gift in itself.

So much of my growth as a Christian has been because of little nuggets I picked up along the way in wives or couples Bible studies in the NFL. The day that Matthew
and I were challenged to give the $100 to a stranger in Green Bay was a day that started to change how I felt about giving and about charity. It was a practical application that taught me, “This is not your money.” Then, when we got our first really big contract, I thought, “Okay, God’s given us this money, and we can’t hold on to it with a closed fist, it's not even ours.” It was up to us to make sure we didn’t give it to a bad financial investor or to bad charities, and also to be sure we didn't waste it on material things.

I wanted to be involved in charitable events, but I wanted to baby step into it. Matthew did a football camp one summer. We didn't make any money off of it, we just paid people to be coaches from the money that came from the camp. We pretty much broke even. I also hosted a 3k race in honor of Pat Tillman. Sandy Gregory, who does community outreach for the Seahawks, helped me do it all. I made posters and I logged all of the participant stuff. It was a very mom and pop operation. I wanted to be able to handle everything myself. The team photographer printed a bunch of big pictures to put up of Pat Tillman. I tried to keep it small enough that I could really be in control of it.

My number one priority was having a successful event without making it stressful in any way for Matthew. I’ve watched some of the other wives who committed their husbands to all kinds of things. Meanwhile, their husbands were just trying to manage their own stress. I felt like I couldn’t add stress to Matthew’s life because of what I was doing.

Things that I do cause him stress. I’m very careful about what I get involved in. This year, I wanted to coach our son’s five-year-old soccer team. I’m very careful to not over-stress myself because I don’t want to put any pressure on Matthew to help me. I’ve
noticed this is a bad thing. I should coach my son’s soccer even though it is stressful because I'm going to miss the opportunity if I don't. I'm torn. Matthew wants to be able to leave town during the off-season. If I’m coaching Henry’s soccer, we can’t go. If I have any responsibility, Matthew can't do what he wants to do.

I am coaching the team. It takes a total of four hours a week. Sometimes it’s stressful. The kids don’t always listen to me and I get scared that they’re going to hurt each other. I’m totally stressed out and at times I feel like I'm a horrible coach and it's crazy. But, I can’t go crying to Matthew.

Matthew plays football, he makes a living for our family. My responsibilities are at home. At home, I take care of everything. He’s not a big home fixer-upper. If something’s broken, he tells me and I take care of it. I try to take care of things before he even knows about them. For many years, I didn't tell him a lot of things, I just took care of everything. I made a lot of decisions without him. I don’t want him to have to worry about it. I make all of the financial decisions without him. I deal directly with our investment guys. I take all of the calls and go to all of the meetings. He’s given me a lot of responsibility that way, a lot of trust.

Matthew helps out around the house when he can. He took the trash out this morning, but I got it ready to take out. I took one out and he took the other two. I showed him what he needed to do. He is usually out the door before it gets done.

Matthew’s amazing with the kids, when he’s around. He takes them to school. He handles any technology stuff like the computers or getting the kids their headphones. He’s different. He does everything differently than I do. If we’re going on a trip, he
books the flight, and he figures out what seats we’re going to be in. He books the hotel and the rental car. He’s in charge of anything like that and he takes a lot of pride in that. I don’t ever have to worry about it.

When I feel like I can’t handle everything, I remember that I don’t do any of the stuff that he does. I’m quick to pull myself back from complaining. He has a career. He goes to work where he has millions of people depending on him. If he plays well, coaches keep their jobs. He has to manage all of his teammates, himself, his body, the media and making money. I don' have to go out and play in front of millions of people every week. That's a big stressor. When I feel like I have a lot on my plate, I remember that he has a lot too. I don’t have to go out there to get my butt kicked, get beat up. Football hurts. He physically takes a beating and mentally he still has to perform. I'm okay with these jobs that I do.

When he’s done with football and he’s back in the house with us, it’s going to be a difficult transition. Where will I find my worth when he’s helping with the things that I did? I don’t want to give up any of that because at home taking care of my family is where I get my worth.

I don’t know what we’ll do after football. I feel like something else is going to happen for Matthew and that I’m going to be there to support him. He’s interesting. He sees things I don’t see. He's a visionary in a different way. I hope something happens for him because he's got a lot in him.

What about me, right? I don’t know what I have in me. I really don’t. I’m smart, I think. When I think of looking back on the timeline of my life to see what I’ve
accomplished, I don’t know what will be there. I know my kids will need guidance. I don’t think I can be there for them and guide them the way they will need to be guided if I’m working. It takes a lot of time to really be there for kids. I help them with their schoolwork and help them get to sporting events. I want to help them do well so they can be successful. I am the one who makes sure that they have they equipment that they need, that their clothes are washed, that they're mentally stable.

But then what? When they’re grown? I don’t know, I suppose something will happen for me. Right now we give some time and money to Medical Teams International, it’s a part of me and my days, but most of my day is my kids. I'm very happy making them happy and making Matthew happy. It takes a lot to make them feel happy and secure. It takes a lot to run a house and to run the kids. At the same time, I feel like some other passions are kind of opening up inside me. For example, maybe I will lead a Bible study for the moms from my kids’ school.

It’s not that I feel like I should be their leader, but I had good Christian NFL women there for me, giving me the right advice and introducing me to the right books. Maybe I could do that for them? The best advice I could give them is that your husband isn’t meant to make you happy; you have to find your own happiness. He is not to blame for everything that's wrong. Women need to look at themselves and ask “Well, what is it like to be married to me? What do I do? They need to respect their husbands and then they will receive love from them. Understandably, the more husbands love their wives the easier it is to respect them. But, I would encourage wives to do nice things for their
husbands, to shock them, and to make their marriage fun...all of the things that we have learned as NFL wives.

I’ve learned since being an NFL wife that we should find our happiness in our relationships with God. He created each of us to be something, to be special. He made each of us uniquely and He is the One we should look to for comfort and joy. Our husbands can’t provide those things. We need to focus on our blessings instead of the things we don't have. God is amazing.

There have been times when I’m not happy because Matthew isn’t home and I have so much to do or he is about to walk in the door after a horrible game. I want to ask, “Why did you throw that pick, what happened there?” or “Why didn’t you handle the situation this way?” If you pray first, you will hear the spirit tell you,

“Hey, wait a minute, this is not going to go well.” That's God working in you, that's the Holy Spirit talking to you. Some call it their conscience.

Some husbands say, “This is my world don’t you dare come into it that way because you can’t possibly know, you can't possibly understand all the dynamics.” Matthew isn’t like that, but I know he gets stressed. I think that many NFL wives are pretty savvy women. We have both intuition and knowledge of the game when it comes to football. We have to be careful, though, because there’s a fine line between sharing our gut feelings and pushing our way into their world. It can be really difficult for me after a long day to keep my mouth closed about football. When he gets home, I want to ask him about what I’ve read on the Internet or about what the coaches and the GMs are
saying to the media. But he is already stressed from work. It’s not going to help him to hear me stressing.

I think I am a good wife. I don't look to him to make me happy. I have my own life and I take pride in what I do. I have a relationship with God. I support Matthew by allowing him to have the luxuries of a good home and kids who aren’t a mess and who are easy for him to spend time with. I keep things moving along. He manages his football and I help him manage everything else. I help provide a stable life and I hope I create joy by being his wife. We are friends and we have fun together. It helps that I like football and it’s fun for me to watch him play.

I also try to work on the constructive criticisms that he gives me. For example, he told me that when I’m insecure that doesn’t make me attractive to him. So, I don't talk bad about myself in front of him. Instead of fishing for compliments, I try to be more confident in myself because I know he finds that more attractive in me.

I try to learn from what he tells me instead of getting upset that he corrects me. When I’m angry with the kids and not being patient enough, he might say, “You just broke her spirit with the way you were so tough on her.” It’s hurtful to hear bad things about yourself, but God has helped give me a teachable spirit. I think it’s helpful to hear what your husband tries to tell you. Earlier in our marriage we were immature about arguing. Learning how to fight and be mature about it, admitting when I’m wrong, and knowing when I’ve acted badly has helped.

We still sometimes argue, mostly when I feel frustrated because I am overly busy and I don’t think I'm going to get a moment to myself. He’ll say something like,
“What’s your problem? You’re as mean as they come.” I know where it’s coming from, it’s because I need to get out to go for a run, to have some time to myself.

Matthew is an awesome husband and I attribute that largely to the great Christian men he had as examples. His dad, the Seahawks chaplain, several former quarterbacks and coaches who he looked up to have all served as great examples of Christian leaders. I am so thankful for his relationship with the Lord and what the Lord has put on his heart. Matthew tries really hard to be helpful and to do the right things. He’s got a big job and a lot of stress and he handles it all really well.

You asked me how Matthew sacrifices for me. I struggled to come up with a solid answer. The first thing I thought of is that he shares his wealth with me, but that sounds pathetic. He shares everything he has with me, unabridged. I’m able to wear all of these clothes that I have on, go to the grocery store, all without worrying about money. He gives us everything he has. He ultimately does everything for us. The decisions he makes in football are also sacrifices for us. When he had a concussion but could have played, he told the truth because he didn’t want to risk brain injury. That was for us. When he had his bad back, he told the truth because he wants to be able to by physically active to be a part of our family, to be able to play with our children after football. Those are sacrifices, I think.

Last season was the final season on Matthew’s contract so now he is a free agent for the first time ever. My goal this year was to never once talk about our deal or say that we were gone next year. It just seems like any time I saw a wife with one foot out the
I had a luxury box for two years that I split with some other wives, but this year felt like we were not a big enough part of the team for that, we were just an in-limbo part of the team. I didn’t feel like we had the right to be in a luxury box. Besides that, we’re up there and the other wives are all in that player’s wives area and I’d rather be with them.

There were several times last year when it was really hard to be in the stands, especially when the crowd booed Matthew. The most difficult time for me was when, in the middle of the game, after Matthew threw two picks, they put in the backup quarterback. That was very difficult. I was ticked off, so I was trying not to say anything to embarrass myself. I knew to keep my mouth shut and and just kind of act with grace and try not to wish bad on the other quarterback. I knew that it was still best if the Seahawks won. I was very in control and outwardly peaceful. God was right there with me.

When we got home that night and I watched the TV copy of the game, I was fine until they panned over to Matthew’s face. It broke my heart to see his face on the sideline as he was hearing that they were pulling him. I could see the hurt. I just looked at the coaches and thought, “How could you?” But that’s football. Matthew was walking in the room as I was watching and his brother was there with me— I had to run

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5 I was sitting beside Sarah when that happened and I heard her yelling, as she looked to the sky, “Why God? What am I supposed to do? Why is this happening, God?”
down the hall, go in my closet and just bawl my eyes out because I felt so bad for him. I felt so bad.

Matthew’s mom came in town for the next home game when the other quarterback was starting. Her perspective was, “We’ve got to hope that the other quarterback plays well -- Let’s pray for him right now.” So, we prayed for him and with the right words, the right attitude followed. I couldn’t help but to think back to Cass Dilfer and how good she was to me when Matthew was starting instead of Trent. I realized, “This is his story, it’s not our story. He’s not doing it maliciously, he’s trying to do the best he can and maybe this is God's plan for him.”

The next week we played at home, against the Saints -- who were the defending Super Bowl champions. Praise to God they let Matthew play. I don’t know why they changed their mind to let him play. Maybe they thought he was going to go in and get hurt, or maybe they thought they were going to get beat by the Saints and Matthew wouldn’t play well. But Matthew played well. It was one of the best games that he’s ever played. It was awesome. It was surreal. It was God. It was vindication.

After the game, our kids ran onto the field with Matthew. He hoisted our son onto his shoulders and our daughters were close in tow. It was the first time they were on the field with him. The whole crowd was going crazy. It was so much fun. When I watched Matthew walk off of that field, I realized that after ten seasons with the Seahawks, this might be the last time he walks off of that field as a Seahawk. I was overcome with emotions.
I felt thankful and at peace. I remember thanking God for allowing it to end that way. Just like during the Super Bowl berth, he had respect. The fans respected him as a quarterback. They believed in him. At that moment, the coaches believed in him too. They respected him. I prayed out loud, “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” It was so humbling. It just felt undeserved. A week before, I never thought he could leave Qwest Field that way. We felt like we owed that to the Seahawks fans. By leaving the way he did, he didn’t let the fans down.

Despite whether or not the coaches and management want us now, we will always be Seahawks. We were with this team when they went to the Superbowl. We were here with a different coach, staff and a whole different team of players. Only a handful of these players were even here then. None of the other current players were here when we arrived in Seattle. We did this with this team. We bled for this team, these fans, for each other. And these players had a fun time together. Those are great memories. They can’t take those away. I will never feel bad about wearing my Seahawks clothes in public. We’ve earned that right.

I appreciate and love being in the NFL. It’s so fun. I love being part of the team. I get really into it. That’s part of who I am. I’m tightly wound and care a lot about the team and think a lot about it.

I’ve heard outsiders say, “Oh come on, it’s just a game! It’s just a sport.” To us, it’s not. It’s our team. It’s our family. I understand that it’s a sport, it’s a game and there are really bad things that happen in this world, and there are some real life and death things going on. But, our everyday reality as Seahawks wives is that we really care if the
Seahawks beat the Forty-Niners. We really care. We connect with it in such an emotional and different way. It’s not just a game to us. It means more.

I’ve heard that the four biggest stressors in a person’s life are moving to a new place, changing jobs, divorce and death. In NFL marriages, couples may move to a new place and change jobs once a year or more. As twenty or twenty-five year olds, you’re in a constant crisis mode. Every game is an emotional high or an emotional low. Are you going to make the team? Will you have a job next week? Will you still be living in the same city? Will you be able to afford your mortgage payment? There’s a good chance that the player and his wife are thousands of miles away from either of their families, it’s just the two of them. It’s sink or swim. Wives are dealing with feelings of uncertainty and loneliness and so are their husbands. Together, they have to find a way to make the marriage work, to make a life and a family. When they have children, they don’t have their moms around to help them. Then, they might lose their job. An average NFL player might play on three or four teams, in three or four states, before his NFL career is over. That could mean one or two different states each year. Even with family close by to help with children and moving that would be traumatic. NFL wives have to deal with that reality mostly on their own. On the other hand, I’ve seen that moving away from families of origin really helps couples bond. The emotional highs and lows of the NFL bond them as a couple and as a family. I’ve also seen it tear them apart. It's stressful.

What happens for us when football is over will depend on what kind of job Matthew gets, because he should work. I don’t think, “Okay, now it’s my turn,” because I believe in him, the talents in him, and I think that he should keep pursuing something
because there’s a lot special there. I think a man should work; it’s awkward when he doesn’t. It’s not that I think that a woman shouldn’t work. I think she can and that she should if it’s important in their financial security of their family. I don’t stay home as a martyr or because I think it’s the right Christian thing to do. It’s such a luxury to be able to stay home with my kids, and for that luxury, I feel blessed.
Chapter 7: Beth

My story is not so cute. Tim and I met at a fraternity party at his college our freshman year. I was engaged at the time but I was kind of on the outs with my fiance. Tim came up to me and said, “I just want to let you know that you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.” It would have been special if he didn’t seem like the typical big black football player. They all made comments like that to women and it was typically just an attempt to get sex, not a relationship. I blew him off but he was persistent. He kept telling me that it wasn’t just about sex. I made him convince me. I didn’t consent to a kiss for four months!

I promised my mom and dad I wouldn’t be with a football player. I was an athlete, recruited to play volleyball. Usually athletes dated other athletes, but I swore to my parents that I would never date, touch or kiss a football player. I promised them. Everyone knew their reputation. Even our volleyball coach told us what dogs the football players were. Our practice outfits were made of spandex, but we weren’t allowed to wear spandex in the cafeteria because of the reactions football players had given girls in the past. They wanted to have sex, and they wanted to have sex with any woman they could find. Showing up in spandex apparently made them think they had a shot. It just wasn’t a good situation to be in. I actually ended up switching schools my freshman year, though that was mostly about the coaching.
After Tim and I had our first kiss, our relationship became serious right away. I had feelings for him, but I didn’t want ours to be a rebound relationship from my fiance. After our first kiss, there was no denying it. I waited those four months to make sure that he was being honest about his intentions and that I was honest with mine.

I was lucky that Tim wasn’t like 99% of other football players. He wasn’t just trying to have sex with me. That wasn’t even on his radar and it definitely wasn’t on mine. It was nice that we were on the same page in that regard. My parents reacted a lot better than I thought that they would, probably because the guy that I had been with before was such a loser. I think that they would have done anything to get rid of him.

Soon after Tim and I started dating, I realized that we couldn’t have a normal relationship because he was a local star. It was a bit of a rough time for us. I remember one afternoon, when we were leaving a baseball game, a large group of people suddenly swarmed around Tim. It was all “Tim, Tim, Tim,” and he didn’t introduce me to anybody. I felt invisible not only to the others, but to him too...so I left. I didn’t say anything, I just went home. I didn’t have a cell phone so he didn’t have any way of reaching me. He freaked out and called all of my friends. Finally, through a friend he reached me.

“Why did you leave?” he asked.

“Who do you think you are?” I answered. I had never even fathomed that people could get so excited over a person. I realized that day that his hyper-visibility would be something that I would have to deal with if I chose to be with him.
It wasn’t an easy transition. In fact, when we were dating, I sometimes wondered if some of my friends really liked me or if maybe they were just friends with me because I was dating a star football player. There were one or two friends who I trusted, but with the others, I didn’t know if we were friends or if they were just trying to get something out of the relationship.

Tim and I were engaged my junior year after dating for two years. I still had almost had a year of school left when he was drafted. He left school before graduating because he was projected as a first rounder and didn’t want to risk injury in college. He fell a bit but stayed in the first round. I was happy for him because if he had slipped into the later rounds, which he could have done, he might have felt disappointed. Following him across the country right away was never an option. I had one more year to play volleyball and needed to finish my degree.

I wanted to get married right away. To be honest, I was worried about him moving on without me. It wasn’t the trust thing, but I had heard things about the cheerleaders seducing the players. I wasn’t worried about him but I think people have a lot more respect for marriage than they do for a girlfriend. I would like to think that somebody wouldn’t throw themselves at my husband like they might if he was just my boyfriend. We were married in July 2005, just a couple of months after he was drafted and less than a month before his first training camp started.

His mom tried to convince him to do a prenuptial agreement with me because she thought that the only reason I was marrying him was for his money. To Tim, money was
never a big issue. He grew up without money and explained that relationships were always more important to him than finances.

I think his mom’s concerns were racially motivated. I’m from Canada where there doesn’t seem to be the same racism against blacks and the racial divides that are present in the United States. For my family, the race of the person I dated was never an issue. It certainly was for his family, though. In the south, no decent white girl would be with a black person. In their eyes, I’m well educated and I’m a pretty enough girl that I shouldn’t be with a black person.

I was hurt that she was so persistent but, out of stubbornness, I wanted to sign the prenup to prove to his family that my love for Tim wasn’t about the money. It had nothing to do with money. My mom and dad said that if I signed the prenuptial agreement that they would no longer support me. They thought a prenup gave him too much power and that it was the wrong way to start a marriage. Who would want to start a marriage being forced into something like that? It would have been one thing if it was Tim that wanted the prenup, but it was only his mom. That was tough for me because I thought she knew me. I thought that she knew I wasn’t like that. I come from a very wealthy family and I don’t need Tim’s money. She knows that I can make it on my own. I’m independent. Out of respect for my parents, I didn’t sign it.

Two years into our marriage, Tim’s grandpa, the family patriarch, took me by the hand and apologized for how his family had treated me initially. He admitted that he wasn’t sure about my intentions when Tim and I decided to get married but that he could
see that I ended up being the best thing in the world for his grandson. He told me that he was thankful for me. It was very sweet.

After being in their family for a few years, I can see why his mom wanted me to sign a prenup. Marriages where they’re from don’t seem to last, especially when money’s involved. I also realize now that as a mother, black or white, it was her job to protect her son from anyone taking advantage of him. She is great now and we get along very well. Tim and I feel blessed to be up in Seattle where race doesn’t seem like an issue.

Before I moved to Seattle, I thought the other NFL wives would look and act fake. I imagined that they would be uneducated with big boobs, blond hair, and skinny waists. I thought they would be mean and stuck up. I realized when I got here that the other Seahawks’ wives aren’t like that. In fact, most of them are educated; that shocked me. I’ve heard that baseball wives fit the stereotype better than NFL wives. I heard from one of my trainers that they all sit and complain about each other and compete for who has the largest diamond in their ring and who has the skinniest waist. They’ll talk about each other behind their backs and then talk with each other as if everything is fine. Another person told me about a baseball wife she knew who had a surrogate mother for her child because she didn’t want to destroy her body. She was beautiful and she would tell you over and over again that she was a model. I’m glad Tim isn’t a baseball player, but I would still love him and trust him if he were.

My first interaction with other NFL players’ girlfriends didn’t help me fight my initial stereotype. It was my first time at one of Tim’s games and a woman who I later
learned was a player’s girlfriend was sitting in front of me. We talked a little bit, just enough to tell her that I was with Tim and a little bit about me still being in school across the country. After that, I heard her saying mean things to the woman sitting next to her about Tim being likely to cheat on me. She said things like, “She doesn’t live here so I bet he’s doing this, he’s doing that.” Then she said to me, “I don’t really care about how strong your relationship is if you’re 900 million miles away.” I couldn’t believe it! I didn’t believe that Tim would ever cheat on me because I had so much faith in him. Still, her comments initiated doubts. It broke my heart. I thought, “I can’t believe that this is coming out of this person’s mouth.” “So this is what the NFL is going to be like,” I thought. It was actually worse than I thought. I felt sick to my stomach.

That’s when I really started to question if I had made the right decision about being with Tim. I questioned whether or not I would go to his games or if when I moved to Seattle I would get a job instead. Before Tim was drafted, I really wanted to be a big CEO of a company, to pursue a strong business career. After he was drafted, my business dream didn’t seem important anymore. I don’t know if it was because of the fame that comes with being in the NFL or if it was the paychecks. Maybe it was because I still felt like the NFL would overshadow any job I might have. After that first game, I questioned how I could have given up my dream so easily. I wasn’t going to give up my life to go to his games if that was how it was going to be.

Just a few weeks after that, a relative of a different player turned around and gawked at some other wives and me during the whole game. He was clearly checking out our bodies. He said things like, “Who needs a halftime show? We have our show
here.” I felt dirty. I know how protective Tim is -- he would have been so hurt if he knew another man was talking to me like that. To make it worse, the other player’s girlfriend never even apologized for the guy’s comments. Thankfully, I soon realized that the girlfriends I met at the game were exceptions to the rule, unlike most of the other wonderful NFL wives that I later got to know.

There are so many great Seahawks wives, but it took me a while to meet people. During the first six months I was in Seattle, the Seahawks went to the Superbowl and it seemed like everyone else was happy. Tim and I had one of our biggest fights because I was depressed, it was raining, I didn’t have anyone to confide in. Any time I wasn’t with Tim, I was by myself. I felt like I lost myself. I just sat there, crying, thinking that I needed more in life than just being Tim’s wife. Now, at least I am a mom and I have my degree to fall back on, if I need it. We try to open our house to new players and their wives because we know what a lonely time it can be.

When I met Vern, whose husband was a rookie with Tim, she and I instantly bonded. They wound up only being in Seattle for two years, but she is the best friend that I’ve ever had. I’ve always been a person that’s very giving and if anyone ever needed anything I would be there. I’d never had anyone who was that for me. It was nice that I finally found someone to reciprocate.

Vern wasn’t at all what I thought a stereotypical NFL wife would be like. She was down to Earth and not overly glamorous. She was beautiful, but didn’t flaunt it with expensive fashion or pricey jewelry. I have a friend who is decked out in Chanel constantly and I just kind of thought that that’s how the NFL was going to be. She’s not
an NFL friend, I just met her through work. The interesting thing is that you wouldn’t even know that most of the Seahawks wives are NFL wives.

When you’re in the NFL, it can be a challenge to stay humble, but Vern didn’t seem to struggle with that. People expect NFL wives to dress a certain way or to have nice vehicles and jewelry. Sometimes I may look like a stereotypical NFL wife because I just love fashion. My secret is that I always buy clothes on sale, but no one knows it. I’m very thrifty. My maternity jeans were only $100 at Nordstrom Rack but at the regular Nordstrom they would have cost about $287. I buy all of my son’s clothes there too. They’re all high-end clothes for the price of Carters. We also drive nice cars because one of the dealerships gives Tim a free car to drive. We don’t pay for anything except for the gas. It’s funny how many free things we’re given and how many places are willing to bend on prices when they find out who he is. For the most part, though, if I am out on the street someone’s not going to look at me and say “Oh, she’s probably married to somebody famous” because that’s not how I present myself. Still, with all of the perks, Tim and I have to try hard to keep each other grounded and humble.

The typical Seahawks wife that I’ve met is an amazing mother, a great supporter of her husband, and always puts her husband’s needs and her family’s needs before her own. I think those are great qualities. Sometimes it goes too far and women let their husbands talk to them badly just because they’ve had a bad day at work. Instead of getting mad back, they internalize it. Or sometimes girlfriends will take on a lot more responsibility than they should. They’re not even married but they’re putting their boyfriend’s needs in front of their own. That can be bad for players too because everyone
in society lets players get away with whatever they want. If you don’t put your foot
down and if you’re not the one that keeps them accountable, then you can get into some
really sticky situations.

As NFL wives I think part of our job is to keep our husbands grounded. When
you do everything that they want and need and take care of all their errands and I think
sometimes it let’s them kind of lose reality a little bit. It’s great to give them those reality
checks it’s really good for them. For example, Tim is making dinner for me tonight.

In the NFL, I think husbands have more power than their wives because they
bring in so much more financially. As wives, I feel like you lose who you are a little bit
because it’s always about your husband. At home and with others, you kind of get swept
under the rug a little bit. That can make it hard to have friends too.

People have told me that I should try to make friends outside of football, but I
never know if people are just trying to be friends with me so that they can meet my
husband or come over to my house to hopefully meet one of the team’s superstars. I’ve
also met a lot of people who I know love Tim and me regardless of his job. I have just
had to sift through people to find real friends. I don’t think that other people, outside of
professional sports and some other similar high-profile professions have to question
relationships like that.

When I meet strangers, on an airplane, for example, it’s nice to talk about
something other than my husband. When he was first drafted I probably would have
been more apt to tell people what Tim did for a living. Now, I never tell anyone on
airplanes because I don’t want to have to talk about football for four hours. I tell them I
live in Seattle because I got my MBA out there, so school took me there, and then my husband’s job kept us there. Then they ask what he does and I say he’s a plumber. That ends the conversation.

Money is interesting in the NFL, partly because everyone knows how much each of our husbands make. It’s easy to find out what any of the players make. You can see their salaries online. When I went back to school after Tim was drafted, I had classmates and teammates ask, “How’s that $8 million treating you?” The truth is that I was living like they were. I lived off of my scholarship money until I was out of college. I lived in the grossest apartment that you could ever imagine. It was rickety. It reminded me of a summer cabin that was 100 years old.

Classmates said things about how they were struggling, alluding to the fact that I was not. I knew it was because they knew the numbers of Tim’s contract. They didn’t know that it wasn’t guaranteed money. The printed numbers make it look like you have so much more than you really do. Not only is most of it not guaranteed money, but once taxes are taken out, there are still people and bills that have to be paid. His agent, our financial advisor, our house and a house for his mom all came out of that. The numbers can be deceiving.

My life is completely different than it would be if I didn’t marry a football player, mostly because of finances. Just like most couples, Tim and I have always fought about money. Unlike most couples, our fights are about how we spend our money instead of whether or not we have enough money to pay the bills. I’ve learned, though, that having more money just creates more issues around how it’s spent. One example that we ran
into early in our marriage was when Tim agreed to fly in one of his female friends without talking with me about it. She had gotten hit by her husband and she was leaving him. That was fine because it was a bad situation but those sort of things should require some communication.

I’m a lot more financially responsible than Tim. Being a business major, I learned about finances for four years in school. I’ve taken the lead on our personal finances and finding out about financial advisors and agents. If we argue, it is typically about money. We disagree sometimes on how much we’re going to give and to whom. He is more of a spender and I am more of a saver. It’s been a blessing that he married me because I’m very financially oriented and I have a long-term view.

Most people would probably want to make what we make and think we should be set for life. But when Tim sees his teammates’ checks, it makes his paycheck seem small. There’s a lot of financial disparity on this team. There are players who make 10 to 100 times more than Tim makes. In Tim’s second year, he saw that one of the running backs was making $400,000 every two weeks. He really was set for life. If Tim stopped playing tomorrow we would be financially secure for at least thirty years spending the same way that we spend today. I think that’s a huge blessing.

I think we’re typical of NFL couples in how we handle finances. It’s common that the woman pays more attention to the finances than the man does. When we were first married, we weren’t typical of other NFL couples in other ways though. I made him do things around the house like cook or do the dishes. Typically, if I cooked dinner then he would clean up. I knew it wasn’t fair that he had to do anything around the house
because I didn’t work. I went to school, but it’s not the same. It’s not that I thought it was the woman’s job to do things around the house, it was just my way of giving back and making it easier on him. By asking him to contribute, I think sometimes I made it really hard on him.

I knew from Bible studies with other NFL wives that it was important to be selfless, especially if it was the night before a game. But that was hard for me. For example, one night one of my friends got into a really bad car accident or another time a girl that I played volleyball with for five years turned out to be a lesbian and it just freaked me out. Both times, I called him at 2:00 in the morning and he had a game the next day. I just wish so much that I hadn’t done that.

Now, I generally put Tim in front of myself and his needs usually have to come first. When he comes home he’s probably hungry so I have to drop what I’m doing to make him dinner. A lot of the things that men generally do around the house, I do. He doesn’t want to take out the trash after he’s been beaten up all day. When he comes home, it’s all about what he needs. Our life is kind of about him right now because it has to be. His job is so stressful and I’m not working so I feel like I have to be a lot more supportive of him than a lot of my other married friends have to be with their husbands.

There were times later in his career, like right after we moved to the midwest, when it just made me mad that I could not ask him to be there for me. I had to have an emergency c-section to deliver our daughter a month early. I had to be on bed-rest and after I delivered her, I was in a sterile hospital in a new city with no one I knew and I couldn’t tell him how lonely I felt. I just wished I was at home with my friends and my
support system and not sitting in a hospital room for twenty-two hours by myself. I didn’t tell him, though, because I knew it would add unneeded stress for him.

During the season, I never want him to have to stress about anything because he has enough pressure with his job. I want him to want to help out around the house and with our children, to have the time and the energy for those things. I would never ask him to do that, though, because it would stress him out. Our biggest fights are probably during the off-season when I think that he should be helping out because he’s not playing football. I think he’s so used to not having to contribute that he thinks that it should be the same year-round.

It was really tough at first for me to be a stay-at-home wife. It was a huge transition for me because I’m really independent. Tim is from the south and he is definitely the nurturer. It was a slap in his face that I could take care of myself. He really wants to be the provider. I could go out and work right now but at this time in our life it would make both of our lives worse and the financial contribution would be nothing. With my MBA I can go out and probably make $80,000 to $100,000 a year but he can make that much with just a player performance bonus. It just doesn’t make sense for both of us to be in high stress jobs when we don’t have to be. That was a really hard transition for me as somebody who wanted to make a career for herself.

By the time I was pregnant with our first child, I really liked the idea of being a mom. I had faith that it would make my life a lot better. That year was really great because I slept a lot and for twenty-four years I hadn’t. It was nice not to have a million things to do. I filled in sometimes at a clothing boutique but for the most part I just took
care of the house. Somehow I kept fairly busy. I did three Bible studies that year which helped me nurture myself so much spiritually. The Bible studies probably helped the transition better than anything. I was around other women who also stayed at home and they helped convince me of a woman’s worth in the home. They showed me, using Biblical principles, that it was a worthwhile calling to take care of your husband and to raise your child. I worked hard during that time studying the Bible so that I’d be able to answer all of the spiritual questions that I knew my son would have for me someday.

The Bible studies were all connected with the NFL. We did the team’s couples study. It was really great for us to see that no one else’s marriage was perfect either. They fought about some of the same things we fought about and they showed us that it was okay to have conflict in our relationship, as long as we were working through it. We enjoyed working together with teammates to help us build an even healthier relationship. One of the other wives also told me about Bible Study Fellowship. I wound up doing that and then we had our Seahawks wives study which was awesome. The wives study helped confirm that I was doing the right thing by putting my husband’s needs first. I learned that my job was to take care of and respect him. It was his job to love me. It also helped validate the way I felt about having to hold so much in and not share it with him during the season. It seemed like most of the other Seahawks wives did the same thing. It is just one of the ways that we honor and respect our husbands.

I think I’ve changed a lot in the last five years. I’ve grown both personally and spiritually. Our marriage has grown leaps and bounds and I’m probably a lot quieter than I use to be. I used to be a lot more outspoken. Now, I try to keep my opinions to myself.
With a group of 52 other women, things are bound to come up that I don’t like. Now, instead of confronting the issues, I just try to let them work themselves out. It used to really hurt my feelings if somebody said something mean about me or did something nasty to me. Now, I’m more confident.

My husband has helped me feel better about myself. Tim is all of the things that a woman could ever want in a husband, he’s just the best. On the football field he maintains his character and his integrity. Off of the football field, he’s an amazing husband who does everything that a wife could possibly want him to do. I’m proud of him for that because it’s really easy, in their field especially, to think that because they’re making all the money that they don’t have to be a good husband. After four years of marriage, I can still say that even when we get into the biggest arguments, there’s no other person that I can see myself being with. I think that’s such a blessing because there are so many people out there who are so unhappy. He’s a blessing.

The happiest time for me in our marriage was getting pregnant and sharing that excitement with my husband. He’s awesome with kids so I imagined he would want to be involved, but I also knew that I’d have to learn not to get frustrated if he didn’t feel like taking care of the baby. I had our son during the season so I tried to prepare myself early for times when Tim wouldn’t want to feed or otherwise take care of our child. I knew there would be nights when I didn’t get more than two hours of sleep but that I couldn’t bother him, especially not during his contract year.

When I had my son, I learned that I couldn’t ask Tim to get up in the middle of the night for feedings. I was basically a single mom for six or eight months until the
season was over. I thought I had prepared myself mentally for that reality, but it was still hard. I became bitter at times, especially when I was most exhausted when our son was a newborn. Tim was out living his dream and I was exhausted and trying to raise our child pretty much alone.

Having a son helped me gain an understanding of how God loves his children. I learned through the NFL Christian conference that when I do something for my husband I do it for the Lord. Sometimes when things are really tough and Tim is being a jerk or just not being helpful but I know that I need to cook for him or just be nice to him, that gets me through. I think “I’m not doing this for Tim, I’m doing this because he’s the Lord’s son. I’m doing this to please the Lord, I’m not doing it to please Tim.” That’s been very helpful.

Growing up, I didn’t envision myself as a full time mom. My dream was to be to become a CEO of a company. When he was drafted, I followed him and decided to get my MBA. I started looking for a job. I wanted to do something in marketing or public relations. When I was pregnant, my priorities changed. I decided that I should stay home while Tim was playing football but then after he retired I thought Tim would be a stay-at-home dad and I would explore what I want to do career wise. I wanted at least one of us to be there for our children.

My plan was to put off my career until Tim retired. After that, I would get a job so I could feel self-actualized. Just doing something other than being a stay-at-home mom would help me feel like I was making a difference in the world. I wanted to make a
company great and add my ideas and my educational background to make it a better and more profitable place.

A year or so after having our son, I realized that I would probably never work again full-time. I was surprised to learn that I am very motherly. I didn’t think I was maternal at all before having him, but now I would lay my life down for him. He changed my outlook on life. Now, I’m a lot more family-oriented and less focused on myself. I may teach or do something else that I enjoy part time, but I want to be a present mother and raise God fearing children. I don’t think that could happen if I had a nanny or let a daycare raise my children. Our family is so much more important to me than going out and making $200,000 or $500,000 a year. Besides that, I know now that I could never have a job that was better paid or that seemed more important than Tim’s job because it wouldn’t be good for our marriage. He needs to be the provider to feel like the man of the house.

Tim is a great spiritual leader. I’m a lot more religious because of my marriage, but I definitely don’t think it’s because of the NFL. We’re very blessed to be in the NFL but I don’t think I’d be any less religious if it wasn’t for the NFL. That being said, it has been a blessing to be able to grow spiritually with other NFL wives because they understand my life and we’re going through the same things.

It is nice to have other NFL wives with whom I can grow spiritually and talk about football. I try not to talk with Tim about football because he deals with it all day. There are times when it’s harder than others. When he started getting some playing time
early in his career, I knew that if he was active in a certain number of games then we would get a large bonus. I found myself starting to ask, “Honey, how did you play?” I had to find it in my heart to say, ‘Okay he’s doing what he can’. It was a lot of money that wound up allowing us to pay off our house. I couldn’t get the thought of the money out of the back of my head. I just told myself to be strong and to talk with him about something else. He told me that he already felt pressure from so many other people, so he needed to be able to come home and know that there was no pressure there. It’s still hard for me.

If he doesn’t play well, we’re not only impacted financially but he could lose his roster spot and we could have to move. That scares me. I don’t want to go anywhere else. I get really excited anytime I hear that he had a great day at practice and received any type of positive feedback. The NFL is so unpredictable and you never know where you’re going to be. Hearing nice things about him from people that matter make me feel more confident that we might be able to stay in Seattle for another day.

I heard early in Tim’s career that some of the players on some teams encourage each other to cheat on their wives. It’s not that I think Tim would cheat on me, I just don’t want him around that influence. The players on our team are a great group of men. I thought that they would be a lot more promiscuous and try to put my husband in bad situations, but that hasn’t happened here. The players are much more genuine than I thought they would be. Even the star players, who I thought would be full of themselves, are very humble.
The bond that the players have with one another is unique because they not only spend all day together at work but they’re often each other’s only local friends outside of work too. As a result, NFL wives are usually friends with the wives of their husbands’ friends. Because of that, NFL wives can become good friends with women who are very different from them.

Despite our differences, we bond because we’re all going through the same things. Most of us have been uprooted from wherever we lived to come out to a city that we know nothing about and live together. In some ways we have to get along. In Seattle we have a lot of great women. I can’t imagine being with catty or mean women and being put in the same situation. I’ve heard other teams are different. We’re really lucky that most of the wives on our team are great genuine people. There are very few bad apples. But when there’s money involved, there are going to be bad apples everywhere. At least here they’re very few and far between.

I think that a lot of the cattiness comes from jealousy. I think that a lot of people see how Tim treats me and the way that he cherishes me. I think some people get jealous because the people they’re with don’t treat them that way. Some women are with players for finances and players are probably with them out of convenience or because the women trapped them by getting pregnant. Some women may not like me because sometimes I say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing and it’s easy to pick on. But, those situations are so few and far between that it’s not even really an issue.

Sometimes there is a rift between NFL girlfriends and NFL wives. I’ve tried to let the Seahawks girlfriends know that I wouldn’t hold that against them. I wasn’t going to
be like, “Oh you guys aren’t married, so I’m not going to talk to you.” I had a difficult situation with one NFL girlfriend in particular while I was trying to be there for her when her boyfriend was not always faithful or good to her. I wanted to let her know that I would be there for her, but she pushed me away. Once someone pushes you away, it makes it harder also for you to be there for them in the future.

If I had advice for new NFL wives it would be to not be scared. I’d encourage them to open themselves up to other women because the other NFL wives have been where they are. It’s not easy being the new person and not knowing anyone. It’s really overwhelming and really scary. If you exude a certain confidence, not arrogance, about yourself and know the type of person that you are, then it’s easy to make friends. Most people are here from other states and they know what it’s like to be the new person. Most women are pretty understanding. Also, keep true to yourself. Don’t let money change your relationship or who you are as an individual. It’s really easy to start to feel entitled. It’s such a hard thing to do but so important. Lastly, don’t read the newspaper or the internet. The reporters know very, very little about what’s going on with the team and individual players. It’s very fickle and it changes as the wind blows. If you’re winning, you’re great and if you’re losing, you suck. There have been times when people have said the nastiest things about Tim and I know that they’re not true. I know that that’s not what his coaches think of him but it still hurts my heart a little bit.

Overall, though, the NFL has been a wonderful experience. I’ve met wonderful people, the financial perks have been great, and we have been able to travel all over the world. Because of the NFL schedule, we have six months a year to do whatever we
want. I really like being able to spend so much time with my husband. I bet in our five
years of marriage we’ve spent more time together than most people have at ten or fifteen
years into marriage.

If you had asked me when I was eighteen if I thought I would be married to a 6’
4”, 320 pound black man who played in the NFL, I would have looked at you like you
had ten heads. That’s not what I thought I had in store. It just changes as you’re in the
relationship. You grow together. The details don’t matter. That he’s a football player
doesn’t matter. That’s just what love is.
Chapter 8: Rachel

Identity was an important aspect of life for me both as an NFL wife and a graduate student seeking to become a scholar. My identity was carved out of my narrative past, which largely had been a tale of academic achievement and the dream of a future life as a professor of interpersonal communication, love, and close relationships. Suddenly, with little forewarning, I was placed into a story of a divided self in which I had to adjust and adapt to an immersion in an unfamiliar story. As the years passed, I would see that a significant part of me was being made over, assembled and socially created institutionally by the NFL. As an NFL wife, my perceived differences with other wives had to be set aside as I settled into an identity in which validating my husband and our marriage, raising my daughter, and managing our finances was the crux of my identity. As an NFL wife, I had virtually no choice as I found myself slowly becoming “one of them”.

My narrative seeks to provide an inside look at the trajectory of my identity formation and transformation. I attempted to pursue my academic dream while immersed in life as an NFL wife. Although the story has not yet ended, it is the story of who I was, who I became, and who I wanted to be before, within, and after the NFL.

I remember being a preschooler, snuggling next to my Dad in my parents’ big bed, lying on his chest while we watched football games together. I knew if I stayed quiet...
enough and pretended to enjoy the game, I could probably stay up past my bedtime. I liked watching football because, to my preschool mind, it was predictable. Every minute or less, the players lined back up across from each other, the whistle blew, and the players ran around before lining back up. It was the lining up that I loved. In a simple way, it made football understandable for me.

My Dad also loved to quiz me with logic puzzles and teach me about math. For my fifth birthday, I asked for workbooks and on the first day of kindergarten, I handed a completed multiplication worksheet to my teacher as I entered the classroom. Even more than I loved watching football with my Dad, I loved learning and I took pride in finding the correct answers to questions.

As the years went by, watching football became a memory, while learning became my life. I valued education and I valued good grades on my report card. I also loved playing sports and believed in gender equality. I was one of two girls on my first baseball team and the only girl on my soccer teams throughout elementary school. In sixth grade, my PE coach separated the boys and girls during the football unit. The boys played football and the girls played frisbee. Angered by his decision, I started a petition “for gender equality,” to allow the girls to play football with the boys. I collected signatures from hundreds of my classmates, teachers, and even the school principals. The girls played football that year, and every year since. In eighth grade, I was the only female who tried out for the middle school football team. I thought of myself as an athlete and truthfully never thought much of the girls who stood on the sidelines cheering for the boys.
Football was valued in my family not only because my Dad loved to watch the games but my cousin’s grandfather, Bud Grant, was the head coach of the Minnesota Vikings, a position that held a lot of prestige within my immediate and extended family. As a child, however, I never attended a professional football game, nor do I remember watching the games on television after I started school.

My brother loved the idea of playing football, and we frequently played pick up games with neighbors in our front yard. He didn’t play in high school, though, because my parents thought the sport was too violent and purposely enrolled us at a school without a football team.

In high school, I played basketball and softball, although sports took a backseat to my studies. I was focused on taking the right classes, getting high grades, and accumulating internship experiences to be attractive to college admissions officers. My senior year, I did an internship as a contributing writer for Converge Magazine. The editor served as a mentor for me and helped my dream of becoming a published writer come true when he published two of my articles. It was then that I decided that I wanted to be a writer someday.

Although I don’t remember thinking that football players were more attractive than other boys in school, I was always attracted to guys who played sports. In fact, my first high school boyfriend played on the football team. I also dated two other guys in high school, one played collegiate football and the other played collegiate baseball. My top priority, though, when picking out boyfriends was to find someone who made good grades and valued education.
Despite my love for learning and for achieving, I wanted to travel around the world for a couple of years before attending college. My parents, who were supporting me financially, let me know that wasn’t an option. Because my own bank account was empty, I headed up to Purdue University to start my undergraduate work. I chose to major in communication because of my journalistic aspirations. Immediately, I loved my classes and the university learning environment. At the expense of any kind of social life in college, I was enthralled with my work and the challenge of doing well in my courses.

I met Craig Terrill at the beginning of my junior year in our interpersonal communication course. We were both communication majors, but he concentrated on journalism. I decided that semester to focus on interpersonal communication.

The first time I talked with Craig was on a cold night in October. I stood up from the couch in the media viewing room in one of Purdue’s libraries. “Are you leaving? I’ll walk out with you,” he offered.

“Sounds great,” I answered, surprised by the offer. Craig and I were in the same group of four students put together to complete a class project analyzing the movie, “When a Man Loves a Woman.” I only knew him from class, but his large frame made it hard for him to hide in a crowd. He was 6’3 and nearly 300 pounds, handsome with blue eyes and chiseled cheekbones. That night, he looked exceptionally attractive, dressed in a black suit that he later told me he wore for a football function earlier that night. Though good looking and confident, Craig was normally quiet in class, leaving me to wonder if there was any intellectual substance beneath his athletic physique.
As the self-appointed group leader for our class project, I assigned Craig the introduction and conclusion – it’s tough to mess those up, I reasoned. I needed a good grade on the assignment to get an A in the course, and just in case he was a typical dumb jock, we would still be okay. Though I wouldn’t graduate for a year and a half, I was actively planning my route to graduate school.

On our way out of the building, Craig turned toward me and asked, “So what do you do for fun?”

“Not too much these days,” I answered honestly. “I’m taking six classes and starting to look at grad schools, so my free time is pretty limited.” When we got to our cars, I saw Craig’s guitar case lying in the seat of his truck. “How about you?” I asked, “Do you play guitar?”

“Yeah, I play and sing in a band called The Strangers” he told me.

My hand was already on my car door, but I turned around. Maybe there is more to this handsome football player than meets the eye. I may not have been interested in dumb jocks, but I was curious about this handsome athlete who liked to sing.

“What type of songs do you like to sing?”

“Mostly classic rock, some country.”

“Any Jimmy Buffet?” I asked.

“Yeah, Buffet, Springsteen, Pink Floyd, the Eagles.”

I’m impressed. “Will you sing a song for me before you leave?”

“What do you want to hear?”

“Surprise me.”
He paused a moment and then looked off into the distance as he sang one of my favorite Eagles songs. I tried to focus on every word he sang, but my mind began to wander and to wonder…who is this guy and why am I suddenly so attracted to him? I refocused as he finished singing, “I’ve got a peaceful, easy feeling, and I know you won’t let me down…. ‘cause I’m already standing on the ground…."

...

The next year and a half went by quickly as I threw myself into my courses, intent on graduating a semester early to have a break between undergrad and graduate school. Craig and I had one more class together before I graduated, but we didn’t spend time together outside of class. He had a girlfriend and I had a boyfriend, so we left it at that. I moved home to Florida after graduating to pursue my Ph.D at USF.

...

At the end of my first semester in graduate school, I sat with my classmates at CDBs, an Italian restaurant where we held the last session of our class on the Social Construction of Reality. Because I was the last one to arrive, I found a seat toward the end of the table, next to one of my classmates with whom I had never talked before. I was wearing jeans and a Purdue sweatshirt.

“You went to Purdue, right?” she asked.

“Yep,” I answered proudly.

“Are you going to the Capital One Bowl?” she asked.

“I don’t think so. Where is it?” I asked, oblivious to the game’s existence.
“It’s in Orlando. Purdue is playing against Georgia. My dad is a Purdue alum, and already has his tickets,” she told me.

My mind shifted to Craig. That night, I sent him an email asking if he might have time to get together when he was in town. I also sent an email to my boyfriend, who lived several states away, asking him if he would like to go with me to the game.

Craig responded to my email letting me know that they should have plenty of time to get together. I let him know in my email that I had a boyfriend, perhaps to remind myself that Craig and I would only be getting together as friends.

My boyfriend responded, letting me know that he would like to go to the game, and that he would buy our tickets.

When Craig got to town, my boyfriend was still out of town. I picked him up from his team hotel and we went to dinner at a small Italian restaurant near my parents’ home. There, we unexpectedly danced the mental dance of two people infatuated with each other. “If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?” I asked him.

“I’d probably go to Venice,” he told me. I smiled. I imagined riding in a wooden gondola with him as he sang Italian love songs. “How about you?” he asked.

“Swiss Alps,” I told him, imagining us riding up the mountain in the bright sunshine.

“Do you like to read?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“More than magazines?”
“Hemingway is my favorite,” he answered. That was important, because the man I was dating told me he read “approximately twelve books a year”. I later found out that those books consisted of his golf magazines that arrived monthly in his mailbox.

“Who is your favorite musician?” Craig asked me.

“I think right now I’d have to say Bruce Springsteen.” I don’t know why I answered that I loved Springsteen. The truth was that I didn’t know a single song he sang. A classmate had recently done a presentation about him, though, and I was impressed by her presentation. Fate must have been involved. Springsteen was Craig’s musical idol.

Four weeks later, I flew up to Indiana to visit Craig. I insisted to myself, to my boyfriend, and to Craig that it was a trip to visit Purdue, my friends and my old professors.

The night I arrived, Craig sat on the ground beside the couch where I laid. He strummed his guitar and we sang song after song together for nearly an hour. With the lights low, he slowly put down his guitar and turned toward me. As my mind resisted, my head moved toward his. One long, slow kiss unleashed the hidden crushes that we had both harbored for years.

...

A couple of weeks after visiting Craig in Indiana, I sat in my small bedroom alone, counting the petals from one of the dozen red roses he sent to Florida from Indiana, trying not to love him. I love him not. I love him. I love him not. The attached card read, “I love you.” He also sent a tape of songs he’d recorded for me. His voice
was gentle, “I want to sleep with you in the desert tonight, a billion stars all around… I’ve
got a peaceful easy feeling, I know you won’t let me down…”

*I love him. I love him not. I love him.* I removed each petal like it was a tarot
card that could reveal my future. I believed Craig loved me, but my feelings were not as
peaceful or easy as he revealed his to be. *I love him not. I love him. I love him not.*

The day may have been more peaceful for me if I didn’t love him. Maybe even
easier if I hadn’t flown up to Indiana a few weeks earlier. Or if we didn’t kiss the night I
arrived. Or if I didn’t tell him that I wanted to spend my life loving him. Or if my
boyfriend, a thousand miles away, wasn’t planning to move to Florida to spend his life
with me. *I love him. I love him not. I love him.*

When I was up in Indiana, Craig took me out on his four-wheeler at his childhood
home in rural Indiana. We were out on the farm, where he said the stars shined brighter
than anywhere else in the world. Craig had never traveled outside of the United States –
but I knew that no matter where he was willing to show me the stars, I wanted to be there.
He pointed out the big dipper, the little dipper, Orion’s belt and sword, Taurus, and
Cassiopeia, the upside down “M”. I leaned back into him close enough to feel his breath
on my neck.

“Tell me a secret,” I whispered.

“What kind of secret?” he asked.

“A sweet one.”

“A sweet secret, huh? I’ve got a good one, but then you have to tell me one.’

“Deal.”
“The first night I was down in Florida, the first night we had dinner together, about halfway through the meal, I looked at you and knew that I was going to marry you someday.”

Thoughts of forever ran through my head – thoughts of our wedding vows, of Craig holding up our freshly bathed daughter and kissing her soft belly to make her laugh. I saw us growing old together, going to church, and loving each others’ wrinkled old faces. I was lost in forever – and then I was snapped back into the moment – somewhere in Craig’s perfectly wrinkled 85-year-old face of the future, I saw the 28-year-old face of the man who still called me his girlfriend – a man to whom I promised that Craig was just a friend.

“Rachy, where’d you go?” Craig asked.

“I’m right here.”

“Now you need to tell me your secret.”

“I felt it too,” I whispered.

As I plucked the petals from the rose, I knew the other man could not spend his life with me. Craig’s words had already moved me. Craig’s arms had already held me and the petals from the roses declaring his love were already being counted. I love him not. I love him. I love him not.

“I can’t be with you anymore,” I told the other man as I continued plucking the petals from Craig’s rose. “I think I have feelings for someone else.”

“Is it Craig?” he asked.

“Yes.”
“That’s ridiculous; I know you’re just doing this because of the NFL.”

I hung up the phone.

As the last rose petal hit the floor, I made up my mind. *I love him.*

...

From the moment Craig and I reconnected in Florida and he told me that he hoped to become an NFL player, I believed in him and I believed in his dreams of playing in the NFL. I learned, however, that the odds were against him. Of the over 100,000 high school seniors who play football every year, only 215 (.2%) ever make an NFL roster (NFLPA.com). On an otherwise peaceful day in April of 2004, I knew that if Craig was ever going to be an NFL player, it was going to happen that afternoon. We were at his family’s home in Indiana to watch the NFL draft.

“How many teams still need defensive tackles?” Craig’s brother yelled as he threw open the door.

I checked my list. “Eight, but Tampa needs two. So kind of nine.”

“Could still be the Colts,” he said with a smile. “Has anyone called?”

“Just his agent. He said he expects Craig to go in the sixth or seventh round. If not, maybe free agency.”

“Has anyone called besides your agent?” I asked Craig, turning to look at him at his mom’s dining room table. Lost in an intense game of Gin with his aunt and uncle, he hadn’t heard me, but saw me and winked. “Your brother wants to know if any teams called,” I asked again, returning his smile and wink.

“Not yet. It’s still early,” he answered before laying down his cards - “Gin!”
Jason and the rest of Craig’s family were pulling for the Indianapolis Colts to
draft him. Indianapolis is just thirty minutes away from his hometown. Because I was
committed to a five-year doctoral program in Tampa, even Indianapolis seemed too far
away.

What happens if you aren’t drafted? I wanted to ask. But that was not a time for
doubt. The smell of hope was in the air and the cake on the table had already
congratulated him. I told him the night before that I would follow this dream with him as
far as it goes. But what if we wake from the dream this afternoon? I wondered. He has
his degree in Communication, but all of his career aspirations begin with at least a couple
of years in the NFL. Will I still look at Craig the same way if he is working an entry-
level job rather than suiting up as a professional football player?

Since 9:00 that morning, every television in the house was tuned to ESPN. By the
time the draft coverage began, several of Craig’s college teammates had already been
picked up. Coverage that morning began with the fourth round. The picks were no
longer being announced live by each team, but rather handed in on cards to be shown on
television. The event would normally be about as exciting to me as the National Spelling
Bee. In all honesty, the impossible-to-spell words would typically hold far more appeal
for me than the names of newly drafted football players.

But that afternoon, as the fifth round came to an end, over forty of Craig’s closest
friends and family members had found a seat near one of the televisions. Right before
the second pick of the sixth round, Craig’s phone rang.
He pulled a pen and paper from the center of the table. I rushed to his side and rested my hand on his knee as he answered.

“Hello?”

I couldn’t hear the other end of the conversation. Craig wrote “DETOIT” on the paper. I whispered, “Detroit” over and over until everyone in the room knew who he was talking to.

Detroit was one of the eleven teams Craig and I chose for our “bad” column of possible teams. I’d never been there, but I imagined a dirty city and cold winters. My mind raced: I don’t want to live in Detroit. Tampa has two picks in the sixth round and one in the seventh. He can live with me, the weather is warm, and I can make it to all of the games. I was still holding out hope.

“Detroit said they’re interested in drafting me with their next pick,” Craig announced.

Craig’s football dream was becoming too real. Beneath the sounds of cheers and applause, my heart beat harder as I wondered what life might be like as the girlfriend of an NFL player. How will I feel? This is already too much stress for me! What will we do? How will our relationship change? Will women from Craig’s past come out of the woodwork seeking him as their partner? Will groupies and hookers attempt to seduce him like friends have warned me they might? Am I pretty enough to be an NFL girlfriend? What will I wear to the games? What will the other women wear? Will we get to know the other NFL couples? Will they care what my name is? Will they ask me of
my hopes, my dreams, my fears? Who plays for Detroit? How much are flights from Tampa?

I turned my attention to the television in attempt to silence the voices in my head. Detroit’s pick was next. With my hand in Craig’s, I closed my eyes and silently prayed.

“Dear God, please God, please don’t let Detroit pick Craig. Please God, let him go to Tampa. Please. Amen”

With the 172nd pick in the 2004 NFL Draft, Detroit has chosen…. The pause seemed like an eternity. “Kelly Butler from Purdue.”

Kelly? Nobody said a word. I felt guilty for my prayer, but thankful to escape the winters of Detroit. Tampa still had three picks.

The phone rang again. Craig wrote, “WASHINGTON.”

DC, I wondered? I raised my shoulders to let Craig know I need more information.

“REDSKINS,” he confirmed.

I looked at the list of upcoming picks. Washington traded for the pick right before Tampa’s. Please God; let Tampa take him. We never put Washington in our “bad” column, but I suddenly imagined the pace too fast and the attitudes too political for our tastes.

“With the 180th pick in the 2004 NFL Draft, Washington has chosen Jim Molenaro from Notre Dame.”
The guilt returned. What if Craig isn’t drafted? Tampa was next. My fingers were crossed behind my back. Craig’s whole family was hoping for the Colts to choose him.

“With the 181st pick in the 2004 NFL Draft, Tampa has chosen Nate Lawrie from Yale.”

Without ever having heard his name before, I hated Nate Lawrie. *Am I being punished for praying against the other teams?* Tampa had two picks remaining in the draft and they still needed a defensive tackle. Indianapolis was probably my second choice because of its convenience to his family, but I didn’t want to lend positive energy to any team other than Tampa.

Fifteen minutes later, Craig’s phone rang again. He wrote, “SEATTLE,” beneath the names of the other cities. Again, I mouthed the name of the city to the crowd. Seattle had already been crossed off of our list because they chose a defensive tackle in the first round.

“I was out there once with my uncle a few years ago,” Craig tells the person on the phone. “It was beautiful.”

What are they talking about?

Craig brings his other hand toward his face and I hear his voice crack, “Okay, yes, okay,” he says, pointing toward the television. “Sounds great. Thank you.”

“With the 189th pick in the 2004 NFL Draft, Seattle chose Craig Terrill from Purdue.”
Tears filled Craig’s eyes as he stood from his chair to hug me. Seattle? They
didn’t even need a defensive tackle, I thought with my arms wrapped around him.

He’s not coming to Tampa. I felt like everyone was watching me. When Craig
moved to hug his mom and brothers, I sat on the floor, trying to conceal my own tears of
an overwhelming mix of fear, joy, despair –Seattle is farther away from Tampa than any
other team’s city. Long distance ended my last two relationships. Can our relationship
withstand the distance? Can I withstand the distance? Is this the end of our
relationship? What will happen to Craig now that he is an NFL player? Will he succumb
to the stereotypical NFL traps of lust, violence and greed that I’d read about in Gardocki
(1997) and Ortiz (2004)?

My cell phone rang again and again.

Calls came in from my parents, siblings and friends. “Congratulations,” they
repeated. The accomplishment was Craig’s. The confusion was mine. Will things
change? Will Craig and I stay together if I continue my studies in Tampa while he is
3,000 miles away in Seattle? Could I ever choose a man over my studies? Is there a way
for us to compromise? Will I even like the man Craig becomes in the NFL? Am I
prepared to be an NFL partner? I don’t know how to be an NFL girlfriend – and, despite
my love for Craig, I don’t want what I believe to be an NFL life. I imagined the movies
and television shows I had seen with groupies hanging on players and wives being
pushed out of the way and forgotten about during lengthy trips away from home. I
imagined superficial women who believed in appearances over intellect and in fashion
over faith. Questions and fears flooded my mind. What will my life be like when Craig is
in the NFL? How will I feel? What will we do? How will our relationship change? If I decide to travel with Craig, will I be able to make my dreams of being a scholar come true from across the country? If I don’t move, can I support his dreams from thousands of miles away?

I hid the tears that surfaced in my eyes.

“He did it!” Craig’s mother shouted as she threw her arms around me.

“He sure did,” I said, trying only to show my excitement.

Craig beat the odds.

A couple of months later, Craig and I laid together in the basement of his childhood home. Posters of football helmets and guitar chords lined Craig’s wooden walls along with two bandanas that he’d hung for decoration - one was an American flag that flew above the head of the Winnie-the-Pooh stuffed animal I gave him and the other was an album cover picture of Garth Brooks. "Where do you see yourself in five years?" I asked Craig. "With you," he answered, nuzzling his nose into my neck.

"How about career wise?" I asked.

"Well, hopefully I'll make the team and I'll still be playing football."

Craig had less than a month before he had to report to his first NFL training camp where he would attempt to make the team. Will the Seahawks like him enough to keep him? If not, is he willing to be in Tampa with me while I finish my degree? Do I have the right to ask him to move to where I am? Will we survive if faced with a long-distance relationship? What will he do for a living if football doesn’t work out?
"And if that doesn't pan out, then what?" I wanted to know.

"I'll have to be a professional musician,' he teased, pointing up to the Garth Brooks bandana.

“I still have four years of school in Tampa,” I reminded him. He was silent.

“That’s my dream…to teach, to write, to be a scholar. And the path to that dream isn’t in Seattle.”

“I know that – and I love your dream. Everything will work out,” he told me, “I promise.” I didn’t believe him.

“I believe in your dream too, you know,” I told Craig, “and I will support your dream wherever it takes you,” I promised him. As soon as I did, I wondered if I would be able to honor that promise. Can I hold on to my career aspirations, the aspirations that have become so ingrained in who I believe myself to be? What if he ends up playing in Europe for $30,000 a year? Should a lack of money make the dream any less real? If it does, then does my tuition waiver and $9,000/year paycheck mean that my own dream is only a third as important as him knocking into big burly Europeans? What if he makes the team in Seattle? Is the increased paycheck and status of an NFL player enough to make me follow him there? If not, how will we be able to survive the long distance? If I go, will I always resent him? Do I want to be the girlfriend of an NFL player?

That night, I lay awake in his arms as he snored next to me. His alarm was set to go off at 7:30 in the morning so he could get up early enough to get in a workout. Thoughts of the uncertainty of our future fought with the certainty of my feelings for him, keeping my eyes open long after they wanted to close.
The next week, I scheduled an appointment with my advisor, Art Bochner, to talk through my dilemma. He listened patiently as I described the scenario and weighed the pros and cons. “Most students who leave never come back,” he told me honestly.

“I’m not most students,” I assured him. He didn’t seem convinced. “My education is extremely important to me.”

“Then I suggest you stay here where you will have access to me and to your peers. That’s an extremely important component to graduate school.”

I thought about what he said and I thought about the limerence I was feeling for Craig. A couple of weeks later, I sent an e-mail to my advisor. “Will you kill me if I go to Seattle?”

“I wouldn’t kill you, but you might be disappointed. Follow your heart, but don’t lose your head.”

At the end of August, as the fall semester was beginning and training camp was ending, I chose love over logic and made the decision to move to Seattle with Craig to study NFL relationships. The words of my advisor continued to echo in my head… follow your heart, but don’t lose your head. Eventually, I took that to mean, “go to Seattle with Craig, but take this opportunity to examine yourself and your relationship autoethnographically.” Perhaps I could turn all of the questions in my head into a research project, I reasoned. Surely I wasn’t the only NFL girlfriend to experience these conflicting feelings.
Once I’d made the decision to move with Craig, I was thrust from the comforts of a predictable graduate school life into the unknown and unfamiliar world of partnered life in the NFL. I moved to Seattle both as a graduate student researcher and as Craig’s girlfriend. It made perfect sense as a graduate student exposed to autoethnographic research methods to keep journals and notes of my experiences (Ellis, 2004; Bochner, 2005). I decided to make my life into a research project, reasoning that this would keep me on target as a Ph.D. student. I wondered, did other women attached to NFL players have the same doubts I had? I didn’t question my love for Craig, only whether I wanted this new life. But I was too insecure and too in love to risk a long-distance relationship. I wasn’t sure that I was ready to be so far away from my academic peers and advisors either, but I couldn’t do both. I realized that I wasn’t ready for the glitz and glamour and high-heeled shoes of the NFL life I projected, but the alternative was too risky. Time would tell.

... 

Seven months later, having made the team and now a year into our relationship, Craig asked me to marry him. After I said yes, he gave me a card with a young boy and girl holding hands running in the sand. It said, "For the One I Love." Inside, the card read, "In you I've found the love of my life and the closest truest friend of my heart." He wrote:

*I love you more than I could ever say with words. I didn't even know what love was until you came into my life. Thank you for saying yes to our lifetime of bliss,*
love and laughter. You are my best friend, my soul mate and the love of my life. I love you.

With his proposition of marriage, I became even more intimately involved with this topic as I began my own search for personal and academic meaning as an NFL player’s wife.

...

I learned quickly by watching others and listening closely at Bible studies that the values of the NFL and Academia are different. The progressive politics of academia encouraged me to think like a feminist: don’t submit to a man, don’t dress up for a man, keep your own identity, your dreams are just as important as his. Already I had observed that the NFL valued women who were feminine. The messages were clear: let your man feel that he is in control, do everything you can to make his life comfortable, his job and health are most important, looking good for him and submitting to him will help keep him faithful. It seemed like as soon as I stepped into the NFL life, I began to feel the fears of other NFL wives -- the fear of not looking the part or bring a good enough wife -- and I was afraid even the feminist strength I had learned to honor in academia couldn’t save me.

...

“This was in my locker for you,” Craig said, as he handed me a copied pink flier. It read: Seahawks Wives and Significant Others, Let’s celebrate the births of the four new baby Seahawks born during the off season.”
The invitation was from Sarah Hasselbeck, whose husband, Matthew, was the starting quarterback. I had never met her, but I later found out that she had her husband put an invitation in every player’s locker. The celebration was set for Saturday afternoon -- when the players would be out of town for a road game. I knew as soon as I read the invitation that I should go; it was my first opportunity for ethnographic fieldwork with other Seahawks wives.

I felt my anxiety build. I had never loved large social gatherings, preferring instead to spend time with just one or two close friends. There I was, thousands of miles away from my close friends, feeling alone and isolated, despite my invitation to spend time with other NFL wives. I looked at my nails -- uneven and unpainted with a little bit of dirt resting comfortably beneath them. I’m not sure that I had ever noticed an NFL wife’s nails, but I was sure they would look more like the grown-up manicured nails my mom had and less like mine. I didn’t know what the NFL wives might be wearing, but I was pretty sure that it wouldn’t look anything like what was in my closet. And it seemed thousands of miles away from the comfort of my jeans and sweat-shirt academic life.

I closed my closet door, disgusted at myself for never paying more attention to fashion so that I’d be prepared for fitting in with fashionable women. I walked to the mirror for a final assessment. For the first time, I felt that I needed a styled haircut--something more than the free trims my sister has given me for the last dozen years. I was already feeling tugged toward accepting my destiny as an NFL wife.
Even as I critiqued my reflection, my nails, and the clothes in my closet, I realized that I was defying my feminist sensibilities. Still, I wanted to play the part, if for no other reason than it would aid my ethnographic objectives -- and for me, one of the unanticipated necessities for playing the part was looking the part. Playing the role of a grad-student seemed cerebral -- sound intelligent, know the readings, show up to class ready to impress. But playing the role of an NFL wife seemed physical -- look beautiful, put-together, and in-fashion. I’d never thought of myself as a conformist before, but still, I felt too self-conscious to show up at an NFL wife’s house without Craig as a bland and ugly duckling attempting to parade among the elegant swans.

At the last minute, though, I didn’t go. Instead, I spent that Saturday alone in our apartment, sitting on the couch in my pajamas, feeling sorry for myself. When did I lose my confidence? What’s happening to me? As I sat alone feeling sorry for myself, I felt tremendous guilt for passing up the research opportunity.

... What might my life as an NFL wife be like had I not chosen this field of study? Would I be Craig’s wife? Would I be in Seattle? The risk is that by theorizing, compartmentalizing, fitting our lives into the academic jargon present in any field, we change the life we are living. “The academic self frequently is cut off from the ordinary, experiential self,” my advisor had written in one of his articles. I wondered how might I be experiencing the NFL if I didn’t have my academic aspirations to push me. Would I have felt guilty for missing the Seahawks gathering or might I have been comfortable with my choice to stay at home, watching movies in my pajamas?
My first real friend in the NFL was Lisa. Her husband, Jeff, played on the defensive line with Craig. He was a veteran starter and took Craig under his wing. We spent a lot of time together toward the end of Craig’s first season and all of his second and third seasons in the league. Lisa gave up her job to move to Seattle with Jeff. Soon after that she was pregnant and they got married. Lisa was an open book about the struggles she had gone through in her life and those in her marriage. She was also the first true supporter of my research project among the Seahawks wives and a foot in the door for me among many others (see chapter 9).

About a year into our marriage, she and Jeff invited us over for a cookout and bocce ball. We played in teams, us against them. After beating them several times in a row, Jeff said “Team Ford will beat you next time,” as he and Lisa gave each other a high-five.

Jeff moved closer to Craig and asked, “Are you team Terrill or team Binns-Terrill? As he did, he reached over and patted Craig’s testicles.

“We’re just team Binns today,” I teased. “We take turns.”

Lisa looked at me as if she felt sorry for Craig. “Remember what I told you? They need to feel like men. You really need to change your name.” It didn’t make sense from my academic perspective. I was mystified, as if I couldn’t trust my own perception of what was going on. (Laing, 1965). My husband, a professional football player, needs me to change my name to help build his masculinity? Who feels more like a man than an NFL football player? Lisa was just passing along what she had learned from her time in...
the league: individual identity and autonomy were not valued. To fit in as a “good wife,” I would need to sacrifice my personal desires and identity for the betterment of my husband. I was being instructed that day that the correct response in the world of NFL wives was for me to change my last name and to keep my mouth shut to protect his masculine status among his teammates. What would happen to my husband and his career if I resisted or completely rejected this advice? Didn’t loving him mean I had to be committed to these rules?

My resistance to change my name was likely a combination of my academic socialization and a response to my feelings of invisibility as an NFL wife. Years later, after having our first child, I changed my last name from Binns to a hyphenated Binns-Terrill for a more evident shared identity with my daughter.

... One of the most exciting times for us was Craig’s second season when the Seahawks went to the Super Bowl. It was the first year that he played regularly and it seemed like the team could do no wrong. If the ball was fumbled, it seemed to bounce into the arms of the Seahawks. If there was a tipped pass, a Seahawk caught it. It was so much fun. I remember being in the stands at Seattle’s Qwest Field for the NFC Championship game against the Carolina Panthers. I was teaching and taking courses at USF at the time, but I flew in after my classes for the Sunday morning game. Our two-bedroom apartment slept fourteen of our friends and family members who flew in to be at the game. In the stands, I watched as Craig and his teammates dominated the Panthers. Texts poured into my phone from friends and family across the country: “YOU ARE
GOING TO THE SUPER BOWL!” they wrote. And we were. I jumped and cried and I couldn’t stop smiling. We were going to the Super Bowl! I am sure that no one had ever been so excited to be taking a trip to Detroit in February.

That night, while Craig celebrated with everyone who came into town for the game, I boarded a red-eye flight back to Tampa to teach the next day. I was exhausted, but I made it through my class and a co-taught course with my advisor. A week and a half later, I boarded a plane to Detroit to join in the Super Bowl festivities with Craig and the other Seahawks families.

I thought I was straddling the line of NFL wife and academic well, without it affecting others. I realized the night after the Super Bowl loss that I was wrong. I was on a shuttle bus from the game back to my hotel. Art, my advisor, emailed me, upset that I had not asked in advance to miss a day of our class to travel for the game. My head was in my hands and tears of sadness, disappointment, and confusion filled my eyes as I felt the scorn of Art’s reprimanding me. I remember wondering, who am I and how did I get here? Others on the bus were silent and it felt like we couldn’t possibly move any slower. I wanted to turn back time, even just a few weeks. Was there something more that I could’ve done at school to help my advisor understand my predicament? Was there something more that I could’ve done for my husband, or for the team? I read my e-mail message again:

I’m disappointed in the fact that your psyche is divided between football and your program here. As I tried to say, that is not unnatural, it is just unfortunate because if you were 100 percent here, given your talents, you would be achieving even
more than you are. I admire your talents but I don’t feel as if you are sufficiently in touch with all the other people who your actions influence… It would have been nice if you had at least asked me if your missing (teaching for the Super Bowl) was going to create any difficulties for me or how you would make up the time. I would have appreciated that. Obviously I couldn’t and wouldn’t say, you can’t go to the Super Bowl (and it wouldn’t matter if I did)… I know you are in tune with the subject matter and I have no complaints at all about your work ethic overall. I just want to feel like you’re 100 percent immersed here with your education, your research projects, your connection to the course we’re co-teaching and I just haven’t felt that. You’re lucky because you have more than enough talent to get by with a split effort, divided by residence and emotional attachments. I’m your mentor/advisor and as long as I’m in that role, I have to tell you how I feel.

…I am sorry this comes on the heels of your disappointment. But let’s remember, it’s only a game…. His message arrived on the heels of my disappointment, which outsiders to the NFL could hardly be expected to understand. I was completely consumed with emotions from the game. I was more than a fan watching football. For me and the other wives and players, the Super Bowl was more than a game. Had the Seahawks won, it would have meant both immediate financial gains and increased exposure for Craig. More money could have meant an earlier retirement. Increased exposure could possibly lead to a longer football career. A longer career meant more time for Craig to live his dream in the NFL. The next day, I would be back in the classroom as a graduate student and
instructor. But that night, I felt like a failure for letting down my advisor and felt that I had failed as Craig’s partner, unable do anything to make him feel better about his Super Bowl loss. I was angry at my advisor for not recognizing the human side of my NFL life, although it would have been difficult if not impossible for him to understand as an outsider. Perhaps I was angry at myself for not being present at that moment as an academic. I was completely consumed by my life as an NFL wife.

The moment led to a further investigation into my research of NFL wives. I learned that most NFL wives who were in the team’s city with their husbands chose to focus 100% on their husband and his career while he was playing. They gave up other hopes and dreams, at least for the time being, to help him succeed. I didn’t want to give up on my dream. My identity felt wrapped up with school, my research, and my desire to earn my Ph.D. Looking back, I was also deeply committed to Craig’s life and dreams, a position into which I had gradually and perhaps unconsciously slipped. But I’m sure my advisor had another thought, is this going to be temporary or am I losing her as a student?

... After the Super Bowl and my conflict with Art, I had so many new questions relevant to my research. Did other wives fear that I would expose their secrets or, were they closer to me in hopes that I will tell the story they hadn’t had the chance to tell? With the exception of some friends I knew before, the other NFL wives were the only people that seemed to want to know Craig and me for who we were and not for Craig’s NFL status. I still wondered, did they too have ulterior motives? Were they drawn to the chance that their story might be published? Curiously, the thought of an NFL wife
getting close to me to share their story did not bother me as much as the thought of a classmate trying to get close to me for Craig’s NFL status....perhaps because, at school, I longed for an academic identity.

...

The Super Bowl seemed to enhance the celebrity status of the players. It completely changed the way the city responded to the Seahawks. Everyone wanted to be close to the players -- they were super stars. Personally, it affected my marriage too. To me, it seemed like people were constantly praising Craig—how great, smart, or wonderful he was. At the same time, I felt increasingly diminished in status and invalidated by others. I couldn’t thrive simply as an extension of Craig. I was losing my sense of an independent identity. My automatic response was to say something sarcastic, subtly cutting him (or us) down in front of other people. In my mind, I wanted to humble him.. I didn’t want fans to think that I thought he or we were above them or anyone else. Eventually, I didn’t even wait for others to praise Craig, I just cut him down. I took every chance I could to put him down in public, as a way of relating to others. I would comment on things like how he could remember the 100-page playbook but not to take out the trash. My comments always seemed to get a laugh and I thought that I was doing my job as Craig’s wife to keep him humble while the rest of the world was elevating him.

Then, during one of the women’s Bible studies, Sarah made a comment about how she used to put Matthew down in public. Her story sounded, word for word, like mine as she explained to the group how she learned to change her ways. She said
One of the veteran NFL wives explained how damaging those comments are both for our marriages and for our husband’s self-esteem. There is no one they want to please more than they want to please us. We have to be their biggest advocates. All day at work, they are cut down and told that they are never doing things fast enough or tough enough. We are their sanctuaries.

I felt an emptiness inside, just as I imagined Craig felt every time he heard me put him down, especially in public.

Craig had never put me down, and certainly not in public. I wouldn’t stand for it. Perhaps Craig was so used to taking ridicule at work without being able to respond, his silence or laughter with the group was his coping mechanism with my jabs. I stepped further into my identity as an NFL wife as I vowed that day to stop putting him down and to always be in his corner in front of others.

I knew that criticism was one of the four most destructive forces in a marriage (Gottman, 2000). I also knew that contempt and stonewalling could soon follow. I wondered if Craig’s polite laughter in response to my criticism was his way of stonewalling me and if contempt might be building up within him. Was I destroying our relationship? It was certainly more socially acceptable among his teammates and their wives for me to build him up (privately and publicly) than it was for me to put him down. I accepted Sarah's view over my own because it made sense. I'd never stopped to think through my decision to put him down, nor was it probably a conscious decision at all, until I talked with her. Perhaps Sarah’s advice did more than help to shape me into an
NFL wife -- it might have also helped save my marriage—or so I reasoned at the time. I had better watch out.

... That night, I sat down with Craig when he got home from work and apologized to him for any time that I may have made him feel inferior in public. I told him about my conversation with Sarah and then explained, “You are an amazing husband. I feel like you put in more than your fair share at home and work hard on the football field to provide for our family. Sure, there are times when I’m frustrated with things...socks on the floor, trash that has to be taken out...and you know that I have no trouble sharing those things with you. But from now on, I’m going to work hard to keep those conversations just between us.”

“I appreciate that you let me know when you are feeling uncomfortable,” Craig said. “I guess because I grew up with two older brothers who constantly picked on me in front of others, it never seemed like it could be harmful. Looking at it in light of Gottman’s research, however, I can see how it could eventually create problems within any marriage.”

“I think that I put you down in public as a way of framing our relationship to adoring crowds. I never wanted anyone to think that we were full of ourselves and I wanted to make sure that you never became too full of yourself either. It seems like it can be difficult to stay humble when strangers around you are constantly telling you how great you are. It also makes me feel diminished, as if others don’t see me at all.”
“Rachel, I am so sorry. I never saw it that way. I also need to be better about letting you know if I am feeling criticized. Most of the time, you make me feel incredibly loved. More importantly, I need you to always feel validated within our relationship. That’s something that we have worked hard on. I know that some of your friends hide the things they feel from their husbands. I don’t want that in our relationship. I need you to be authentic with me and I want to be authentic with you.”

...  

During the off-season before our fourth season in Seattle, Jeff retired. He and Lisa moved back to the midwest their original home. It was heartbreaking for both Craig and me to lose them in Seattle. Until that point, they were our only close friends on the team. I soon learned that such is life in the NFL. “...We are part of a narrative community: a constantly changing network of individuals” (Randall and McKim, 2004).

In his time in the NFL, Jeff established a foundation that helped children battling life-threatening illnesses. As a part of the foundation, he and Lisa, along with other football players throughout the league, took about forty kids from around the country on a winter trip to Wisconsin each year. We joined them twice, once while Jeff was in the league and once the year after. It opened our eyes to their suffering and to our own mortality.

When the Lisa and Jeff left town, Lisa asked Sarah Hasselbeck and me if we would be interested in meeting with caseworkers from Seattle’s Children’s Hospital about setting up a program between the Seahawks wives and some of the hospital’s preteen and teenaged female patients. Sarah and I didn’t know each other well at that point, but we
both respected Lisa’s vision and the connection that she had established with Children’s Hospital.

The case workers told us about a program they saw at another hospital called “Funky Young Women.” The idea was to make the girls princesses for a day, allowing them to feel like teenagers instead of just feeling like patients. We loved the idea and so, together with community partners and Children’s Hospital, Sarah and I put together the first Funky Young Women event for ten hospital patients. Each girl invited one “well friend” from outside of her life at the hospital to share the day with her.

We asked the wives of Seahawks’ coaches, management, and players to sponsor each Funky Young Woman. The cost was $40 for each pair of friends. The other Seahawks’ wives jumped on board. The girls were pampered with manicures, pedicures, and makeup applications. They received instruction about finding and fitting wigs from a woman who lost her hair when she was young and they left with gift bags full of Seahawks gear and other goodies.

We invited all of the other Seahawks wives to join us, those who had invested in sponsorships and those who hadn’t, thinking that the Funky Young Women would enjoy getting to know them, as many of these girls were also football fans. We quickly learned that the girls were not interested in who we were. They expressed gratitude toward us for putting the event together, but their joy seemed to come from reconnecting with their well friends in a pampering environment outside of the hospital.

The Seahawks wives, however, seemed to bond in a meaningful way. Sarah and I bonded as we planned and executed the event together. Other NFL wives who didn’t
know each other well before the event were moved by their collective experience of
giving of their time and resources for the event and to the girls. For the first time, I felt
connected to the team in a meaningful way as I watched the group come together for
something that mattered beyond football. I also felt as if I gained visibility as a leader of
sorts among the wives as newer wives who may not have known me before the event saw
me in that role.

... Throughout my time as an NFL wife, I felt pulled by conflicting responsibilities.
Not only did I have to navigate between the dialectics of school and football, but also
between the past and the future. Perhaps that is normal for people at my age. I had to
make choices between family of origin and the family I was creating. One of those
choices that felt particularly poignant was time with my Grandma Shirley and Grandpa
Don in Minnesota or time with Craig (away from football). On my flights between
Seattle and Florida for school, I scheduled extended layovers in Minneapolis for a few
hours or an overnight with my grandparents. But my time with them grew less and less
frequent as I became more involved with my life in Seattle and busier with school in
Florida.

Seven years earlier, despite being a Mormon who never drank, my Grandma
Shirley was diagnosed with liver disease. We knew it could and probably would take her
life eventually, but I put it in the back of my mind, instead choosing to believe that she
would be around for a very long time.
Craig and I had just moved into our new home when we got the call that she was unconscious. I rushed on a plane to be with her in Minneapolis that night. I stayed in the hospital with her all night, talking to her, pleading with God and pleading with her to please just open her eyes one more time. Sometime around noon the next day, I was by her side when she opened her eyes. "Good morning, Grams," I whispered. She looked up at me and smiled,

"Good morning, sweet child." Her ammonia levels were out of control and she was highly toxic. She thought that she was 25 years old, but somehow she knew who I was. By that night, her ammonia counts had leveled and, a decade at a time, she became her 75-year-old self again.

I didn’t realize at the time that this was the beginning of the end of her life. I trekked back and forth between Seattle and Minnesota for the next few weeks and then was able to spend two of her last three weeks with her. We shared some beautiful moments together. We laughed and talked and cried together. She was one of my best friends. In the back and forth life I was living, she was my home.

Three nights before she passed, Craig carried her like a princess from the couch to bed. She looked up at him and then to us (My Grandpa Don and four aunts were there too) and told us she'd never been carried like that before. The next day, she told everyone she saw how Craig just picked her right up and carried her to bed. After carrying her, Craig laid beside her in her bed and my aunts, Gramps, and I stood beside the bed. Craig sang to her while she smiled at him without her teeth and we sang backup, "buh buddabum bum...Goodnight Sweetheart, well it's time to go...." It was precious. No one
in my family can carry a tune, but we were just happy to be a part of it. Even Grandpa Don, in his long nightgown, got into it, smiling and singing along.

Craig and I left the next morning, July 3, after kissing her goodbye. "Goodbye for now," she told us. We had to get back to Indiana because, as the town’s first resident to play in a Super Bowl, Craig was appointed as the Grand Marshall of his home town’s 4th of July Parade. It was so strange, the negotiation between the present and future. Craig and my Sweet Grams. Of course, she wanted us to go, to ride in the parade and then to come back to tell her about it. So, I rode beside Craig in the parade, waving to the sea of strangers’ smiling faces reminiscent of the stadium full of adoring fans, and then looked forward to talking with Grams the next day to tell her about it. When I called, my aunts said she wasn't responsive. I never got to talk with her again.

The morning of July 6th, my aunts bathed her and changed her pajamas. A few minutes later, she opened her eyes one last time. My Grandpa Don, her husband of 55 years, was there and said, "I love you, Shirley Binns." She smiled, closed her eyes, and peacefully took her final breaths. It was a beautiful end to a beautiful life.

Despite knowing it was coming, I had no idea how hard it would hit me when the reality of her passing set in. I was there as her caretaker, doing things I never thought I could do -- helping her in the bathroom, feeding her, taking her false teeth in my hand (yuck!) -- and loving every second that I could help her, knowing it would soon be gone. She turned to me about a week before she died and said, "Patti (one of my Dad's sisters) said she's glad you're here with me. She said you'd probably do just about anything for me." I smiled.
"She's right, Grams." She knew there was nothing I wouldn't do for her. Weeks later, her visitation and funeral having come and gone, my dreams at night of time with her convinced me that my mind wasn’t ready to understand that she wasn't coming back. Perhaps if I’d been there with her the day that she died, I would have had a better grasp on her being gone. Instead, I chose to be with Craig, in my role as an NFL wife, waving to a sea of faceless fans. At the time, my life as an NFL wife was all consuming -- and I failed to step outside of that reality to see life beyond the game.

When things are overwhelmingly emotional, I have two perhaps equally strong tendencies. One is to run away from my problems, to pretend they don’t exist. Perhaps that is what I was doing when I ran to the parade instead of being at my grandmother’s side. The other is to delve within myself, to write, to release the tsunami of thoughts threatening to drown me if I don’t let them flow. It is when I move within myself that I am most truly myself (Hampl, 1996). And perhaps that’s why I chose the major, the school, and the advisor I did.

Dealing with my Grandma Shirley’s death and being involved with Funky Young Women and with the winter trip with pediatric cancer patients, where we met and fell in love with young children, some of whose deaths soon followed, brought life and death together for us in a strange way. Football is full of life. As a sport and with its following, it is strong, energetic, passionate, emotional, loud, and moving. On the other side, because of Craig’s association with the football team, we were invited, literally to the death beds of sick children to spend some of their last moments with them. The experience was surreal. I missed my Sweet Grams’ final moments because of our
association with the NFL. In retrospect, I felt guilt and angry. Was I losing sight of the important things in life? Then again, the same association with the NFL allowed us to be there for those moments, beside grieving parents of children, Seahawks fans, who were otherwise virtual strangers to us, as they took some of their last breaths.

... Back in Seattle, on the anniversary of Grandma Shirley’s passing, Craig and I sat together in our living room as we watched the fire jump and crack in our fireplace. As I watched the fire come to life and then slowly fade away, I was reminded of the temporality of life. Time was fading with each passing day, each passing season, not just for the elderly and the sick, but for all of us. “I need to finish my dissertation,” I said to Craig.

“You will,” he cheerfully answered.

“But I need to get it done now,” I told him. “What if there isn’t a later? My advisor has only had one student who didn’t graduate and it was because she passed away before she finished. I don’t want to be the second for any reason. We don’t know when our time is up.”

He paused a moment. “You’re right. But, do you want to spend your time working toward a degree that will be meaningless if you’re gone?” he asked.

Being beside Grandma Shirley as she took her last breaths felt real to me. It felt like a good use of my time, the right place to be, despite the pull I felt to also be with Craig while he was living his dream. “Writing and teaching are all that I have. I want to prepare for my future as an academic, that feels real to me. And it’s lasting within this lifetime. When I’m gone, my writing will be the only legacy I have to pass on.”
“I get that,” Craig said, moving closer toward me on our brown leather couch. “I’ve always worried that being here with me in Seattle, living this football dream with me, would stifle your academic plans. I never want that to happen though, Rachy,” he told me.

“I don’t want that either. But in some ways it already has. Despite the warnings from my professors at school, I didn’t think it would happen. But since losing Grandma, I sense that the problem is not the potential of dying...that’s going to happen. It’s not having enough time to live that worries me."

“I hadn’t thought of it that way. Our lives have been so wrapped up in the NFL that it has become all that we can see. But the real game we’re in is the game of life,” he said. “I’m glad to be sharing this life with you and I am going to do all that I can to make sure that you are as satisfied with the life you’re living as I have been,” he said softly before kissing my cheek.

I snuggled into him as my mind wandered and wondered about life and death, the present and the future, contingency and fate. I thought about what I would be giving up by devoting all of my time to my research and writing: time with Craig, time with my family, and time with my friends outside of football. I also thought of everything I had to gain: a future career as an academic, my name in journals, a place in front of the classroom inspiring and teaching other aspiring academics. “Thank you, Craig,” I whispered back to him. “We never know what’s going to happen, but we have to anticipate the future nonetheless.” He held me close to him as we both turned our eyes back toward the dancing fire.
That night, I decided that I would throw myself whole-heartedly into my research and my dissertation work again. I had to admit that though I was still taking notes from time-to-time, I had gradually moved further and further away from my academic identity. Naively, I thought that making the decision to move toward my academic dream again would be enough to make the dream come true.

...  

A year or so later, I learned that I was pregnant. My goal was to finish my dissertation before having children, so I had mixed emotions about being pregnant. We felt blessed, that the child was a gift from God. We were excited to be parents. We knew that having a child would provide more common ground for us with other NFL families. But, I also knew that having a child would make it more difficult to keep up with my dissertation. For seven months, I hid the fact that I was pregnant from my advisor and my academic peers. I felt embarrassed and ashamed, as if I had let my advisor down. I had seen others who had children lose sight of their academic ambitions. I thought that I could go into hiding while I finished writing my dissertation before she was born.

I didn’t anticipate how sick I would be during my pregnancy. I laid in our recliner for the first three months, nauseous and vomiting all day, trying not to be sick. My research took a back seat as I struggled just to eat and maintain my health. My research continued to suffer when our daughter was born as I became absorbed in life with my new little child. Meanwhile, my NFL life flourished. Sarah hosted a baby shower for me and dozens of wives of players, coaches, and even management showed up -- many of whom I hadn’t met before. Other women who were moms became close friends.
Without realizing it, I gradually slipped further and further away from my academic self—away from classes, from a culture in which people read books and talked about theories. I no longer actively fantasized my future achievements in books and articles and teaching classes. For some time, I even lost contact with my advisor. I still thought of myself as a student and my life as research. I conducted some interviews and kept fieldnotes, but I wasn’t actively seeking my dream. I had moved away from the academic conversation. I was no longer reading current literature and, hidden away across the country from my peers and professors, no one was there to pressure me.

Looking back, I realize that I was losing confidence in my ability to write and defend the dissertation on which I’d spent years working. I didn’t know if I would be able to fulfill my academic dreams. Instead, I found that I became more entrenched in becoming a great NFL wife. My place in the social world of the NFL didn’t depend at all on my academic achievements. In fact, my child served as a stronger currency than any diploma could have.

After a year of being home with my daughter, I knew I needed to get back to my studies and to my dissertation. My dream was to earn my PhD and to develop a career studying and teaching love, and though I was scared and more doubtful about my abilities, I wasn’t ready to give up that dream. The next fall, I started teaching at a local college. Alas, I was back in the classroom, teaching students about love. I felt more myself again.

In the meantime, Craig was still playing football in Seattle and it seemed almost as if his career might never end. Although we were still nervous on the weekends when
they cut players, we began to feel secure with our place on the team. Friends were cut or traded and we watched them move away. That was, by far, the most difficult part of NFL life for us during our first six seasons with the team.

After Craig’s seventh training camp with the Seahawks, he had been through three head coaches, three general managers, and two position coaches. During cut weekend, we celebrated our wedding anniversary. We were thrilled when we didn’t get a call saying he had been cut. As long as he was on the team the following Sunday, his year’s salary would be guaranteed. It would be the highest salary he had made in his time with the team. We began to dream together about what that money meant for our financial future.

Two days later, he received a call from the team’s general manager telling him that he had been cut. He drove to the Seahawks facility a few minutes later where he would box up his locker and be told again, face to face, how sorry the team was to let him go. When he got home, we cried together, tears of memories of his six years with the team, tears of loss of the only job he’d had since college and the locker room full of friends he would miss. I didn’t anticipate how hard it would hit me too. Both with him and when he wasn’t around, I broke down. I sobbed for my connection to the team, for the plans I had made with the team, and for the confusion I felt about what might come next for us. We could have been picked up by another team, in another city across the country that day or any day that followed.
A few weeks later, on a Friday morning before a Sunday game, our Seahawks gear packed away in the closet, Craig and I laid together in bed when his cell phone rang. “Are you in town?” a Seahawks representative asked.

“Yes,” Craig answered.

“Want to play some football this weekend?” And just like that, Craig was back with the Seahawks where he would complete his seventh season with the team.

Although he was back on the football field, Craig’s position there no longer seemed permanent. For the first time in years, I was able to see outside the tunnel of the NFL life that had consumed me. Outside of my academic dreams, we had no solid goals for after the game. I realized then that I had let academics slip too far into the periphery. Perhaps Craig being cut was just what I needed to get my academic gears back in motion.

I realized that the time limit for finishing my dissertation and graduating with my PhD was approaching and that if I didn’t act soon, my academic aspirations would fall to the wayside. A couple of weeks later I was on a plane across the country to meet with my advisor. I needed to finish my dissertation, and I needed his help to get there.

Together, we talked through my seven years of research and experiences to make sense of it all and to see what might fit together in the form of a dissertation. I was excited again for the project and for the first time, it felt like a milestone that was within reach.

Craig was not offered a contract by the Seahawks after the end of his seventh season with the team and, for the first time, we went into the off-season as free-agents. The NFL locked out the players for the entire off-season and most of training camp,
which gave me time to write my dissertation while Craig was home to watch our
daughter.

When the NFL lockout was lifted, we waited, day by day, to see if a team might
call to sign Craig. As I write this, seven weeks into the season, we are still at home. We
don’t know whether Craig’s career is over or whether we’re just being blessed with extra
time at home before he is signed.

Seven years after arriving in the NFL, I again look in the mirror to see how those
years have changed me. There are new wrinkles around my eyes that recall the vast array
of NFL-induced emotions. My hair is styled, at least more than it was when I arrived, the
result of being thousands of miles from my sister’s free haircuts, I suppose. My nails are
still un-manicured, and I’m wearing a t-shirt and jeans. Little has changed in how I
present myself, except that I have grown more confident in my own skin.

“As human beings living in the world...we are storytellers seeking meanings that
help us cope with our circumstances” (Bochner, 2002, p. 32). And often, we find our
stories in hearing the stories of others. It was by getting close with other NFL wives that
I learned the significance of my own story. For example, it was only unique that I was in
school because I thought that most wives weren’t. It was the way that I differentiated
myself completely seven years ago, until I learned that several wives were also in
graduate school, two had their PhDs and most have undergraduate degrees.

Besides Lisa and Sarah, there are a handful of other NFL wives who I now
consider among my closest friends. I share my thoughts, secrets, ambitions, and dreams
with them, and they share theirs with me. We have laughed together and cried together,
experiencing the real-moments of births and deaths alongside football victories and defeats. Today, only one of those wives is still in Seattle, the others are either retired or scattered throughout the league on other teams. The NFL wives’ social group that scared me into isolation seven years ago became a place that I felt at home. Today, the illusion of football reality is now in my past, but for what and who it added to my research and to my life, I am forever grateful.
Chapter 9: Analyzing the Stories

In this chapter I look closely at the four first-person narratives presented in chapters 5-8, offering an analytical synopsis of each of them and pulling out the themes, dialectics, and socialization processes evident in their stories.

Joy: Chapter 5

Joy’s story is a romantic tale of how she and her husband, Jim, navigated NFL life together, raised three children, and maintained a strong marriage throughout the process. She and Jim met around the time when her parents were divorcing and she was between majors in school. It was during that time that she submitted both to God and to Jim. Hers is a classic conversion story.

When the paradigm of her life wasn’t working, Joy was open to submitting to another explanation for her life. When NFL players and their wives are lost in and overwhelmed by the grandeur of the NFL, they often turn to the Bible to find meaning and solace and to Bible study meetings for friendship. Their loneliness and disengagement from the familiar worlds of family and friends left behind may help explain why Christianity is so prevalent in the NFL. Christian fellowship helps them make sense of the dissonance in their lives between the autonomy with which they entered the league and the submission to authority and rules they find there.
In every way, Joy joined Jim’s world; he didn’t join hers. He quarterbacked their relationship from the beginning, establishing the rules for their dating. He gave structure to their relationship for the first time when he asked her to be his wife.

Outsiders treated Joy like a star when she started dating Jim. She was intimidated by the “star” status that he garnished from outsiders, especially other women. Suddenly, she felt as if she was not enough; she was just a “normal” everyday person thrust into his superstar world of privilege and attention. Together, they found joint meaning beyond the glitz and glamour by turning to the Bible and committing to Christianity.

She began her story as a feminist, but her feminist convictions disappeared during her time as an NFL wife. Her goal of a 50/50 equality in their relationship (paying for her own meal, for example) ended up in a relationship where she did nearly all of the domestic work: taking care of their home and raising and home-schooling their four children. Their Christian faith promoted a marital pattern in which she submitted willingly to Jim and to God as the leading authorities in her life. Their faith constructed her submission in a way that allowed for her to feel a sense of fulfillment in the domesticated wife role that she played.

**Sarah: Chapter 6**

Sarah’s story started as a romantic tale of two collegiate athletes who found joy in each other. They “stayed up for hours talking” and he never left her side. In some ways, she was the one with more of the power at the beginning of the relationship. She graduated and got a job with a $1000 signing bonus that made them both feel rich. A decade later, married, in the NFL, with millions of dollars in the bank, and as the parents
of three children, most of their time together revolves around Christianity and football. Sarah is actively involved in church and she works incessantly to take care of her children while juggling her commitments to Bible studies and faith-based charities, a physical fitness regiment, and leadership of the wives’ group on her team.

Like Joy, Sarah initially resisted submission to her husband, but her story shows a gradual conversion that reveals in great detail the many ways and focus of her submission. She admitted to being conditioned to over-identify with Matthew’s achievements and to bond with other NFL wives at the cost of not living the life she once hoped she might. She once dreamed of being a writer, a CEO, or the President of the United States. When she stopped working during her first pregnancy, she wanted to let everyone know that she “wasn’t just his wife” but years later that’s what she became, a wife and a mother. Somewhere along the way, she lost or suppressed her desire to work. By the end of the story, she was content as a homemaker, taking care of everything there and shielding Matthew from stressors outside of football.

She expressed wanting to be a strong Christian, giving herself to her family, but was torn by not knowing whether her kids would ever see her as “amazing” in her own right, wondering whether being “just me” could be sufficient. Like many other NFL wives, she hides how she feels from her husband—“I would never let him see how upset I was.” She questions the elevated sense of self-importance that evolves from having money and a certain degree of fame as a couple—“Who do we think we are?”—and the way materialism and superficiality creeps into her life.
“A lot of women have trouble finding a role for their new self in this life,” she says, but she wouldn’t think of asking Matthew to help her cope with this new self-creation. She sees the changes she has made and the sacrifices she makes as equal to what he provides for their marriage, primarily the paycheck and his Christianity endorsed authority over the family. “At home, I take care of everything…I don’t want him to have to worry about it,” she observed, suggesting that it was an indication of the trust he had in her. She found it difficult to come up with an answer when I asked her the ways in which Matthew sacrifices for her. She gains most of her self-worth from serving the family. No other achievement seems possible as long as Matthew is still playing football. She believes that wives are supposed to make their husbands happy and joyful, but “your husband isn’t meant to make you happy…I don’t look to him to make me happy…and I hope I create joy by being his wife.”

She runs off her frustrations in morning jogs and feels joy when she has some time to herself. She looks to the future with some concern, even alarm, given her astute awareness about how much life may change when Matthew’s playing days end (and the rate of divorce in NFL marriages). Expressing the uncertainty that comes with NFL life, she takes pleasure in Matthew’s performance on the field. She loves the football life she has now, the competition, the glory, and financial security it has provided for her family. She has reframed her dream to be seen as a Christian wife, sacrificing to please her husband.
Beth’s early feelings in her relationship with Tim included distrust because he was a football player. Her socialization in collegiate sports led her to believe that football players “wanted to have sex, and they wanted to have sex with any woman they could find.” To be sure of his intentions, she made him wait for four months before she consented to a kiss. At that point, she felt confident in his intentions, believing that he was different than the others. “Tim wasn’t like 99% of other football players. He wasn’t just trying to have sex with me.” Soon after they started dating, however, new identity issues arose. She expressed feelings of becoming virtually invisible because of her husband’s ultra-visibility when they were together in public, a sentiment also shared by Joy and by me. “I realized that we couldn’t have a normal relationship because he was a local star,” she said at the beginning and much later on she observed how overshadowed she felt, how she resisted telling any stranger that she was connected to the NFL or specifically to her husband.

She showed some resentment for Tim’s hyper-visibility and her invisibility, though she accepted the narrative “account” she had been socialized into -- that it’s enough to be a good wife and to take care of her husband and their children. She also admitted wondering whether her friends liked her for who she was or because she was dating a superstar.

When he was drafted while she was still in college, she pushed to be married right away. Although she said that she trusted him, she admitted, “I was worried about him moving on without me.” She told me that it wasn’t his intentions that she worried about,
but the way other women might treat him. She admitted, “I think people have a lot more respect for marriage than they do for a girlfriend.”

Hers too is a conversion story. She was full of hopes and dreams and even maintained them into her marriage. During her first season as an NFL wife, she felt lonely and depressed. “I didn’t have anyone to confide in,” she said, and admitted, “I felt like I lost myself.” She encouraged her fellow NFL wives to get to know each other and to open themselves to friendships with other NFL wives. In an attempt to quell her loneliness, she first went to school and earned a master’s degree. After graduating, she took a year off and spent more and more time with other NFL wives and at Bible studies before getting pregnant. She described getting pregnant as “the happiest time for me in our marriage.” Despite her happiness when becoming pregnant, she expressed the feeling that only one of them was living their dream. “Tim was living out his dream and I was exhausted and trying to raise our child pretty much alone.”

Eventually, Beth decided that the hundreds of thousands of dollars that she might make as the CEO of a company wouldn’t compare to the money that her husband made as an NFL player, so it was pointless for her to work. “The NFL would overshadow any dream I might have.” Eventually, she turned completely toward Christianity and decided that she was meant to be a homemaker and to take care of her family.

Beth also worried about infidelity and negative influences from her husband’s teammates. She commented that her husband was lucky to have ended up on a team with a great group of religious guys. “I thought that they would be a lot more promiscuous and try to put my husband in bad situation.” She assumed that the situation could have
been different if he played for a different team. Crute (1981) also found that many sports
wives stated that problems with infidelity happened on other teams, but not theirs. Beth
told me that she also thought the NFL wives on other teams were different. “Most of the
Seahawks’ wives are great genuine people. It’s been a blessing to be able to grow
spiritually with other NFL wives because they understand my life and we’re going
through the same things.”

She withheld many of her frustrations from her husband due to the “rules of the
game”—that she learned from other NFL wives. “I knew from Bible studies with other
NFL wives that it was important to be selfless,” she said. “They showed me, using
Biblical principles, that it was a worthwhile calling to take care of your husband and to
raise your child.” She felt that she should make life effortless for her husband at home,
explaining that “it wasn’t fair that he had to do anything around the house because I
didn’t work.” She justified any frustration by telling herself, “I’m doing this to please the
Lord, I’m not doing it to please Tim.”

Over time, she found solace in realizing that “none of the wives have perfect
marriages” so it was okay that hers wasn’t either. Her expectations of Tim’s role in their
marriage changed through her socialization with other NFL wives, and she told me that
“He is an amazing husband who does everything that a wife could possibly want him to
do.”

Beth originally planned to put off her career only until Tim retired. She thought
she would go back to work so that she “could feel self-actualized” and to feel like she
“was making a difference in the world.” After spending time with other NFL wives and
having her son, her goal changed from making a difference in a large company to “maybe
teaching or doing something else” part time. “I want to be a present mother and raise
God fearing children,” she told me.

Money is a big part of her story and a justification for giving up her own dream.
She thought it would be difficult for Tim and bad for their marriage if her job seemed
more important or brought in more money than his. “Our family is so much more
important than going out and making $200,000 or $500,000 a year.”

Beth concluded her narrative in love with love and in love with her husband,
seeing beyond the sometimes difficult details of her marriage to the commitment that they
made.

Rachel: Chapter 8.

When I started dating Craig and subsequently moved with him to Seattle, I
thought that I was a strong feminist who was committed to academic work. I soon found
myself, for over a year, sitting on a couch alone in our rented apartment. Although I’d
only recently become an NFL partner, I was already reacting to how I assumed the
stereotypical NFL wives might react to me. I wanted to fit in, but I was sure I wasn’t like
them.

My story is ultimately about the relationships that I have with other NFL wives
and the way I see and interpret them. I found, after my story was written, that I too was a
production of the culture of NFL wives. My story is a product of my enculturation,
socialization, and institutionalization (Bochner, 2001).
When I initially resisted immersing myself into the NFL, I thought that I was playing the part of a researcher who didn’t fit in with the NFL, but now I see that I was playing the part of an NFL wife who thought she needed to look the part to be there. Perhaps both identities were working simultaneously. Goffman (1959) wrote that we become the roles that we play and the people with whom we talk. We play the part as we learn it, and we become more and more of what we enact. Subconsciously, I became like other NFL wives by spending time with them, all of us conforming to and resisting the images of sports wives portrayed by popular culture. None of us really thought we belonged with other NFL wives, at least not at first.

Before I ever met another NFL wife (except for Anne), Eric Eisenberg, the then-chair of the Communication Department at USF, told me that he knew a handful of NFL wives and even considered one a friend. “You could look the part,” he told me, “but I just can’t see you as one of them.” At the time, I was too insecure to ask what he meant. His words echoed in my head as I got ready for my first Seahawks event. *What would I have to do to look the part? Do I want to look the part? And even if I do, if he doesn’t see me able to be like them, then will the other NFL wives see through my attempts to blend in?*

Had I totally resisted belonging in NFL wives’s groups, I would have been lonely and alone, which would be bad for my self-identity and my marriage, which ultimately could have affected both my research project and Craig’s career.
Years later, well into the project, I contacted Eric to see what he meant when he said that he didn’t see me as one of them. He explained

The wife I knew then seemed to have made some pretty gigantic adjustments and sacrifices to support her husband’s job and in so doing constructed herself as mainly in a support role. Don't get me wrong, she certainly made the most of it, and in some respects seemed to wear the pants of the family, but the performance was pretty traditional. From what I knew of you at the time--smart, independent, outspoken--I wasn't sure whether that role would suit you.

I wondered, after reading his explanation, what type of sacrifices I had made. The biggest sacrifice seemed to be leaving campus to follow Craig to Seattle. Art, my advisor, let me know on multiple occasions that I sacrificed tremendously by missing out on time working with him and my cohorts on campus. I wondered if I returned to campus if Eric and Art might still see me as the smart, independent, and outspoken person that they knew before. I saw myself that way, if only more refined from nearly a decade of getting to know myself. Was “refined” a way of fooling myself that I hadn’t lost my edge?

Years into my research, after having made friends with Lisa and Jeff, I was still learning the rules of life as an NFL wife. I was told directly that, for Craig’s sake, I needed to change my last name to his. My husband, a professional football player, needs me to change my name to help build his masculinity? I wondered. Professional sports wives are often expected to support and defer to the high-profile occupations of their
husbands (Coser, 1974, Ortiz, 2002.) I was caught in between my desire for autonomy and the need to belong. At the time, I thought the struggle was theirs, but it was likely mine. I resisted changing my name both from my academic socialization and from the feelings of invisibility that I felt as an NFL wife.

When I got pregnant, I found myself for the first time more immersed in my role as a mother and an NFL wife than in academics. I stopped working on my dissertation and focused on my own health, my child, and supporting my husband’s career. I followed in the footsteps of those around me and, for the first time, felt like an integral part of the Seahawks’ wives group. Without realizing it, I was at risk of prematurely foreclosing on the possibilities of living my dream. The more time that one spends in the league, the bigger the risk of foreclosing on the dream because of the time that they are away, largely because of the time constraints on those dreams. Even though I was teaching a course on love and communication at a local college, it took stepping back, and a defined time limit, to bring me back to what I had set out to do: to earn my doctoral degree and to pursue a career studying love and decency in academia.
PART III

The final two chapters of this dissertation provide a more comprehensive analysis of the socialization practices present in the lives of NFL wives.

Chapter 10, *The Social World of the NFL Wife*, is a thematic chapter in which I highlight the most predominant themes that emerged in my observations as an insider among NFL wives. The themes emerged from the over three hundred pages of interview transcripts and hundreds of pages of field notes in addition to formal and informal interviews and friendships with dozens of NFL wives and their husbands.

Chapter 11, *The Trajectory of NFL Wives*, concludes the dissertation and guides the reader through two different trajectories of identity and socialization in the lives of NFL wives. The first trajectory is that of a typical NFL season. The second, more comprehensive trajectory, covers the time span from when a player is drafted until he retires.
Chapter 10: The Social World of NFL Wives

In this chapter, I describe and discuss some of the themes that emerged from dozens of interviews with wives of NFL players and seven years living in the world of NFL wives. The themed sections illuminate some of the overarching themes NFL wives face.

As a human being attempting to live an ethical life, I admittedly started this project caring more about relationships than exposing any dirty little secrets of the NFL. What I learned from extensive time in the field is that exposing a culture is different than exposing a person. The culture of the NFL is evident in the stories that I heard and in the themes that emerged. Time in the field helped me locate the larger stories that the individual stories told. As a researcher, my goal was to offer readers a way of understanding what happens routinely to women when they enter this world.

I interpreted the data as I collected it and then made a list of themes that seemed pertinent to the research. I then went back and read through fieldnotes, journal entries, and interview transcripts for those and other emergent themes. I highlighted representative themes and made memos of their significance. Here, I present the emergent themes supported by snippets of stories that tell the stories of and within the culture and subcultures of NFL relationships.

First, I discuss the structure and importance of social networks including the characteristics of a wives’ group, the emergence of a hierarchy among NFL wives,
marriage as meaningful for membership and belonging among other NFL wives, and other ways that one gains visibility in the group. Second, I discuss the role of NFL wife as a career and explain how NFL wives censor their speech around each other but also turn toward each other as surrogate sisters and best friends. I also discuss children and babies as levelers when NFL wives have little else in common. Third, I describe the pecking order and status of authority within the NFL as a form of secondary socialization, how NFL wives and are fused into extensions of their husbands, the way in which marriages are stressed and challenged, and the performance of masculinity and femininity. Fourth, I discuss the risks NFL wives take in seeing their husbands as pseudo-deities and the pitfalls of protection in NFL communities as they become pseudo-communities. Fifth, I reveal emergent financial themes including the performance of wealth, struggles to keep up with others financially, marital arguments about spending habits, the presence of prenuptial agreements, and money as an incentive for NFL wives to stay in bad marriages. Sixth, I discuss violence on and off the field followed by a description of racial separation among players and their wives. Seventh, I show the processes of meaning making through charity and religion among NFL couples. Finally, I describe the roles of sex and the prevalence and fears of marital infidelity in the NFL.

**Entering the system.**

New NFL wives are often removed from the familiarity of the lives they have known, landing thousands of miles from home, in cities where many of them don’t know a soul. Gradually, most of these women begin to create relationships with other women who are in the same situation. When asked the best part of being an NFL wife, the
overwhelming responses offered had to do with the relationships that NFL wives developed with each other. Learning the rules of how to engage in those relationships takes time, however, and there are risks involved with gaining the rewards of friendships with other wives. Risks include struggling to fit in and dealing with the ephemeral nature of team tenure.

Every new NFL wife that I interviewed expressed an initial feeling of being “different” from the other NFL wives, despite trying to fit in with them. I felt that too, which is why I stayed home the first time I was invited to join other wives at a social gathering. What we knew of the NFL before getting there was gained mostly from what we saw on TV or heard from other people. We each prepared ourselves as well as we could, but ultimately found that we were never prepared enough when we got there. It took time for us to fit in with other NFL wives, to find a place where we felt like we belonged. It typically takes a full season for a new NFL wife to feel like she knows what’s going on within the organization, the benefits that are available, what activities are available, and what the team’s expectations are of her as an NFL wife. Marie told me that not knowing what to expect going into the rookie year can make an NFL wife feel out of place and insecure. There are lots of judgments that are placed on the significant others of professional athletes. For me, most of the judgment seemed to come from fans and other outside people. I certainly didn’t get any notice from the Seahawks’ organization, even though we were living together. If we were married, I think they would have welcomed me. It took me up until our third
season for me to not care about it and to feel confident enough in myself to jump into the charity and social events other NFL wives were a part of.

Turnover is fast and furious in the NFL. Front offices continually tweak their rosters to reflect their visions of team strengths, weaknesses, and chemistry. As a result, NFL players and their families are disrupted and scattered all over the country. During the 2011 preseason, the first year Craig was not in camp with the Seahawks after seven years with the team, there were ninety players on the pre-season roster. Of these, only sixteen players were on the Seahawks roster eighteen months earlier (Seahawks.com). It is no wonder that NFL wives struggle to feel a part of the group. With such turnover, just as an NFL wife is starting to make friends or to figure out how to operate within the group, her time there may be finished (not of her own choice). The group is never the same from one season to the next, though there are always returning members whose job is to pass on the rules of how to function in that group.

NFL wives’ group: What does it look like?

Though the exact characteristics of any team’s wives group may ebb and flow as NFL wives are replaced, most teams have had identifiable wives groups on and off throughout the team’s history. Some teams have team-sponsored or organized women’s groups, others do not. Team sponsored women’s groups may be open only to player and coaches’ wives while other groups may incorporate all female members of the organization including all female employees and the wives of male employees and unmarried girlfriends. Typically, teams have team sponsored or supported wives groups as a result of the general manager’s wife or the head coach’s wife who asks the team’s
community outreach department to get involved. The bulk of the planning then lands on the shoulders of female employees in the community outreach department.

Many teams don’t have team sponsored wives’ groups. Established veteran NFL wives sometimes emerge as unofficial group leaders, often as a result of hosting or leading a women’s Bible study. Other events that gather NFL wives together, though less common on teams than Bible studies, include watching away games together at each others’ houses or at local restaurants, dinners together on Saturdays during home games after players are locked down at their hotels, or children-based events such as trips to local attractions or a gymnastics class that many of the New York Jets’ wives, to take one example, signed their children up for together. It is within the more intimate environments that deeper friendships begin to form.

Charitable events that seek to incorporate NFL couples are typically held on Monday nights, because Tuesdays are the players only day off. Most teams hold their couples’ Bible studies on Friday nights because Saturdays typically consist of players’ meetings with coaches and a walk-through in preparation for Sunday’s game.

NFL wives Bible studies and other weekly get togethers are typically held on weekdays while players are working. NFL wives who have jobs have expressed feelings of being systematically excluded from those events because of their work schedules. In other words, the wives are subtly discouraged from working if they want to be full-fledged members of the group. Liz expressed the pressure promoted by this schedule:

We never felt secure about my husband’s spot on the team so I didn’t want to quit my job in case we needed it to pay the bills. It was hard to work while he was an
NFL player because not only did I lose out on time with him (his day off was Tuesdays, but I had to work on the weekdays) but I also missed out on most of the activities with other NFL wives. I wish they could’ve scheduled them for evenings when I could’ve been there, but I understand that evenings are the only time we get with our husbands. It’s just hard. It’s hard to work and to be a part of the NFL. I quit my job the next year so I could be a part of everything.

Who is invited?

Marriage matters.

From the top of the Space Needle with the lights of a December winter night shining around us, Craig and I looked into each other’s eyes as our love for each other spilled from our lips. He was dressed in a black suit, a far stretch from the jeans and polos that he typically equated with dressing up. It’s a good thing, because his jeans wouldn’t have matched the black limousine that drove us to the Space Needle and he wouldn’t have looked nearly as debonair without his suit as he sang Frank Sinatra love songs to me along the way. It wouldn’t have taken an aspiring academic to figure out what was going on. Craig was going to propose marriage to me. That night, I was concerned with what I would wear for such an important moment. I found the only dress in my closet, black to match his suit, and asked him to stop along the way so I could buy a necklace that I silently hoped would match my ring. At the restaurant, I listened intently as he reminisced about his favorite moments in our relationship and answered eagerly when he asked me about what our love and relationship meant to me. When he pulled the ring out from the center of a foggy dry-
iced dessert and got down on his knee, I knew that moment would forever be significant in our relationship and etched in my mind. I had no idea, however, just how significantly the ring on my finger would affect my experiences as an NFL wife.

A few nights later, at the Seahawks Christmas party, I learned that engagement and marriage are important for an NFL wife’s visibility and social status. One by one, more than a dozen players’ wives, most of whom I had never talked with before, came by our 10-person table where just the two of us sat, congratulating me on the engagement, admiring my ring, and some even suggesting that we get together before the end of the season. It was the first time I realized that marriage was a form of validation in this network. I felt visible to the other wives. I was becoming one of them.

It took being engaged to Craig for me to realize the distinction between NFL wives and girlfriends. Others learned the lesson while they were still girlfriends. One wife told me that she was dating her boyfriend for a year and a half before most of the other NFL wives would talk to her. She said that her saving grace was that one of the veteran wives on the team took a liking to her and told the other wives that they should get to know her too.

The story is common among NFL wives: “Some of the wives don’t respect the women who are “just” girlfriends,” Sadi, an NFL girlfriend told me. Other girlfriends and wives of players told stories similar to Sadi’s:

It wasn’t so much not being friendly, they just didn’t include me in things they did. I think it was because I wasn’t a wife. Looking back, I realize that some women don’t want to get attached to an NFL girlfriend because they feel that the
relationship isn’t secure. If they break up and the player finds a new girlfriend, then it could be awkward to be friends with both women. Not only that, but the common thought among NFL wives is that if a girl is attracted to one player she could be attracted to another. If she’s married or engaged, that’s fine. But if she’s not in that committed relationship, no one wants that girl near their husband! - Cori

The first time I felt bad about being his girlfriend was the first time I tried to be a part of a team function. It was a Bible Study group that was held at one of the wives’ houses. I was excited to be there and to learn more about the Bible. At the end of the hour, the host wife said something like, ‘Please help Lisa to see the immorality in what she’s doing by living with Jeff without being married, and please help Jeff to be faithful to her’. I was shocked, especially because I knew that the woman praying had lived with her husband before they were married! Needless to say, I didn’t go to another wives’ function in [that city]. - Lisa

I personally think that it’s much easier for an NFL lady if they’re married because they’re more accepted by other NFL wives. I was treated like the girlfriend of the week even though I had been with him longer than most people had been married! - Marie

Visibility in the NFL (not for long) wives’ groups.

Several factors besides marriage can influence who feels comfortable and welcomed within an NFL team’s social network and who feels left out. Some of those
factors include a player’s draft pick, salary, position, and performance on the team, the
wife’s commitment to Christian faith, whether or not she has children, and the NFL
team’s formal wives’ group, or lack thereof.

There are several ways for an NFL wife to move up in the hierarchy:

1. Player is a first or second round draft pick
2. Player is a star
3. Players is a highly paid free agent acquisition or a highly valued traded player
   from another team
4. Player is visible, playing a high-profile position such as quarterback, running
   back, or wide receiver
5. Player has been on the team for a long time (3+ years, although this number
   could be different depending on a specific team’s turnover. If players stay around
   for a long time, it will be tougher for newer wives to break in to the group based
   on time spent with the team.

An NFL wife whose husband was on the practice squad for the Chargers
explained:

They had Bible Study every week, but I was never invited. I think it was because
Josh was on the practice squad. Even though we were married and my place in
his life was secure, his place on the team was insecure. I think they saw Bible
Study as some sort of an elite club. I didn’t know anyone in San Diego, so it
would’ve been nice to be a part of that group, but I didn’t want to invite myself to
a club from which I was excluded either.
Danielle, a confident and quirky three year veteran NFL wife, recalled feeling welcomed by most NFL wives. Her feeling of connection right away is not a feeling that’s typically shared by rookie NFL wives, although her husband’s second round draft pick (2nd round) helped her visibility among the mostly invisible faces of new NFL wives. A few months into her husband’s rookie season, Danielle recalls a conversation with another NFL wife at their first team-sponsored charity event that shook her sense of fitting in:

It was a bowling event, so I wore jeans and a t-shirt. John and I are competitive about stuff like that, so I was looking forward to beating him. I felt uncomfortable when I got there and I saw that everyone was dressed up and then they told me that I couldn’t bowl. I guess people had paid money to bowl with the players, so they had a VIP room where the wives could hang out away from the players and fans. Some of the wives were bowling on a lane together, but they had to sign up in advance too. I went into the little room they had sectioned off for wives and saw another wife who I knew had been around for a few years. We started talking and I told her how nice everyone had been to me and how much we were enjoying Seattle. She looked at me and said,

‘Yeah, if you wore a t-shirt and jeans to a charity event on any other team, it would not be okay.’

I felt like I was about two inches tall. I knew then that it was probably not okay in Seattle either, at least not if I didn’t want to stand out as different from the other Seahawks wives. She was wearing jeans with heels and a fancy top. I guess
I didn’t really have things as figured out as I thought. I chalked it up to a rookie mistake, took note of what she was wearing, and never wore a t-shirt or tennis shoes to another NFL event.

When discussing the hierarchy with my mentor, Art, he asked me, “Craig has been a good player and has survived cuts for the most part for seven years, but he was never a star or pro bowl player—-in other words, he got by on grit and determination and nothing was handed to him—so where did that place you in the hierarchy?”

Reflecting on my experiences, I first felt like I came into my own around year three or four. I worked my way up the chain. By Craig’s seventh year with the team, only one wife had been with the Seahawks longer than I had! By spending time with those who were more established, I slowly worked my way up the chain, from lowest woman on the totem pole to a leader, mostly because of time spent on the team.

It's important to note that it’s not necessarily a goal of wives to work toward the top of the chain, but it does happen, nonetheless. It's a predictable pattern, but not one that everyone recognizes because most wives aren't around long enough to see themselves as others see them or to really see others at all. If you haven't climbed at least a few rungs of the ladder, then you’re typically too far down to be able to see who is climbing up. It's not necessarily a popularity ladder, just a visibility ladder.

Visibility is important in the world of NFL wives. To outsiders, NFL wives are both invisible and hyper-visible. They are invisible in that they can be knocked over, pushed away, or just otherwise not be seen by wild fans. They often feel that their opinions are not heard. They are also hyper-visible as people enjoy prying into some of
their lives and they are granted access because of the visibility that comes with being "MRS. NFL PLAYER", even when their husbands are not around.

The first time that I felt visible to other NFL wives was when Sarah and I hosted the first Funky Young Women event (detailed in chapter 8). It was the first time that I took a leadership role among other NFL wives, meeting both new wives who I didn’t know before and others who I knew but may not have ever really seen me.

**NFL wife as a career.**

I've never met an NFL wife who sees it as her calling to be an NFL wife. But, there are ways to be a good NFL wife and because of the nature of the player's job, it is more involved than wives of those with some other careers. The average NFL career is just 3.4 years. In the last twenty years, there have been 15,060 NFL players. Of them, only 631 played longer than 4 years. It's a temporary thing and everyone sees it that way. In the long run, it provides little meaning. But, in the short run, it structures their relationships and determines the functions that they will carry out.

It's not something wives have worked toward. Little girls may dream of being wives or even of marrying NFL players (as one of my cousins did, she even wrote a paper about it in school), but they don't dream that someday they'll be NFL wives. In fact, once they're there, it's something that most just endure and make sense of as they go.

As friendships are made, NFL wives serve as sort of surrogate sisters and best friends for each other, and other NFL couples serve as their families. It is a unique dynamic because the NFL wives are suddenly immersed into a social world with women that they did not freely choose as friends. Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners are often
eaten together, presents exchanged, and memories made. Like any group, however, not
all wives establish close friendships with all other wives. NFL wives are placed together
because of their husbands’ jobs. Their jobs as professional athletes are uniquely
competitive. Contracts in the NFL are not guaranteed and players in the league lose
playing time, positions, and even jobs due to injuries and poor performance that cannot
be precisely anticipated.

Censored speech.

The competitive nature of NFL players’ careers can spill into NFL wife
relationships as well. Although NFL wives identify other NFL wives as their closest
confidants, there are times when they are careful to censor themselves around each other.
The most commonly censored topic is on-field NFL player performances. One player’s
success often means another player’s demise within the team. That can make friendships
with wives of players who play the same position difficult. NFL wives whose husbands
play the same position might avoid talking about their emotions related to the game and
their husbands’ performance to maintain comfort within the friendship. Likewise, a
receiver’s wife may avoid discussing the game with a quarterback’s wife, or vice-versa if
the offense didn’t perform well.

It is ironic that the topic of the game is censored in wives’ gatherings because, in
general, NFL wives love to dissect the game with other NFL wives. They are just careful
to talk only with wives whose husbands play on the opposite side of the ball or a
completely different position. Even then, any analysis that is too close to the other wife’s
husbands position is strictly avoided for fear of offending others and hurt feelings.
Enough is said outside of friendships about the shortcomings of any NFL wife’s husband. Both successes and failures by NFL players are written about in newspapers, talked about on sports radio, and made topics of discussion for fantasy football fanatics around the country. When business men struggle to meet objectives in their jobs, it is likely between them and their co-workers. That same privacy is not afforded to NFL families.

**No one else could understand.**

Winning brings together jovial NFL wives who catch on to the team spirit. But, when a team has a losing record and especially when they fall out of contention, friendships are deepened and so is faith. Wives start to turn toward God and toward each other and the friendships they’ve made to find meaning in the NFL season. With playoffs no longer the goal of a season, wives use their faith and each other to make sense of the sacrifices they make for football, and ultimately for their marriages.

It is common, especially during times of loss or at the end of a player’s contracts for NFL wives to express a fear of being a part of a different team. NFL wives who haven’t been a part of another team tend to think that the stereotypes they heard about NFL wives before they were in the league are true, and that the women on the team they are a part of are exceptions to the rule. Even if there are some NFL wives with whom they do not get along on their team, they tend to focus on those with whom they connect. NFL wives identify with those who are nice and supportive to them, thus assuming that their team’s wives are inherently good and kind people, unlike the stereotypes of catty, ego-centric, cold, social-status seeking NFL wives they previously believed to be true.
They still believe, however, that those sorts of women exist on other teams, and that they were just lucky to have found a group that defied the stereotypes. Lindsey confided that Joe hasn’t been getting as much playing time this year and I am so afraid that they won’t resign him next year. I don’t think that I could deal with the women on other teams. I’ve heard the stories about them. In most cities every game is a fashion show. I don’t want to have to compete with my clothes and jewelry every week. I love the Seahawks wives, I can’t imagine being anywhere else.

NFL wives lean on each other because of their shared circumstances but also because it can be difficult to cultivate new friendships with non-NFL wives. Questions about friends’ intentions surface: Do they want to be friends because they like the person or are they attracted to her husband’s fame? NFL wives recalled hearing comments from new friends such as “I can’t believe I’m meeting an actual NFL wife” or “I’ve never met someone famous.” Likewise, their children hear things at school such as, “my dad lost money because your dad can’t catch a ball” Mary explained.

During our first year with my husband’s new team, we found a church that we loved. No one pointed out that my husband played football, and I loved that. Then, one day the pastor’s wife asked me if I would like to have a play date at the playground with our kids. This is bad, but I questioned her intentions and it gave me a bad taste in my mouth about the church. I just couldn’t believe that she liked me for me. I wondered if she was just trying to get close to me so that they could get closer to my husband or our money. I felt better when I learned that she
had breast implants too, it helped me feel normalized and like we were connecting.

Thompson (1999), the wife of a player in the National Hockey League wrote: I meet a new friend; I have to train them all over again. It’s like they’re so excited that my husband plays in the NHL, they act stupid. They ask stupid questions. They’re not themselves and it takes them a long time to be normal around him. It seems for them, or even our children’s teachers in school, they have a hard time talking to me because they’re, you know…It takes a while and then they realize you’re normal and he’s normal. (p. 188)

She wasn’t the only one. Of her fellow NHL wives, Thompson (1999) wrote: They wanted to have friends who were not simply friends because their husbands did the same job, and they wanted friends who did not just want to be their friends because of the celebrity. They were well aware that celebrity easily attracts pseudo-friends and hangers-on who may just want to use them for contacts, to obtain tickets, or to suggest ways to invest or spend their discretionary income. (p. 188)

**Children: Status symbols among NFL wives.**

With the exceptions of football games and Bible studies, the most common gatherings for NFL wives are baby showers. Every year, women from each team around the league host multiple baby showers -- and as a rule of thumb, every wife on the team is invited. The first baby shower I attended was during Craig’s second year with the Seahawks. It was for Senetra, a rookie wife. I’d never met the hosting NFL wife, but I
showed up to the baby shower despite my reservations about fitting in because I’d met Senetra and was excited to celebrate her pregnancy.

Besides their husbands’ jobs, babies and children are the most common leveler for NFL wives. Despite vast differences in income, places they came from, family backgrounds, or race, NFL wives bond over their children.

Babies and children not only serve as a leveler for NFL wives, but they can also serve as a sort of status symbol among veteran wives. Kristen, wife of an 11-year veteran NFL player and mother of two, recalled seeing an NFL wife who had children make some of the rookie wives feel out of place because they didn’t have kids. She explained that More veteran wives would talk down to the new wives or the women without children, as if they knew more or better than the other wives just because they had kids. They were condescending. It happened to me and it happened to many others. It wasn’t just one or two wives who acted that way, it’s been happening in the league, on different teams, for at least the decade I’ve been a part of the NFL.

Stacey, a child-free wife, recalled being left out because she didn’t have children:

Each year, the other wives come up to introduce themselves to me and, without fail, ask me if I have children. I tell them I don’t have any kids and I see their eyes glaze over and I never hear from any of them again. They are probably looking for people who they can have play dates with, which I get. It makes it hard for me to connect with others, so I’ve pretty much stopped trying. I love
kids and would love to hang out, but it might make them uncomfortable that I don’t have kids.

Finding my place: The NFL’s pecking order.

Berger and Kellner (1964) argued that marriage is “a dramatic act in which two strangers come together and redefine themselves,” or a form of secondary-socialization. In other words, the individuals are “socialized again” in the world they have created together within their relationship. Bochner (1984) found that individuals are often attracted to those who help validate their views of themselves and others. But what happens when two newly married or dating people are thrust into an entirely new and unknown world, in this case the NFL?

The NFL regulates the rules for each team. The management for each team tells the coaches how they should behave. In turn, the coaches are in charge of the players. Like blue-collar construction workers building an empire, NFL players put in the labor to build the team for which they play. They are told when to be there, how hard to swing the hammer, and when they can go home. As long as they are employed by the team, the game comes first.

The league works hard to ensure that players know the pecking order and don’t let their marriages interfere with the game. One example came during the 2011 season when Troy Polamalu, a four-time pro-bowler, was fined $10,000 by the league for calling his wife during the game to let her know that he was okay after suffering concussion-like symptoms (Associated Press, 2011). The fine was for having a cell-phone on the side-
lines, but the league’s choice to enforce the rule under such circumstances clearly shows where a player’s priorities must lie.

In turn, NFL players’ schedules and needs determine the schedules, opportunities and restrictions of their wives. The NFL schedule even dictates when many couples conceive babies (the end of training camp so the baby will arrive at the start of the off-season). Not following “the rules” may lead to NFL players not being able to be with their wives when they are giving birth.

A clear example of the pecking order is seen in NFL Training Camp. Players are sequestered from their families to work for the team for three to four weeks each summer. It is arguably the most difficult time in an NFL player’s career. While in training camp, an NFL player’s marriage to the league leaves his wife as the secret mistress. He must sneak away to call his wife and hang up the phone quickly if management comes near. In his few hours away from practice and meetings each day, players in camp near their homes can sneak home to see their wives. Many conceive their children during that time. But afterwards, players must return to training camp - they have to sleep with the NFL at night.

In my fieldwork with NFL players and their partners, I found that NFL couples often believe that the sport should come before the relationship. In a world of modern day equality and women’s liberation, NFL wives seem to have stepped back in time. The role of NFL wife more closely resembles that of a “help mate” than an equal partner (Rogers, 1966). In turn, many NFL wives expressed a feeling of being invisible. Lisa told me that
We were walking through a restaurant that was in another state and as we walked by, a table full of men turned their heads. It took me a second to realize that they were looking at me and not my husband. They were looking at me! That had never happened before. I couldn’t believe it. We can’t go out anywhere near where he plays without people coming up to introduce themselves to him. I’ve had people literally go across the front of me to shake his hand and not say a word or say hello to me. It’s like I don’t exist.

When I returned to campus each spring, it was my time that I felt like I could be myself and not just Craig’s girlfriend or wife, which was rare in Seattle. He would even attend some classes with me. Most of the students were focused on academics, like me, and didn’t care much about football. I loved that because I knew that both students and teachers seemingly responded to me as a graduate student and not as an NFL wife. The barriers blurred one afternoon when we had a speaker in class who had gone to Purdue, where Craig and I both did our undergraduate work. One of my classmates who was sitting near us, upon hearing that the speaker was from Purdue, jumped at the chance to introduce Craig. “Oh Craig played football for Purdue,” she shouted. I felt about two inches tall. That classroom was my sanctuary. It was where I got to be me. My classmate could’ve said, “Rachel’s in our department, she went to Purdue.” I realized that afternoon that if Craig was there, and the circumstances presented themselves, it was still going to be about him.

Many NFL wives have far more drastic stories of zealous football fans making them feel invisible. Every NFL wife I know has been, at one time or another, handed a
fans’ camera and asked to take a picture of the fan with their husband. In more drastic cases, NFL wives have been literally shoved out of the way by women wanting to get closer to their husbands. Marie expressed how

Football players are kind of like politicians. They never want to upset fans, especially if that was somehow leaked to the team. PR is so important around NFL teams. That was fine with me until I was shoved out of a picture with my husband and he kept smiling for the picture while I was on the ground, in my fancy dress, with a broken high heel. I felt like I was invisible.

Another NFL wife, Larissa, explained:

Fans aren’t usually violent with me, but it seems like they are unable to see past me as an extension of my husband to know anything about me or to even see me as a person. I’ve even been asked to sign HIS autograph for them.

Learning to stay out of the way.

NFL wives are socialized to find ways to “stay out of the way” of their husbands’ careers. To support their husbands’ careers, which many NFL wives care deeply about, wives learn to avoid “distracting them” at all costs. In a Newsday article about NFL relationships, Bob Glauber (2007) told the following story of Norm and Bobbe Evans, who later became our friends in Seattle:

The Evans travel the country each year attempting to help current and former NFL players, as well as athletes in other sports, including baseball and professional auto racing, improve their relationships. They speak from experience;
when Norm was an offensive tackle with the Dolphins in the 1970s, their relationship was strained by his intense devotion to the game. Midway through the 1971 season, when the Dolphins were in the midst of their first Super Bowl run, Bobbe Evans had grown increasingly troubled by their lack of communication. So one night, she made her feelings known as the two were driving home from a restaurant in Miami.

I had been in a marriage improvement mode, having been to a couple of classes and reading some self-help marriage books,” Bobbe recalled. “So on the way home from dinner, I told him, ‘I’m concerned about our relationship, and there are things that I want to talk about in our relationship.’”

Norm’s reaction stunned his wife. “Right now,” he said, “winning the world championship is the most important thing in my life, and you’re going to have to put that on hold. I can’t think about that right now.”

For the next seven years, Bobbe Evans suffered in silence. Shortly after Norm’s career ended in 1978, the two finally sought help through marriage counseling and eventually healed the wounds that once had troubled Bobbe so deeply. But she and her husband are painfully aware many couples are unable to overcome their football-related heartache.

‘I think a lot of couples are like that,’ Bobbe Evans said. ‘Women, whether it’s overt or covert, get the message that she takes care of as much as she can, problems with the kids, neighbors, or in-laws, and the husband has the mentality
that, ‘I’m getting over a game,’ or ‘I’m getting ready for the next game. That’s where my focus needs to be.’

Billy Taylor, a former Giants running back who divorced shortly after his career ended in 1984, believes “No player should be married during his career. ‘I don’t think athletes should ever get married when they’re playing because there are too many ups and downs, and it’s too tough to handle” (Glauber, 2007 as quoted on gamesover.com).

NFL wives like Bobbe are well aware of the negative connotation many players have on marriage. In turn, many NFL wives get caught up in the performance of the perfect wife.

Landyn, the wife of a veteran pro-bowl player confessed:

I wake up early with him, get dressed, make him breakfast, and kiss him goodbye at the door. After that, I crawl back under the covers. Before he gets home, I put on my apron, throw a loaf of store-bought bread into the oven, splash some flour on my face, and I’m ready with fresh-from-the-oven bread that he thinks I slaved over all day when he gets home. It’s important that he thinks I was working as hard for him during the day as he was for me.

**Fusion: The risk of worshiping our lovers.**

What is it that brings NFL wives to NFL relationships in the first place? I posit that like all of us, NFL wives seek transcendence in their relationships with NFL players. Beyond the walls of a team’s facility, NFL players are often deified by the general public. Becker (1973) writes, “We are all hopelessly absorbed with ourselves. If we care about anyone it is usually ourselves first of all” (p.2). In the quest for self-enlargement, man’s
greatest fear, and only certainty in life, is his own mortality. This fear, Becker reasoned, leaves us seeking transcendence by deifying others, including our lovers. We use our pseudo-god lovers to affirm our own significance. Perhaps NFL wives are but a collection of women who believe in the public illusion of a deified lover. Perhaps NFL players seek wives who will validate his view of his life as meaningful (Bochner, 1984). Buber (1956) once wrote, “It is the wish of every man to be confirmed as what he is, even as what he can become” (p. 57).

Becker cautions, “A person who is trying to find his salvation only in a love relationship […] can become overly passive and dependent, fearful of venturing out on his own, of making his life without his partner, no matter how that partner treats him” (1973, p. 179). Such is how I posit NFL wives lose themselves and begin to recreate their identities to fuse with those of their husbands.

To deify someone is to see them as god-like perfection. NFL players look really great through the eyes of their wives who often give up their own lives for them -- or through the eyes of the fans that shout their names from the rafters and cheer with all their might for a solid play. We see ourselves through the eyes of the other -- when they go, we are blind. It is not until we see that we are blind that we are capable of seeing again.

From the heights of perfection, there is only one way to fall. Phillips (1996) explained, “Lovers begin as prolifically inventive, producing enthralling illusions about each other…only to be disappointed into truth” (p.40). Either NFL wives choose to keep up the illusion of a perfect love, or they grow disappointed by their
partners’ shortcomings when they realize he can no longer answer their call for transcendence.

When I met Jim, I couldn’t believe that he wanted to spend time with me. He was perfect and I was just me. By the time we had our first child, and he was gone all the time, I knew that the illusion of him being perfect was just that -- an illusion! He could see how much I was doing to take care of our baby, and he never ever tried to step up and help. That’s when I knew that I would have to find another place to find meaning in my life. Being his wife was not going to be enough! - Katy

If NFL wives see past love’s delusions and realize their spouse is not god-like, other shortcomings may become clearer. Their expectations of their spouses may fall and, in their disillusioned state, they may develop more negative perceptions of their partner’s behavior (Kelley & Burgoon, 1991). Even though they once thought they were quite similar, suddenly their differences seem paramount (Armstrong, 2002).

As differences emerge, NFL wives may begin to lose excitement for their spouses. They no longer praise their lover as their god, but instead lose faith in the way their lovers see them. In the world of professional sports, an athlete’s fall from grace is typically fast and furious. When the game and/or career is over, their deified status is gone.

Currently, the divorce rate for NFL couples parallels the rates of the larger population. One distinction, however, is that of the NFL couples who divorce, fifty
percent of them do so within the first year of the husband’s retirement from the game (Gamesover.org).

When an NFL player is cut or when he retires, he loses his identity as an NFL player. Likewise, his wife, who does not have any control over the situation, loses her identity as an NFL wife. She also loses what may have attracted her to him in the first place – his “heroism” in sports. Suddenly, two people with new identities have to get to know each other again. Many times, they have to do so during a time of grief over the loss of the game. In turn, they may find themselves unable or unwilling to spend time affirming each other. Ultimately, both NFL players and NFL wives realize that neither falling in love nor the illusion of a deified lover will ultimately satiate their desire for transcendence. They have to find a new source of affirmation. The structure of their life and marriage is radically altered. Within three years of retirement, 85% of NFL players are either divorced, broke, or dead (GamesOver.org). Away from the adoring gaze of the crowd, they become blind when there is no one left to see them.

The pitfall of protection.

In M. Scott Peck’s, The Different Drum (1998), he makes the distinction between a pseudo-community and a real community. In a pseudo-community, "people who want to be loving attempt to be so by telling little white lies by withholding some of the truth about themselves and their feelings in order to avoid conflict" (p. 88). In a genuine community, members conduct themselves with full awareness of the reality of the problems they are confronting, and face conflicts with respect for each other and for differences of opinion.
NFL wives are socialized to tell little white lies to their husbands by withholding information about their feelings or household affairs so that the players can concentrate on football. I believe that the more time NFL wives spend in pseudo-community, the more likely they are to find themselves in pseudo-relationships. One example comes from Lisa, who dated her husband for several years before they were married:

We broke up once a couple of years ago because he thought that the added stress of a girlfriend was affecting his play on the field. So, I stayed away for a while during the season but then he was still playing poorly so we got back together. Eventually, things turned around and he played great again. Because I know he thinks about it, I try to do everything I can to make his life easier during the season and to make sure he’s playing well. I don’t want him to leave again because I’m making him play worse than he would without a girlfriend. I’m especially careful not to bother him the day or two before games. If I am really upset about something or if he really messed up, then I’ll save it for Monday or even Sunday night after the game. We don’t talk before the game after he leaves on Saturday, so that helps me keep it to myself. Then when I finally can get things off my chest he has time to process what I’ve said and we can work through it before the following game.

NFL wives are prodded into an identity that is only theirs by default. When their husbands become NFL players, they become NFL wives. NFL wives encourage each other to carry the full burden of the household and family without troubling their husbands with the details. If they are living as they have been socialized to live, then
they do not have the luxury of distributing household chores or negotiating the details of their relationships like many women in non-NFL relationships. Their job, instead, is to take care of their husbands. They protect his career by withholding any details that might be distracting. When wives share details that could be upsetting to their husbands, they feel a sense of guilt for having burdened him with their troubles.

Deion Sanders’ wife of eleven years, Pilar, became a household name after starring in a television reality show about the lives of NFL wives. In 2011, Deion Sanders filed for divorce, saying that his wife became too famous. “If I wanted a model or a television star I would have married one a long time ago. All I wanted was a housewife” he said (Chemer, 2011).

Playboy model Kendra Wilkinson, who had her own reality show, married NFL player Hank Baskett in 2009. After having a child and moving to live in the same city with him when he was signed by a new team, she complained to him, "I need you as my husband, but I also need to find some independence with myself, too. I feel like a NFL wife. We’re going to have to be apart" (Deeken, 2010).

The pressure is strong for NFL wives to live within the boundaries of the NFL’s pseudo-communities. Only within these boundaries can pseudo-relationships exist between some NFL players and their wives.

Others figure out early on that they need more than their pseudo-relationship can offer. Alyssa, who moved to live with her husband before they were married explained: I just realized that if I was going to live out here with him then I’d have to find myself first and become a confident woman who didn’t care what other people
thought. I have seen too many people get lost in the player’s lifestyle. They don’t find anything they love to do and so all of their focus is on what their husband is doing. Then they usually want some of the attention and limelight that their husbands are getting. Lots of women put aside their dreams coming right out of college to be with their man who is pursuing an NFL career. And if they never go back to what they wanted to do, that can cause a lot of resentment toward the other.

I decided to become a yoga instructor, so I had something to focus on other than him. I knew someday we’d get married, I just wasn’t sure when. But life was a lot better for me once I figured myself out...and so was our relationship!

Money.

In 2009, the median household income in the United States was $50,221 (US Census, 2009). The same year, the median salary for an NFL player was roughly $870,000 (USA Today, 2009). Despite the drastic difference in salary, money issues seem to be as prevalent in the NFL as they are in the average American home (Marshall and Skogrand 2004).

Our lifestyle in the NFL has differed from some of the other Seahawks players and their wives and is far from the typical NFL lifestyle. I don’t have my own stylist (although I could certainly use one), we don’t drive new cars, and we don’t send our daughter to $15,000/year private preschool. But we’re not the only ones. The multi-million dollar NFL contracts fuel a common misconception that most NFL players are multi-millionaires. The rookie minimum salary in 2009 was $310,000/year and, after
taxes, even with three years in the league (the average career), many successful NFL players will walk away from the game having made less than $600,000 after taxes. So the idea that all NFL players and families can afford to live luxurious lifestyles just isn’t the case. Of course, that isn’t true for all NFL players -- and some still try.

**Keeping up with the Joneses.**

Keeping up with the Joneses isn’t just a catch phrase, and in the NFL, sometimes the Jones’ are the Walter Jones’ who are making a base salary of more than eight million dollars a year.

Keeping up with the Joneses, which has been shown to increase happiness levels, (Kawamoto, 2009) takes on a whole new meaning in the NFL and may be a contributing factor in poor money management that leads so many players to being broke when football ends (Delevingne, 2009).

Higher salaries don’t come with better money management skills. In fact, I have friends in the league who make over $2 million/year who live paycheck-to-paycheck despite, or maybe because of, living in a luxurious home and driving $100,000+ vehicles.

“It’s easy to do when everyone around you lives that way. You don’t want to be the one who can’t keep up” an in-debt NFL wife admitted. Despite a concerted effort to be financially conservative, Craig and I, too, have fallen victim to living beyond our means. Often, players will gather together for dinner after a victorious game. Being a part of the gathering means team bonding and friendship where friends are sometimes hard to find. It can also mean splitting the bill with teammates who have different financial values and assets than you. At one particular dinner at a top-of-the-line
steakhouse during Craig’s rookie year, we sat with a half of a dozen of his teammates and their wives around a large mahogany table. When we opened the menus, we were aghast to read the prices, so we opted to share a baked potato and some broccoli before hitting fast-food on our way home. Around us, Craig’s more-established millionaire teammates ordered appetizers, large steaks, and expensive bottles of wine. At the end of the night, Craig’s stomach rumbling with hunger, we heard one of the highest-paid players on the team suggest that each couple “just throw in $400” to cover the bill. I started to protest to Craig, “But we only...” he squeezed my leg under the table and whispered, “It’s okay,” as he counted out his cash, everything he had in his wallet, and threw it in the center of the table. On our way out of the restaurant, the manager asked if he could take a picture of the group for their celebrity wall. Craig and I made a pact that night that we would never see that picture again.

From rags to riches.

Some players grow up in financial destitution. When they reach the NFL, some of them literally go from not knowing where they will get their next meal to having millions of dollars overnight. One NFL wife, who grew up wealthy, told me the story of meeting her husband’s family for the first time:

I didn’t know what poor really meant until I saw where he was from. The first time he brought me home to meet his family, I cried for everything that he had made it out of and for the family members of his who were still there. They didn’t have running water or electricity. They didn’t have enough to eat. His mom was taking care of his two siblings and their children. His brother was in
jail and his sister was selling her body so that she could feed her children. I could only imagine the guilt that he must have felt pulling up in the new SUV that I encouraged him to buy. He had hundreds of thousands of dollars in the bank and his family had nothing. After we were married we bought his mom a new house and a car. We’ll always support them because they don’t have any other way to make it out of where they are.

**What do they have to argue about?**

Regardless of the amount of money in one’s bank account, NFL couples still argue about finances. One of the most poignant examples of this was between a couple who signed a prenuptial agreement before they were married. They each hired their own lawyers and negotiated how the money he had made up until that point would be distributed. The result was that they would put five million dollars into a joint account and the rest of the money he had previously made (about fifteen million dollars) would go into a separate account in his name. Any money that they made from that point forward would be added to their joint account.

A little over a year into their marriage, she called me, distraught, because her debit card was rejected when she tried to buy an area rug for their living room. “The account is empty,” she told me, and I have to wait four more days until he gets another check before I can even go grocery shopping.”

Astounded, I asked her how the five million dollars had disappeared.

Well, I guess it’s my fault,” she said. “He bought a large property for hunting and he asked me if I wanted it to be his land or our land. I told him our land, so it
came out of our joint account. Then he gave his Dad an $80,000 motorcycle for his birthday. He asked me if I wanted it to be a gift from him or a gift from us. Of course I wanted it to be from both of us. I could have told him no. That happened over and over, our vacation home is in both of our names, the house has been furnished from our account, we go out to eat with the money we share.

What really pisses me off is that he has fifteen million dollars sitting in an account but when I told him that my debit card didn’t work, that the account was empty, he reminded me that it was only four more days. That’s four days that his wife and son are broke. It just makes me sad that he feels that way. The truth is that I would gladly trade my rich husband for the same man who was poor. His money has done nothing but hurt our relationship.

Another NFL wife vented to me at one of the games because her husband had just purchased a $20,000 painting. “It’s an ugly painting and it cost us $20,000!” she exclaimed. “He could have at least asked me how I felt about the purchase. That’s a lot of money.”

Earlier the same day my sister vented that her husband bought a Big Mac on his way home from work. “What was he thinking? We don’t have that kind of money right now!” she exclaimed. The issue and the feelings expressed by the two women struck me as the same, regardless of the price tags attached to the items. No amount of money ever seems to be enough in a marriage in which economic and financial “rules” have not been mutually negotiated.

How much is enough?
It has been estimated that 78% of NFL players go bankrupt within two years of leaving the game (Torre, 2009). Notable players who declared bankruptcy include Deuce McAllister who had earned more than 70 million as an NFL player, Mark Brunell, who made more than $50 million, and Rocket Ismail who made more than $18 million. Jamarcus Russell, who had a guaranteed $40 million dollar contract, lost his home to foreclosure (Bukszpan, 2011).

Perhaps it is stories like those above that breed fear into NFL players and their wives about their own financial futures, leaving them wondering about how they will sustain their income after football.

In a discussion about one of our friends whose husband had retired from football with more than $15 million in the bank, an intelligent veteran NFL wife asked me, “What are they going to do now?”

“Whatever they want,” I answered. “They have more than $15 million invested, so they won’t ever have to work again.”

“But they can’t retire off of that amount. Not for the rest of their lives,” she answered. She was serious. In her mind, that wouldn’t be enough.

When I got home, I pulled up a retirement calculator on the computer. With $15 million invested at just three percent, they could spend more than $450,000 a year without running out of money. The amount seemed livable to me. However, put into the lifestyle with those like my friends in the story above, who had and spent more than $5 million in less than two years of marriage, she was right. The amount couldn’t possibly be enough.
Why do they stay?

Current and potential future contracts can serve as incentives for NFL girlfriends and wives to stay in relationships, even if they are unhappy or their partner is unfaithful. Before marriage, there is an understanding among some NFL couples that male infidelity will be tolerated until marriage, even while the future NFL wives are living with the players, with the understanding that marriage is the outcome that they’re working toward. Far fewer NFL couples tend to tolerate infidelity during a marriage (or at least far fewer couples talk about infidelity during a marriage if it’s tolerated). Marriages that struggled with infidelity typically dissolve within months of a player’s retirement (Gamesover.org).

“It’s just too difficult and time consuming to go through a divorce during the NFL season,” a former NFL wife told me. “And besides, he gets paid weekly. Why would I want to give up the money that I deserve just because he screwed up? That just makes me want to stay to get everything I possibly can from him,” she admitted.

Just four years into the game, the veteran minimum is currently over $400,000...a 50/50 split makes it worth at least $200,000 for each year that a wife stays and potentially much, much more.

Turning violent: An unspoken reality.

Violence on the field.

NFL wives constantly worry about their husbands’ safety on the field. While to the general public it may seem that football players “play” for a living, wives of football players have called it “glorified slavery” (O’Toole 2006 p. 39). Jessa, a young NFL wife, told me:
He comes home on Sunday nights full of adrenaline and feeling good, but by Monday he can barely move. His bruises are full of color and it looks like he has been in a fight or a terrible car accident. On Tuesdays, when he is off, he can barely stand up on his own. He spends his day at the chiropractor or getting a massage. We tell ourselves that if ever his body doesn’t feel good by the following weekend, then it’s time for him to retire.

O’Toole (2006) recounted watching her husband get hurt when playing for the Canadian Football League:

Someone missed a block, and he got blasted. Horrified, I watched as his torso flew backward, cleats and hips parallel to the turf. He was airborne fifteen feet before landing on his left shoulder, with his head bouncing to a standstill.

When he didn’t get up, the referee called a time-out. The trainers rushed over, and through the jumble of arms, legs, and medical equipment, my eyes zeroed in for a twitch of movement. Nothing. I felt my throat start to close. In a frightened stupor, I left my seat and descended to the bottom row of the bleachers, where the steel railing stopped me. My face was burning hot. The pale yellow turtleneck I wore squeezed like a torture device. Twenty seconds passed as I stood there, frozen, staring at John’s still body.

As I focused on John, I heard the crowd exclaim in unison, ‘Oooh!’ and then ‘Aaahh’ several times, until I followed the crowd’s gaze up toward the JumboTron. After replaying the slow-motion image of my best friend and lover torpedoing into the green Astroturf, the camera panned to a live close-up – of me!
There I was, red-cheeked and yanking at the sweater around my throat, my eyes bright with unshed tears.

Seeing my overblown face on a 20x20 foot screen almost pushed me over the edge-literally. I grabbed the bleacher railing and started to climb over, determined to run onto the field and get to John, when he pulled up his knee. The trainers helped him to his feet, and only after they had coaxed him to the sidelines did my throat finally stop constricting and I let go of the metal bar in my hands.

As I headed back to my seat, I heard several excited comments: ‘That boy got his ass knocked off! ‘Wow, what a kill shot!’ And, ‘He sure got de-cleated!’

I never want to feel that terrified or helpless again. After that incident, my throat would start to tighten every time John suited up.” (p. 59-60)

Other women throughout the league expressed similar sentiments. Football is a terrifying sport when you’re watching a loved one out on the field. Dick Butkus famously stated, “I would never set out to hurt anyone deliberately unless it was, you know, important, like in a league game.”

Violence and aggression are applauded in football until, as Jeff Benedict suggested, a player takes it too far and isn’t playing by the rules. Fans shout, tempers rage, and players can be fined thousands of dollars.

Research shows that the chance is good that Craig will be injured before retiring from football. A 1990 study of 870 former players reported that in the 1980s, 72% of players suffered a major injury while playing. In the same study, two of every three
former players said their injuries had limited their ability to participate in sports and other recreational activities in retirement (Gerdy, 2002).

Craig’s First Active Game

“Hey, baby, this movie is rated R. Adult language and violence. Lots of it.” – Bruce Smith, Buffalo Bills

Twenty-two uniformed men jumped, stretched, and twisted inside the lines on the field turf below. The Minnesota Vikings lost the toss, so they kicked-off to the Seahawks. A win for either team would put them in contention for the division championship.

Craig was about to play his first active snap of regular-season NFL football. I was dressed in blue from head to toe with small Seahawks hanging from my ears and a silver “93” hanging from the necklace around my neck. In reserved-for-the-family-of-the-visiting-team seats, I wasn’t nearly close enough to see which player in blue belonged to me without hiding my eyes behind high-powered lenses. Nonetheless, we were lucky to be there. Only 215 of every 100,000 high school football players make it to the NFL (NFLPA.ORG). Only 40% of sixth round draft picks, the round when Craig was drafted, make the final roster. Craig made it. He spent most of the season on the sidelines. Now, he was playing his first active game.

The whistle blew. Minnesota kicked the ball high into the air to Seattle’s kick off returner. Craig joined hands with two of his teammates and charged toward Minnesota’s defenders. From my seat, Craig, at 6’3” and 295 pounds and his equally sized teammates looked like children playing a moving game of red-rover. It was their job to clear a path for the kick-returner to get through. But this is no child’s game. They call Craig’s
position “the wedge.” USA Today listed it as the 7th worst job in sports. To clear a path, offensive players charge down the field and slam their bodies into the just-as-large men from the opposing team who also charge toward them at full speed, attempting to break through their arms to stop the ball carrier from advancing.

Through my binoculars, I saw Craig and a Vikings player about to collide. Craig didn’t slow down. I wanted to stop looking, but I couldn’t take my eyes off of the play. The Vikings’ player lowered his head into Craig’s face mask. I cringed. The other player fell backwards and Craig fell on top of him. Craig stood up, readjusted his face mask, and stumbled forward.

“Is he okay?” my mom asked, her eyes still hidden behind her high-powered camera. “He looks like he’s dizzy.” My stomach tightened and I closed my eyes. “Why is he yelling at that guy?” she asked, interrupting my silent prayer. I looked up. Craig’s shoulder was in the chest of a Vikings player.

“The other guy must have said something to him first. Craig doesn’t get too emotional on the field,” I explained.

“It’s football. Everyone gets violent,” my brother told me.

“Not Craig. He’s always pretty calm,” I assured him. Though I’d often worry about the possibility of Craig being injured on the field, until that moment, I’d never worried about the possibility of him becoming violent.

...
The game ended well for us. The Seahawks won in a close battle (27-23). Craig’s face-mask wasn’t as lucky. During the opening kickoff, his collision indented and deformed it.

“Why were you yelling at that guy on the field today?” I asked Craig after the game.

“What guy?”

“After the very first play. What did he say to you?”

“Nothing.”

“Did he start it?”

“No, he didn’t say anything.”

“Why were you in his face?”

“I don’t know. My adrenaline was pumping.”

My eyes narrowed with confusion. I worried about his safety and, for the first time, my own. He wrapped his arms around me and kissed the top of my head. Does Craig’s on-field violence indicate that he is capable of becoming violent with me?

Violence off the field.

My interview with Anne revealed that violence off of the field is also an issue. She told the stories of two “wife beaters” from the 1970s and said there could have been
more. Today, domestic violence continues to be a problem. Twenty-one percent of all NFL players have been accused of a serious crime (Carlson, 2010).

When athletes commit acts of violence off the field, both fans and coaches seem to be much more forgiving. While their crimes steal the headlines, fans often welcome them back to the playing field.

Some of the more notable accusations include:

- The New York Giants’ Michael Strahan’s wife, Jean, reported that her husband punched her in the face and knocked her to the ground, loosening a tooth when they were dating and that the abuse continued after they were married in 1999. He continued playing for the Giants and was considered one of the top defensive ends in the league, a fan favorite.
- In the early 1997, Dallas Cowboys’ star, Michael Irvin was accused of holding a gun to a woman’s head while his teammate Erik Williams and another man raped her.
- In 1996, NFL superstar OJ Simpson was charged, though found not guilty for the murder of his ex-wife, Nicole.
- Indianapolis Colts’ defensive back Nick Harper was arrested on a domestic battery charge. His wife was treated for an eye injury and he had to stay in jail before he appeared before a judge.
- Ray Lewis of the Baltimore Ravens was accused of murder in the stabbing deaths of two men.

NFL wives and girlfriends also made headlines with their violence toward NFL players. NFL players spend their work days being yelled at by their coaches. They are
not allowed to respond. In turn, players admit to tuning out the yelling, no longer shocked by the yelling. They are taught not to let their emotions get involved when being yelled or screamed at.

One of Craig’s teammates went to jail when the police were sent to his house by a neighbor who overheard him fighting with his girlfriend. When the police arrived, he refused to tell them that his girlfriend attacked him. Instead, he stayed silent and they took him to jail instead of her. Notable cases of NFL wives being accused of domestic violence include:

- In 2011, Michi Nogami-Marshall admittedly stabbed her husband in the stomach. The charges against her were later dropped.
- In 2009, Steve McNair was killed in a murder-suicide by a woman with whom he was having an extra-marital affair.
- In 2003, Deidra Lane was convicted of manslaughter for the shooting death of her husband.

Some NFL wives undoubtedly grow frustrated when yelling doesn’t work and they don't know how to get across to their husbands when they don't respond, becoming violent when yelling doesn’t work. Because players may not want to admit being assaulted by their wives, the number of reports may not be indicative of the amount of domestic violence by NFL wives. Alyson described her frustration with her husband:

I get so mad at him when he is at home, sitting on the couch, and I am running around like crazy taking care of our kids and home. He tells me he is tired or sore -- I get that, but he also chose to play football. It gets to the point where I am
yelling and screaming at him, but he still doesn’t respond. I know it’s not good for our kids to see that, but I don’t know what else to do. Sometimes I will have to go stand between him and the television just to avert his gaze. It makes me feel like slapping him, but he may be too desensitized to physical pain to even know I was there.

**Racial separation or segregation?**

In the NFL today, talent seems to be color-blind. Coaches and management put the best players on the field, regardless of the player’s race. In the locker room and in the team cafeteria all players interact with each other. But, Craig told me that white players tended to spend time with other white players while black players tended to spend time with other black players. Looking back on my seven years among NFL wives, there are several black NFL wives who I consider close friends, but there was a disproportionate number of white wives with whom I spent time.

The first time I noticed a racial divide among NFL wives was when I received pictures from the first baby shower that I attended. The baby shower was for an African American rookie wife, Senetra Weaver, wife of fullback Leonard Weaver. It was being hosted by Val Alexander, wife of Seahawks MVP running back, Shaun Alexander. They knew each other because both of their husbands’ were running backs. I had never met Val, but I showed up to the baby shower despite my reservations about fitting in with other NFL wives because I’d met Senetra. The pictures revealed a clear racial divide in the room:
The six women sitting on the couch in the picture on the left are all caucasian and married to caucasian players. The picture on the right is also of six women, five of whom are African American and one of whom is Caucasian. The blonde Caucasian in that picture is married to an African American player. On both couches, the most veteran NFL wives are in the two center seats and the newer to the league NFL wives are closer to the edges.

As far as I know, none of us consciously decided to sit on the couch we did because there were other white or black women on the couch; nor did we choose the location where we sat on the couch consciously based on our husband’s time in the league. In a room where none of the women knew each other longer than a few years and some of us had never met, we may have just gravitated toward what seemed familiar in an unfamiliar world, the younger wives, including myself, walking the edges, trying to fit in.

As I got to know other NFL wives, I realized that I was not alone nor was the tendency to look for the familiar that was found in the pictures from the baby shower an
isolated incident. At nearly every NFL event I attended without assigned seating, black wives tended to sit with other black wives and white wives tended to sit with other white wives, although at most events there were exceptions to the rule, a white wife at a predominantly black table or a black wife at a predominantly white table.

When Sarah Hasselbeck decided to lead a Bible study for Seahawks wives, she asked a black NFL wife to co-lead the group, both because she was well-versed in the Bible and a natural leader, and because Sarah thought that having a black leader would help attract more of the black wives to the group. It worked. That year, the Seahawks wives’ Bible study was made up nearly equally of black and white women.

The following year, the wife with whom she co-hosted was no longer in Seattle after her husband was signed to play in a different city. Sarah decided to host the Bible study at her home and lead it on her own. She put fliers in each player’s locker for their girlfriends or wives. At the first session, nearly thirty wives showed up. Within thirty minutes, I stood with Sarah in the kitchen as we looked at the group of wives who had self-selected where they sat. Twelve black wives and one hispanic wife sat together around Sarah’s dining room table. Thirteen white wives sat together in Sarah’s living room. “This is not good,” Sarah said, pointing to the obvious separation of the races. She sat down in a chair near the middle of the dining room table, silent as she waited for a chance to jump into the conversation with the black and hispanic wives. She never said a word and the conversation quickly died, perhaps a result of her being there. Within three weeks, the group at Bible study was down to ten wives who attended regularly. Of

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these, eight were white and only two were black, despite nearly a two-to-one ratio of black wives to white wives on the team.

**Search for meaning.**

At a local fundraiser, I listened as one of Seattle’s popular news anchors gave her keynote speech to a diverse group of Seattle area residents:

Our lives are like train rides, and we spend much of our time dreaming of the destination. For most of us, the destination is fabulous: we are riding in a parade, confetti showered over us, the crowds cheering and chanting our names. We imagine that we will live in a castle, maybe with millions of dollars in the bank. At some point, we realize that destination does not exist, then we have to figure out how to enjoy the journey along the way. Where can we find meaning and happiness if we will never reach that destination? she asked.

Suddenly, it hit me. The *destination* that she said didn’t exist was the *journey* that we and our friends were living in the NFL. In January 2006, the Seahawks defeated the Carolina Panthers to win the NFC Championship game. As the game ended, blue and green confetti fell from the rafters, fireworks erupted, the crowd went wild. The Seahawks were on their way to the Super Bowl. Craig was on the field, I was in the stands with a smile that covered my face. I jumped up and down, my phone went crazy with family and friends calling and texting from all over the country -- We made it! We were going to the Super Bowl! The Seahawks wound up losing the Super Bowl, but the fanfare didn’t stop. While I was back in the classroom at school in Tampa, thousands of fans lined the streets of Seattle to welcome home their champions as they paraded to the
packed stadium. That night, the players went home, many of them to their 5,000+ square foot “castles” with their millions of dollars in the bank. Had they “made it?” Had we made it? Did we find the happiness that so many others were seeking -- was this the destination? If so, what happened when the confetti stopped, when the bank accounts were overdrawn, when the fans no longer cheered? Did the happiness go away? Where else was there to go if the train had reached the station?

One NFL wife’s parents told her, “Going to the Super Bowl to watch Tom play has been the most exciting event of our lives.”

“What does that mean for our future?” she asked me. Is it all downhill from here?”

NFL players achieve the pinnacle of their careers earlier than most. While their same-aged friends are climbing the corporate ladder toward what seems like fulfillment in their respective careers, 30-year-old NFL players have already reached the top in their fields. NFL players realize earlier than most that the meaning they were seeking is not there.

There is hidden longing that NFL players and their wives possess that comes from searching for meaning when outsiders assume they have it all. While those outside of the game think they have everything they could ever want, NFL families realize that meaning isn’t in playing in the NFL and there has to be something more, even within the NFL, to want. If you play, you want to start. If you start, you want to play in the pro-bowl, to win championships, or to set records that last forever. There is no permanence in the NFL. Ultimately, we’re all let down, players and wives.
NFL players reach the destination that others gave up on finding -- only to realize that it’s as empty as the dream. Upon realizing that meaning is not found by fans screaming your name, being the best in your field, or making a lot of money, NFL players and their wives are left with a choice: Move forward without meaning or find another way to create meaning. I believe it is the attempt to make meaning, along with league socialization that leads NFL wives to turn away from football as the meaning in their family’s lives and move toward charitable work and religion.

Charitable works in the NFL.

NFL players and their wives are afforded celebrity status by their association with NFL teams. As a result, they have greater presence and more agency than the general population (Marshall, 1997). McKenzie (1999), an NFL wife wrote:

As the wife of an NFL player, I could take advantage of... benefits in a more active way. For example, Brian’s endorsement contract with Nike entitled me to order any shoe, sweat suit, or other Nike apparel that I wanted at no charge. For a 20 year old this was an impressive perk. Other perks included free dinners at good restaurants, complimentary trips including an all-expenses paid cruise in the Caribbean, and four consecutive trips to Hawaii for the NFL Pro-Bowl. The wives of Pro-Bowl players flew first class on tickets provided by the NFL. And there was plenty of spending money for our meals. This was a lifestyle others just dream about, and I was living it in my twenties because I was the wife of a National Football League player.” (p. 234)
Like others, McKenzie realized that the perks so many admired did little to bring her closer to finding meaning in her life. She wrote, “it was not too long before I realized that these did little to help me answer on my own terms the question, “Who am I?” (p. 234).

To help answer that questions, NFL wives like McKenzie spend time with other NFL wives, often at charitable functions sanctioned by an NFL team or an individual player. Not all NFL wives are comfortable jumping into charitable events, but they are pushed toward them through invitations to multiple player-hosted events that occur almost every week. They show up with their husbands to support his teammates or to make a community appearance.

NFL players’ high salaries make it easy for NFL wives to make financial contributions to the charities with which they associate. As NFL wives spend more and more time involved with charities, they come to think of themselves as charitable. Many start to volunteer more and more time with humanitarian efforts and fundraisers and give more and more money as time goes by. Eventually, many veteran NFL wives host charitable events or fundraisers. Charity and charitable giving among NFL wives is still prevalent after their husbands retire from the game. Although players’ names are often used to promote the events, it is the NFL wives who do all of the legwork to make the event happen (see Sarah’s story in chapter 6).

**Religiosity: A Christian socialization**

Many NFL players and their wives look for meaning through Christianity. Many athletes learn to seek God to protect them and for an advantage to victory. This may be
the result of intense marketing to athletes of all ages by Christian organizations including the YMCA, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Athletes in Action, Champions for Christ, and Pro Athletes Outreach. Billy Graham began recruiting born-again Christian athletes in the late 1940s (Mathisen, 2002). He reasoned that, “Fans who see their heroes following Christ are more receptive to Jesus.”

According to Athletes in Action, a Christian organization that seeks to evangelize to college athletes, 35 to 40 percent of pro football players are evangelical Christians, compared to about 25 percent of the rest of America. Beyond the influence of formal Christian organizations, established Christian NFL couples also recruit younger NFL couples. Ken Ruettgers, during his time with the Green Bay Packers explained, “We [The Packers] have a couples’ Bible Study. We try to get couples who are engaged or just dating to come so we can do some modeling for them of what a Christian marriage looks like” (Branon, 1996 p. 125).

*Christianity on the field.*

Christianity is as evident on the football field as it is off the field.. Players pray together in the locker room before each game and groups of Christian NFL wives gather together in fan waiting areas to pray for their husbands before the games. They pray for their safety, for their performances, and for the team’s victory. Their prayers often continue individually from the stands during the game.

After big plays, players often celebrate by pointing up toward God or by making other gestures suggesting prayer or thanks to God. One of Craig’s former teammates, DJ Hackett, put his hands together after every touchdown, as if to say “Thank you, Jesus”.

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"God puts you in a certain situation, and I was going to make it here regardless of where I was playing at," Hackett told reporters (Wyrwich, 2007).

At the end of every NFL game, players from both teams gather in the center of the field where they pray in front of fans, reporters, and TV cameras. In press conferences after games, Christian players who played well or whose team won are quick to give the praise to God for all of their achievements. Leonard Weaver, nicknamed “The Baptizer" for his religiosity and stiff-arm as a running back, told a reporter after a touchdown:

"It was one of those things like, 'Oh, my God, I just scored.' It was just a blessing...Man, this was the best feeling I've felt in a long time. I just thank God for it. It was great, really good.” (Johnson, 2007)

*The catalysts of conversion: Justification for change.*

It doesn’t take long for NFL families to realize that the cheering they hear from the fans, the perks they receive, are because of their association with the team. If they play poorly or if they are cut from the team, most of the cheering stops and those that loved them are no where to be found. Upon that realization, many players and their wives turn to Christianity. Jim Harbaugh, a first round draft pick who later went on to coach, said:
I grew up thinking that football was the most important thing and that people would like me because of how well I did as a football player. Now I realize that there’s Someone who loves me more than it’s possible to describe. It’s a love that is unconditional.” (Branon, 1996 p. 61).

Likewise, Guy McIntyre said, “God gave me the ability to [play football], and as long as I do it in His glory, I think I’m OK... I use the game to be a witness for Him” (Branon, 1996 p. 88).

*Bible studies: A way to belong.*

NFL players and wives are encouraged to get involved with Bible studies. Each NFL team has a team chaplain and nearly every team chaplain leads a Bible study for the players and many chaplains’ wives lead Bible studies for NFL wives. Teams without chaplain wives to lead Bible study sometimes have players’ wives step up to lead Bible study. Such was the case with the Seahawks during our time in Seattle. Trent Dilfer, who played for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers at the time, explained the involvement he and his wife, Cass, had with Bible studies:

We are involved in two major Bible studies. One with my teammates on Monday night and then Thursday nights we have a Sunday school class that meets in our home. The women meet downstairs and the men upstairs. We do that for two and one-half hours on Thursday. In the off-season, we’re involved with our Sunday school class. Cass is also involved with Bible Study Fellowship and a wives’ study. She’s involved in four Bible studies. She’s really taken off. I’m doing a hermeneutics study with...our Athletes in Action representative. I’m really
digging into God’s Word and getting a better understanding of it. (Branon, 1996 p. 197)

Because of the prevalence of Bible studies as a time for NFL wives to bond, making friends with other wives can be especially challenging for NFL wives who do not participate in Bible studies. An NFL wife who identified as an atheist even thanked a group of other Seahawks wives for “being so nice to her despite the fact that she did not believe in God.” She clearly saw her lack of faith as something that had previously set her apart from other NFL wives.

She was the same wife who told me how sick it made her to see wives wearing their husband’s jerseys, parading around with his name on her back or the husband’s number around her neck. I quietly slid my hand over my “93” necklace that displayed my husband’s number and nodded my head in agreement. She reasoned that her life was hers to live -- that she would neither serve a god nor serve a man.

Not all Bible study groups are places for NFL wives to bond. Angela reported experiencing cattiness in her city’s Bible study. She told me

The other wives used God as a way to get in their digs on each other. They prayed for certain players not to cheat on their wives and for certain wives to be nicer to their husbands. It was not a spiritual experience, just a chance to gossip, to call themselves Christians, and to make themselves feel better by putting others down.

*Christian socialization: Who does it serve?*
Bible studies and the embrace of Christianity within the NFL reinforce the male dominant structure of the NFL marriage and family. Women are cast into subservient roles, protective of their husband’s needs and desires. Women’s subservient roles benefit both the team and the league as women find satisfaction within their sometimes secondary citizenship. Embracing their roles as Christian wives, sacrificing for their husbands, helps them to justify not having their needs met at the expense of the league. It is no wonder, then, that Christianity among players and their families is encouraged league-wide through team chaplains, team prayer, and team-endorsed Bible studies.

One risk that NFL marriages face is the stonewalling of conflict, which could lead to built-up resentment (Gottman 2000). NFL wives may suppress their natural and legitimate emotional responses to their husbands actions while they are in season (see chapters 6 and 7), NFL wives may be inadvertently damaging their marriages. This may be one of the reasons that so many divorces happen so quickly after NFL players retire.

Equality: From the inside looking out.

I sat down one night to dinner with three of my favorite NFL wives -- Sarah, Ashley, and Jackie. I asked them, Is there equality in NFL relationships?

“Yes,” Sarah quickly answered. It wasn’t the first time that I’d asked her that question or one close to it.

I changed the question -- “what does equality look like in NFL relationships?”

“That’s a hard question” each of them said over the next few minutes.

“It depends on whose perspective you look from,” Ashley offered. “From my family or friends outside of football it doesn’t look like it, but to me it is,” she said.
“I have the opportunity to stay home and raise my kids. Other people in other jobs might not have the financial means to be able to have that option. Lots of my friends have expressed wishing that they could have the same opportunity,” Jackie said. “But do they have to pick up in a moment’s notice and move because of his job, sometimes to five or more cities within a few years? Not usually.”

“Take the emotion out of it -- looking at it from a sociological perspective, who makes more sacrifices in your relationship?” I asked.

“What’s your dissertation about? It’s about love, right? And in love, there are sacrifices. It’s what we do and we don’t think of it sacrificially. We’re happy. I love being Matthew’s wife,” Sarah said.

“My professor talked about being a professor as more than a job -- as a calling. Are NFL wives asked to step away from their callings in support of their husbands?”

“Why do you think we’re getting so defensive?” Sarah asked. “I can feel my fists clenching and I want to come out punching,” Sarah admitted. The other girls nodded in agreement. “Yeah, we make sacrifices, but if we think of it that way we’ll be miserable. What’s the point? I’m happy with my life and I feel like I’m living it the way God wants me to.”

Janea explained how she began to gain a sense of self-worth within an NFL Bible study group:

When I left my job, I felt like I was making a big mistake. I gave up my dreams to support his. I knew my parents weren’t happy with my decision to stop working and my coworkers seemed to think it was a big mistake too. The other
NFL wives talked with me about what the Bible said about supporting our husbands. They affirmed me for sacrificing for Jeff and I realized that I was doing what God wanted me to do. - Janea

**Sex**

Cheerleaders dance on the sidelines of the football field and some collegiate football teams have even been known to hire hookers to lure in high school prospects (O’Keefe, 2011). At the NFL Player’s Party at the Super Bowl, women were hired to dance on stage around the bar. Sex is closely linked with football at all stages of the game.

The NFL constructs NFL wives’ obligations as supportive of the team and the player, most of it is a domestic role including sex and having children. Sex is one of the issues that comes up often in conversations between NFL wives. Because of other women who outwardly desire their husbands and what they have learned from Bible studies, NFL wives feel that they are under increased pressure to look sexy and to make sure their husbands are sexually satisfied.

Soon after getting married, a veteran NFL wife told me that it was my job as Craig’s wife to give him sex any time he wanted it. “If you are saying no, there will be someone else saying yes,” she explained. Other wives reported hearing similar things from other NFL wives. Shawnie remarked,

I know that as his wife it is my job to submit to him, but he asks for sex at least three times a day. My body is tired and I can’t perform that often. Besides, it
seems like the more I have sex with him the more he wants sex. It just never ends.

Chloe, a veteran NFL wife, told me that she woke up one night after an exhausting day with her kids, to her husband breathing heavy beside her. “Did you just have sex with me?” she asked him. He admitted that he had.

Conversely, I’ve heard NFL wives complain that they don’t get enough sex from their husbands because they are too tired and their bodies are too sore. “I stood in front of him with my shirt off, trying to attract his gaze from the television. He finally looked at me but only said, ‘Excuse me.’ I put my shirt back on and went to bed.”

**Infidelity in the NFL.**

Although not as rampant as fans might think, infidelity is present in the NFL. The first time I heard of a specific instance of infidelity in the NFL was when one of Craig’s teammates left his wife after she uncovered a love letter that he wrote to another woman. She found the file on their computer. When she opened the file, she quickly realized by the content that the letter was for someone else. The couple had a young child and another on the way. She went home for a couple of weeks to be with her family. When she returned home, the locks had been changed and the other woman was living in her house.

For years, I believed that the player’s infidelity was an isolated incident and that the other players were all good family men. “The players don’t have time to cheat,” other NFL wives and I reasoned. “When they’re out of town, their time is accounted for, and the rest of the time they are at practice or in meetings when they’re not at home.”
more and more stories of infidelity surfaced, I realized that if an NFL player wants to cheat, he will find a way.

An NFL wife and her husband told me about being out to dinner one night at a club when the manager said they were closing early for an NFL team party. She was surprised, “My husband plays for that team,” she told the manager. He let them stay. One by one, they watched nearly a dozen of her husband’s married teammates enter the club without their wives. Scantily clad women followed and they watched several of the married players kiss and dance with women who were not their wives.

A different NFL wife told me that one of the rookie players was asked by a married veteran player to book a room in the team hotel under the rookie’s name for the married player’s girlfriend.

The stories of infidelity still seemed like stories that happened to others until one of my close friends came to me with the story of her NFL husband’s infidelity. Her husband cheated on her while they were living in separate cities. They had two young children and his position on the team was insecure, so she decided to stay in their home town. “No NFL wife should ever live apart from her husband” she told me later. “I don’t think I will ever get over what he did. It’s awful,” she said.

She asked me about my relationship with Craig. “You guys have such a perfect marriage,” she said. “Do you guys ever argue?”

“Of course,” I admitted.

“But not normally, and probably not about anything big,” she said.
I admitted that Craig and I had argued in the past because he was dishonest with me about trivial things. She told me that her husband was the same way. It scared me to think that there were similarities between Craig and her husband the way they handled the truth. *Was Craig capable of cheating on me?*

Some NFL girlfriends put up with infidelity before marriage with the expectation that the player will be faithful after they are wed. Renee, who had dated her husband since middle school, recalls the rules of her relationship changing in college when he became a collegiate football star.

Women started going crazy for him and his teammates and he was spending more and more time out at bars and parties with his teammates. Soon after, I started hearing rumors that he was cheating on me. When I confronted him, he admitted that it was true. His excuse was that he wasn’t ready to get married. I had to make a choice -- put up with his cheating or get out of the relationship. I knew I wanted to marry him someday, so I waited. When he finally proposed, after being in the NFL for three years, he promised that he would always be faithful. I believed him. Things are different in football. It’s not their fault that women throw themselves at them. But, when they’re married, then they should be faithful...and he is.

The fear of infidelity is ever-present among NFL wives but they downplay the risks inherent in NFL relationships and in their own relationships through group-talk.

“We are so lucky to be married to such great men and we’re lucky they are NFL players and not baseball players” an NFL wife told me. “Other athletes cheat on their wives, but
NFL marriages are safer than those in other sports. I think it’s because the players are not away from home for long periods of time.” Another NFL wife, Ashley, said

Everyone outside of football thinks that our husbands are these awful guys who cheat on us and that we just stay at home and take care of them. But, I would say, with most of the guys on the team, we have such a great team, that’s not the case at all.

Despite spending seven years as an NFL wife, I don’t know how many marriages in the NFL, or even among our friends suffered from infidelity. Marital infidelity is not typically discussed among acquaintances and even close friends sometimes hide such details to protect their marriages. From my time in the field, I have seen that NFL players are under increased temptations as their celebrity status attracts women and groupies that might not have otherwise been attracted to them.

... The themes that emerged during my time with NFL wives reveal the issues that NFL wives think about, talk about, and deal with during their tenures as NFL wives and how they are socialized into their roles as NFL wives.

I laid out the structure and importance of social networks focusing on how NFL wives enter the system of the NFL, their struggles to do so, and the characteristics of individual wives’ groups. I then discussed the importance of marriage for visibility among other NFL wives and subsequent ways one can move up in the hierarchy of NFL wives on a given team. An important point to remember is that it is not a hierarchy of importance, but only of visibility, which is extremely important for a sense of identity
among one’s cohorts while one is an NFL wife. Typically, a player’s position, performance, or time with the team dictate his wife’s visibility among other NFL wives.

I then laid out the idea of “NFL Wife as Career.” I explained that although some girls may grow up wanting to marry football players, I haven’t met a woman who has seen being an NFL wife as her calling. Still, there is an unwritten job description that NFL wives learn through a strong socialization when their husbands enter the league.

Next, I talked about censored speech. Despite spending most of their time with other NFL wives, these women are careful to censor some of the topics they discuss with each other. Those topics center mainly around football and player performance, especially as it relates to poor performance of another woman’s husband.

I explained that because of the loneliness inherent in NFL life, NFL wives turn toward each other in times of trials and triumphs. There is a belief among NFL wives that no one else could possibly understand what they are going through and a collective fear that outsiders might try to permeate their worlds with ulterior motives.

Next I talked about the role of children. Between NFL wives, children are seen as symbols of longevity and permanence in NFL marriages. I discussed the ways in which they dictate both status and belonging. I also discussed the prevalence of baby shower and the celebrations and subsequent children as levelers between wives who may have little else in common beyond the NFL.

Next I talked about the secondary socialization of NFL wives that positions them and their families beneath the team and the league. The socialization practices take place league-wide from the top-down, dictating the pecking order and status of authority within
the NFL. As a result, most NFL wives are socialized to believe that the sport should come before their marriages and families. They learn that it is best to support their husbands’ careers, but to stay out of the way of his success.

As a result of the socialization, many NFL wives see themselves simply as extensions of their husbands. I talked about the public deification of NFL players that adds to the natural tendency of women to deify their lovers. I then moved into the pitfalls of protection by discussion the pseudo-communities that are developed. NFL wives are socialized to tell white-lies both to protect their husbands and to maintain harmonious relationships with each other.

Next I described the emergent financial themes. The financial topics included the performance of wealth, moving from poverty to posh living, the struggles many NFL couples have to keep up with other financially, the arguments couples have about spending habits, prenuptial agreements, and money as an incentive for NFL wives to stay in bad marriages.

After that, I discussed violence in the NFL. I talked about NFL wives’ reactions to their husbands violence on the field, despite it being expected and necessary, and then move into violence off the field. I detailed the extreme cases of domestic violence, both offenses committed by NFL players and those committed by their wives. I also discussed the possibility that NFL wives become violent as a result of their husbands being so desensitized to yelling and other criticisms.

The next topic I discussed was racial separation and segregation off the field. Despite the NFL being color-blind in terms of talent, players and their wives naturally
separate themselves by race both for off-the-field gatherings and during group or team gatherings.

Then, I covered the processes of meaning making through charity and religion among NFL couples. I explained that there are always unrealized goals and desires, even when it seems to the outside world that NFL players have it all. When life seems meaningless, NFL couples find meaning by donating time or money to charitable causes or by turning toward Christianity.

I discussed Christianity as part of the socialization of NFL wives and how it helps put NFL wives to embrace their roles as secondary to husbands/league. I talked about meaninglessness and fears as catalysts for conversion and Bible study groups as a way to belong with other NFL wives. I discussed how Bible study groups and the fundamentalist Christian marital roles they learn there help NFL wives achieve a sense of equality within their marriages.

Finally, I discussed the topic of sex in relation to NFL wives’ learned sense of obligation to have sex with their husbands and to look sexy for them. I also talked about infidelity in the NFL. I explained that the fear of infidelity is prevalent but that NFL wives help to convince each other through group-talk that the likelihood of NFL players cheating is low because of the team-regulated schedules and the strong Christian leaders that they have around them.

... In the next chapter, I will describe the trajectory of the formation and transformation of NFL wives’ identities during their time in the league. I will show how
important having a story is in our lives and what happens in NFL marriages when that
story is over without an ending...how NFL wives and their husbands have to re-story their
time in the NFL to move beyond the broken identities that were stripped from them when
the game ended.
CHAPTER 11: The Trajectory of NFL Wives

For seven years, I was a character living within the story of NFL wives. It was a story that neither the other NFL wives nor I could have imagined before we started living it. It was a life that most of us didn’t think we belonged in when we arrived, a life that most of us came to love and identify with while we were immersed in it, and a life that ended abruptly for most of us, leaving us with a difficult “narrative challenge” (Bochner, 1994) in terms of charting a course for the future. In fact, before we were no longer NFL wives, most of us came to identify more closely with each other than with friends outside of the game (see Berger and Luckmann, 1967). It was a story we knew would draw to a close some day, but we acted as if it wouldn’t.

In my time within the story, I found that life as an NFL wife was far from the dysfunctional life that past academics painted it to be (see Ortiz, 1994a, 2001; Crute 1981). Instead, I found myself as an NFL wife within a purposeful conversation, a conversation that helped to guide the other NFL wives and me through our NFL years, helping us develop into women who valued family, faith, and football. Together, we were socialized into a story in which the predetermined plot provided the necessary guidelines we needed to maintain our marriages and manage our families. Unlike many marriages, it was not a story of our own making or one composed collaboratively with our husbands. It was a story that preceded our entry into the institutional world of the NFL and will likely continue in the aftermath of our exit.
To illustrate what life is like within the walls of NFL lives, I developed a series of scenes that show the trajectories of NFL wives’ identities through their socialization into the league. Naturally, not every NFL wife reading this dissertation will see themselves in all of these stages. Most will likely see themselves in parts, not in other parts, and some may resist recognizing themselves as they progressed through the processes of change and development as an NFL wife, as I did too.

After presenting the trajectories I look back at some of the previous research on sports wives that I studied before living as an NFL wife. I take the reader within the claims of others and describe possible reasons for the differences in our findings. I conclude by returning to my life now, discussing my hopes for how other academics and NFL wives might read this dissertation, and providing directions for future research.

Trajectories.

Love in the NFL is influenced by religion, money, power, fame, violence, jealousy, and the brevity of playing careers. What becomes of the collective identities of women under such powerful influences? In my seven years in the field, as an insider among NFL wives, I found that NFL marriages face unique joys, benefits, strains and constraints; some of which are characteristically different than those described by previous research. Not every NFL marriage faces the same issues and each couple likely manages them in different ways. But the NFL socialization practices contribute to a pattern of identity formation that I’m convinced by my own experience, as well as experiences of others from conversations, friendships, and focus groups, that most NFL marriages follow.
In this section, I break down the story of relational life in the NFL and the creation of an NFL wife in two different story lines. Each allows outsiders a glimpse into the schedules and socialization of NFL wives. The first storyline is one of a single season in the NFL. The second is the storyline that spans a player’s (and subsequently, his wife’s) entire career.

**Single Season Storyline**

*Major characters:* NFL wife, her husband - an NFL player, their children, his teammates, the other NFL wives, the team, the league (NFL), fans.

*Epiphany or crisis:* The struggle for an NFL wife to maintain an individual identity in the face of pressure from all other characters to “take care of” her husband and to help him succeed on the football field.

*Temporal ordering of the relationship:* An NFL wife’s schedule is dictated by the team’s schedule. The wife may not have agreed to marry the NFL, but that’s what she did. An NFL hierarchy of influence in a player’s life looks something like this:

1. Franchise Owners (collectively)
2. Franchise Owner (Paul Allen for the Seahawks, for example)
3. Franchise Management/Head Coach (these two are sometimes lateral, but can be one over the other, depending on the power given by the individual franchise owner).
4. Assistant Coaches (position coaches, such as Defensive Line coach over his defensive line players)
5. Veteran Teammates
6. Player’s wife/ family
During training camp, an NFL wife raises her children alone for a month while her husband is away. He often struggles to make the team. It is a nerve-racking time for the NFL wife because her schedule for the year is completely dependent on her husband making the team, which is uncertain. It is a period of chaos and contingency outside of her control. If he does not make the team, they may move to play with another team in a different city. Worst case scenario, her husband may be cut or injured and left without work (or a paycheck) for the season. Of the ninety players in training camp, only fifty-three will make the team. This scenario is repeated each year.

If her husband makes the team, then a woman officially becomes an NFL wife. Her new responsibilities include attending charitable events, supporting the team and participating in other wives’ gatherings. She probably attends all of his games. Although her husband lives at home again, if they have children, she still feels like a single mother because the brunt of the parenting responsibilities fall in her lap.

It is her responsibility to make sure he eats well, sleeps enough, and feels good about himself. She likely hides her own problems from him during the season for fear of distracting him from football. She is told repeatedly both implicitly and explicitly that she needs him to play as well as he can. If he fails to perform or the team no longer needs him, he can be cut from the team at any moment for any reason. If he is cut, he may be picked up immediately by a different team in a different city. Or, he may be left without work for the season.
When she gathers with other NFL wives, she mainly gathers with a group dictated by her husband’s position, race, or income level. In NFL wife groups, she is seen as an extension of her husband. Conversations with other wives revolve largely around the football season and struggles as an NFL wife. When she is with her husband in public, she feels both highly visible and invisible at the same time. She sees others seeing him. She may sometimes wonder whether he or they see her. When she’s in a group without him, she may feel empowered by her status as an NFL player’s wife. The benefits he receives in restaurants, stores, and other venues as a member of the team may be extended to her. She will probably not work or go to school because his irregular schedule makes it hard for her to have outside commitments and still have time for him and their marriage.

Despite his love for his family, an NFL player will quickly learn by watching others that the league and the team must come before his marriage if he wants to stay employed. Although some coaches allow players to miss meetings or practices in extenuating circumstances, NFL players have been fired or fined thousands of dollars for missing meetings or practices to attend the births of their children or funerals of extended family members -- even some that were at one point approved by the team. In turn, most NFL wives schedule for their babies to be induced on Mondays or Tuesdays, when the player is likely to have time off.

6 I had minor complications after giving birth to my daughter, whose birth was induced on the Monday before a Thursday night game. I was rushed down to the operating room after midnight. Craig stayed with me through his first meeting the next day but then returned to work before practice started the same morning. Despite his marital commitment to me, we both knew that once I was stable, he needed to honor his commitment to the team.
If the institution of the NFL had written rules for NFL wives, they would read something like this:

- Football is in charge.
- Your time here is temporary – and you will have no control over how long you will be here. The average career for NFL players is 3.5 years.
- Your husband will make more money than you do and thus it is your job to support him in every way that you can. If he succeeds, he will likely earn enough income to provide a secure financial future for the rest of your lives.
- You will not be able to travel with your husband when he is away.
- If you have children, they need mothers to stay home with them.
- You are in charge of the children, handling tickets to games for family and friends, and the home while he is away.
- When you are in public, you represent your husband and the team. Dress nicely and look the best that you can.

**Playoffs.**

After making the team, the most climactic point of the season for both players and their wives is the playoffs. For NFL players, the playoffs not only provide extra exposure but also increased income for their families. NFL wives’ identities become so tied to the team by the end of a winning season that the playoff run becomes personal. Both husbands and wives have dedicated their energies and daily lives to the team, so a victory gives them the satisfaction of a job well done while losses hurt and make them question
what they could have done for a better outcome. A team’s success is a personal success.

A successful playoff run may also earn each NFL couple $100,000 or more in extra income.

Off season.

When the season is over, players attempt to integrate themselves back into the family system. Some husbands will find it difficult to adjust to their new roles without football dictating their schedules. Wives are often happy to have more time with their husbands, but may express difficulty adjusting to their husbands’ new desire and time to be involved in the family affairs. In public, players are still heroes and wives may still feel invisible. The team is no longer in control, although the league may still be in charge.

Point or Moral: A season in the life of an NFL wife is exciting but can be difficult and stressful. Her identity will likely get wrapped up with her husband’s and his team as the season progresses.

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Career storyline.

Major characters: NFL wife, her husband - an NFL player, their extended families, friends, their children, his teammates, other NFL wives, the team, the league (NFL), fans

Epiphany or Crisis: The struggle for NFL wives to maintain meaningful lives of their own while their husband’s unstable career overshadows her dreams. Also, the struggle
for NFL wives to maintain meaningful relationships in the ever-changing world of the NFL.

*Temporal ordering of events:* The lifespan of an NFL wife begins when her husband becomes an NFL player and ends with his retirement. These are the stories that NFL wives are socialized into. Their parts are already scripted before they start living them. Underlying the trajectories of NFL wives is the understanding that nobody is naturally an NFL wife. What eventually becomes something that seems natural is really unnatural (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). NFL wives are made not born.

*Pre-draft.*

The experience of an NFL wife begins when it becomes clear that her boyfriend or husband may be skillful enough to play in the NFL. Some NFL wives report being nervous or frightened while others are excited. Those who are scared say they are afraid of the unknown and of the constructions of NFL players as womanizing, unfaithful, and violent beings. They fear that the NFL will influence their husbands to take on those characteristics. Others are very excited to be NFL wives. They are excited in anticipation of the high-paced, highly-visual world and the higher-than-average NFL salaries. NFL wives typically come into the league confident in themselves but insecure and unsure about their ability to be “NFL wives,” unsure of what that entails.

*Rookie year.*

Most NFL wives are taken far away from their families of origin and closest friends. Their husband’s fame may lead them into isolation. They are too insecure to reach out to other (typically more veteran) wives who seem to have things figured out.
Because of their husbands’ irregular schedules, they don’t have networking opportunities that are afforded to other wives in the area.

First year wives experience an overwhelming amount of loneliness. They rebel against what they see regarding the conformity and submission of other wives. They have big dreams of their own and are uncertain of how long their husbands will play in the NFL. Their husband’s roster spots is often in jeopardy and they also fear for their husband’s safety and health on the field. It is a stressful year for players as they get to know their teammates and role on the team, and attempt to learn the playbook. First year players have never before played against such talented opponents.

During the first year, NFL wives have to balance expression and protection. They want to help their husbands keep their place on the team, so they begin to protect them from anything potentially distracting. NFL players may hide their insecurities on the field or the amount of physical pain that they feels as a way of protecting their wives from added fear and uncertainty about their place in the league. Conversely, there are many daily details such as how the kids are doing in school and things that go wrong with the house that NFL wives keep from NFL players to protect them from the outside world while they concentrate on playing football.

First year NFL wives typically hold on to their job and career aspirations as fall-back options in case their husband’s NFL career fails to materialize, and as part of their individual identities. They take on an attitude of, “It’s fine for the other NFL wives to focus entirely on football, but I have dreams of my own.” They are not yet attached to the other NFL wives and they find it hard to make friends.
Years two and three.

Players often have a sense of their place on the team by their second or third year. By then, NFL wives have gotten to know a handful or more of the other wives on the team and they feel comfortable in those friendships. They have likely already lost at least one friend to cuts, trades, or retirement. Except for some friends from home, they now mostly socialize with other NFL wives. They are hesitant to make friends with non-football wives or other outsiders because their schedules likely do not coincide and they fear that others may only want to get close to them for their husband’s celebrity status. They also know that other women are not welcome in football circles for fear that NFL marriages may be threatened.

NFL wives begin to submit to the sport, enjoying the games and what the game means for their lives (increased money, exposure, and perks outside of the game). They do not yet submit to their husbands. They still see their marriages as possessing an equality that is lacking in the lives of more veteran wives who have made sacrifices of themselves for their husbands. Soon, they too will begin making concessions, such as putting their careers or graduate studies “on hold” or canceling other outside obligations, often necessarily so they can get to know the other wives and to spend time with their husbands.

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7 Greitemeyer’s (2005) research on fidelity found that women are likely to stray from their relationships for a man with a high socioeconomic status (SES). Women are attracted to men who show off their skills because it demonstrates a take-charge kind of leadership, which can be indicative of status (Buss, 1994). Further, Fisher (1994) found that fame could translate into status and serve as a substitute for a high SES. It is not hard then to believe that women are attracted to professional football players. In 2003, the average player in the NFL was 26 years old, stood 6'2,” and weighed 245lbs. Millions admired him and his yearly paychecks totaled more than one million dollars. He possessed the traditional traits women find most attractive: a masculine stature, status, money, and fame (nfl.com, 2003; Buss, 1994; Fisher, 1994, Sprecher, 1989; Desrochers, 1995, Greitemeyer 2005).
The relational dialectic of dependence/independence is ever-present now as NFL wives desire to have their own identities but also want to be in a relationship with their husbands. Part of being an NFL wife means that some individuality is sacrificed to be a part of the NFL team experience; that may mean not only identifying with the team, but also becoming an extension of the NFL player. NFL wives often wear their husband’s jerseys with the player’s number and last name on the back and are known in public as “Mrs. NFL Player” rather than as who they are apart from him. Some NFL wives are even asked to sign autographs (sometimes even to sign their husband’s name) for eager fans who see them as extensions of their husbands.

During/after years three and four:

NFL wives who are still with their original teams now feel quite established. Though they have seen a good number of other couples come and go from the team, they do not feel like it could happen to them. They know the average NFL career is 3.5 years, but they see the few players on each team who have played for ten years or longer. They believe that they will play that long too. Their identity is now largely associated with the NFL. Team wins are their wins. Contract opportunities are their opportunities.

NFL wives restructure and/or reframe their ideas of success and what constitutes a “good” and/or “equal” marriage. They become more motivated to have babies both to fit in with other NFL wives and to help fill in for the loneliness they feel because of being so far away from their families and lifelong friends. They justify being stay-at-home mothers after having quit their jobs because staying at home to raise their children is valued in the NFL. They turn more fully toward Christianity because of Bible studies.
and pressure from other NFL wives, which further convinces them that they are doing the right thing by staying at home with their children and deferring to their husband’s needs and priorities. The changes are likely uncomfortable at first, but eventually seem right based on what they are learning in their NFL Bible studies and in other social settings with NFL wives. Without realizing it, NFL wives gradually are socialized into the culture of NFL relationships, which normalizes their NFL lives. The system of relationships between NFL wives becomes very powerful and they lean on each other for support (Berger and Luckmann, 1967).

If they are playing well, their husbands will likely be offered a new contract from their team or have a chance to test the waters in free agency. They could move to a new city with a new contract from a new team. Players could play another five years or more with the new team.

If their husbands are not playing well, they may not be offered a contract. At that point, they must decide whether they should continue trying to play football. Players have likely sustained at least one major injury by this point. If they continue to play, they could spend the next two or three years bouncing around from city to city struggling to find a place with a new team. By this point, many NFL wives will have fused with their husband’s ambitions.

*Years five through seven.*

If their husbands are still with a team at this point, NFL wives will feel some comfort in the first year of the new contract because of the hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars that the team has committed to her husband. NFL wives will feel like
veteran wives within the team and the league. After the first year of their new contract, the pressure for him to perform will resume.

The longer that NFL wives are in the league and the more involved they are in the public side of their husbands careers, the more they shift how they remember themselves before their time in the league. They begin to think of themselves as different from their non-NFL wife peers. They say things such as, “People who aren’t in the league don’t understand how life is for us” or “We’re moving ahead, growing, while those at home are still doing the same old things and not changing.” How they perform their roles in public slowly becomes who and how they understand themselves.

_Nearing the end of a career._

As the years pass, life in the NFL becomes increasingly ingrained into the identity of both NFL wives and NFL players. They have spent significant time away from their extended families and the dissonance they once felt fades and they begin to feel confident in their roles as mom and wife. They believe that they have always wanted to be a wife and mother or at least that it was their calling and they are thankful to have found it. They perceive a sense of equality within their marriages and are proud of the roles that they play as wives and mothers.

Both NFL wives and their husbands are probably younger than thirty-five. Though scared, they refuse to think past the end of football. At some point, NFL players will likely begin a downward slope toward retirement. Younger, faster players will be brought in to fight for their positions. In some ways, the thought of retirement is like
death. They know it’s coming, but they don’t know when or how and they lack a storyline that can point them to a future beyond the NFL.

Retirement.

Eventually, NFL players are no longer employable by NFL teams either because of their performance or injuries. This happens quickly for some players, which may prematurely interrupt the process of identity formation for an NFL wife, and takes longer for others.

Retirement may happen by choice, but will likely be the result of being cut, injured, or not having their contract renewed. Suddenly, the former NFL wives and their husbands, former NFL players, have a lot of time together. They will have to redefine their relationship and get to know each other without the identities of the major roles they’ve played since starting in the NFL. With few exceptions, the bulk of an NFL player’s fame ended with his tenure on the team. The perks they enjoyed as a celebrity couple are suddenly unavailable. They have been away from the work world for too long to have competitive skills. When the money stops, so too must their high-scale lifestyles. If they have not budgeted well, they may face financial difficulties.

New identity issues also arise when the game is over. Narratively, their life’s work (as football players and NFL wives), ends when they are very young. Both NFL players and NFL wives have to recreate their identities again both individually and with one another. Moreover, a marriage is something “made” together, it’s a relational world and somehow the couple has to remake or reinvent themselves in the aftermath of the heroic worship and celebrity in which they had been living. Trouble lies ahead.
NFL wives likely saw the sacrifices they made as temporary, a finite province of meaning (McLain, 1979; Schutz, 1962), as they endured the burdens of the taking care of their families and homes while their husbands were employed by the NFL. Their NFL player husbands, however, do not always know that their roles are supposed to change after football. When players retire and their wives expect things to change, they discover how difficult it is to break their relational patterns (Bateson, 1990; Haley, 1963). It is no wonder that eighty-five percent of NFL players will be divorced, broke, or dead within three years of leaving the game (gamesover.org). What brought them together and kept them together may not be enough to sustain a reinvention of what is important in their lives, that is, what can keep them together now that the NFL dream is over.

We all live in the stories that we’ve internalized but most of us are living in a story that has (at least at the age of 30-something), a long future trajectory in which to fulfill ourselves and achieve our purposes. There is a much more abrupt ending for NFL couples. Players have to free themselves from the enormity of the past. Their status as “former NFL players” may now shadow or haunt them because they lack a storyline in which to live a future life.

Point or Moral: The NFL is a thrilling ride with an abrupt ending. It’s a narrative lived in the present tense that accumulates memories of a heroic time in their lives but with no future purpose.

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Seeing them seeing us: Returning to the literature.

The bulk of previous research on professional sports wives has been completed by outsiders who had only partial access to the lives and relationships of the wives. My
dissertation research, on the other hand, is the work of an insider, someone who became a professional sports wife and lived in a community of other sports’ wives for seven years. There is nothing necessarily wrong with doing research as an outsider, but it clearly provides a different way of seeing and interpreting the lives of the women studied. The trajectories that I uncovered were likely impossible for most of the others to see because of their limited exposure to the everyday lives of NFL wives. Other researchers who wrote about professional sports relationships, except for O’Toole (2006) didn’t know the women as peers. Most of the participants in their studies were strangers to them and they had no little to no direct experience with their day-to-day lives. They had no way of knowing the barriers that sports wives have around their lives and their relationships to protect their private lives from the prying public. Not seeing and understanding NFL wives’ lives as narratively lived, allowed previous researchers to take small snippets of time and interviews with virtual strangers, and then present them as portraits of their lives. Thus, most of this research results in snapshots of the women’s lives contingent largely on the context of a single or several interviews conducted by researchers who were largely strangers to the women studied and may have been invested, as we all may be at times, in an already formulated theory of the values and lived experiences common to these lives. It is not surprising, for example, that the notion of a community of wives bound in a unique form of friendship has rarely been mentioned in previous research. Yet that is precisely what I experienced during my years as an NFL wife.

I turn next to a reexamination of the work of Steven Ortiz because he has been the most prolific writer on these relationships and because of some of the bold claims that he
made about sports’ wives that appear to have been largely accepted as “the truth” about professional sports’ wives. I then briefly look back at Gardocki (1997) and O’Toole (2006) and the ways that I came to identify with them and their work through this project.

**Ortiz.**

I started this research critical of Steven Ortiz (1982, 1994, 2001, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2011), who has been among the most prolific writers on sports marriages. He studied women married to professional baseball, football, and basketball players. As an NFL wife, I felt that Ortiz wrote from a position that seemed above the fray, giving the impression that he knew more about these women’s lives than they did and that his view was superior to any view they held. He showed little curiosity about how their lives or marriages “work” but seemed mainly interested in judging the meaning or meaningfulness of their lives. It scared me to think that the adventure of life as an NFL wife and the focus of my research might be filled with meaninglessness.

Ortiz (2005) called himself “an insider” among sports wives, explaining that he spent time with sports wives in their homes, babysitting their children, and running errands with them. As my own research progressed, I realized that Ortiz couldn’t have understood that by its very nature, the personal world of NFL wives is closed even to the closest friends of women who are not themselves wives of professional athletes. The insular nature of sports wives’ relationships comes both from the unique work schedule of their husbands and also their desire not to be exploited or to have their relationship publicized. Any man, even one who feels like an insider, may never get completely within the private world of sports wives.
Ortiz followed the wives he studied through three pro seasons, interviewing them intermittently. He was well-aware of their frontstage identities, but I learned that there is a persona that NFL wives put on that they privately recognize and talk about amongst other NFL wives. As an inherent outsider, Ortiz neither lived among these women in their natural settings nor did he develop an awareness of how their relationships with other wives functions as a system of social support and validation to complement their marriages. Pulling out bits of behavior and expressions from his interviews, Ortiz often missed the context of the experiences he witnessed. By failing to see the stories in which these women were immersed, he likely overlooked the fact that many sports wives, at least in the NFL, like the life that they are living. The women I studied did, and so did I. Or so it seemed from my perspective. We aren’t depressed and miserable and looking for a way out of these marriages. Moreover, many of us are educated women who have been exposed to theories and feminist critiques regarding the exploitation of women. We may not have known what we were getting into, as is likely the case for most newly married women, but we are committed to our husbands, our marriages, and our families and we love most things about our lives as NFL wives, though we understand they’re not perfect.

Although Ortiz and I both desired to explore NFL relationships and even came to many of the same conclusions, Ortiz drew some inferences about the motivations of NFL wives that were strikingly different from those I uncovered. For example, Ortiz (1994) reached the conclusion that professional sports marriages are dysfunctional (p.1), citing his main reason as the great personal cost that sports wives pay by deferring to their
husbands’ careers. I found that NFL wives strongly believe that their marriages are functional and intensely meaningful, although not without issues that most marriages have to work through.

Ortiz also wrote about the “private pain” of sports wives and claimed that they felt subordinated, exploited, and oppressed (Ortiz, 2006, p.529). He (2002) called them resentful of the sport and said that they hid the fact that they were miserable. He (2001) called them hyper-sexualized and disempowered. He (2002) asked, “What price do these women pay” (p. 10.4)? In contrast, I found that these women very much enjoyed and appreciated their roles as NFL wives and did not feel miserable. Although Ortiz may have seen them as disempowered, they saw themselves as empowered by their husband’s active status within the league. However, we both found that despite the sacrifices these women make and whether or not they felt empowered or disempowered, they all realized that their husbands’ careers came first in their marriages.

NFL wives don’t judge themselves or their peers the way that Ortiz and other academics have judged them. These women, although facing very uncertain futures, do not see themselves as immersed in dysfunctional relationships and do not feel oppressed. Many of them have lovely children to whom they are devoted and marriages of which they are proud. No, they are not likely on the same paths that they were on when they were college students and perhaps, in the quiet moments they do in fact question the paths they chose and wonder where other paths might have led. Don’t we all?

Considering the context in which Ortiz’s studies were conducted and the questions on

8 Bochner (1984) found that a couple’s happiness is determined more from their perceived levels of equality than how other people outside their marriage judge their equality; each couple decides for themselves (see also Bott, 1957).
which he focused, Ortiz’s understanding of “the career” of an NFL was necessarily limited. Having little knowledge of (or desire to appreciate) the lived experience of these women, he situated them morally without understanding the complexity of their relationships.

Much of Ortiz’s (2002) article focused on the stressors in sports and how women respond to them by employing the role of controller at home. He concluded that sports wives become highly dependent on their husbands and their identities become wrapped up in who he is and how he is doing during any particular season. My findings, as presented in the trajectories and wives’ stories, paralleled those of Ortiz. Indeed, NFL wives care deeply about their husbands’ careers and how they are seen within the social system of the NFL is highly dependent on their husbands’ performance and status within the team. However, I am not convinced that women take on the role of controller at home as a response to sports stressors. He (2002) suggested that sports wives should try to be both less dependent and less controlling. I don’t believe that NFL wives have the choice to be either less dependent or less controlling. There are relational dialectics in play, and they constantly negotiate the middle ground of dependence and independence. Sports wives are typically the only adult in the home much of the time because of the long hours their husbands work. They have no choice but to manage the home. The role is theirs by default, not as a means to control.

Generally, these are not women who believe they could not live without their husbands. They are not immersed in the kind of dependence that writers like Scott Peck (1998) admonish. The sort of dependence that they experience is a necessity for the lives
they live. Where they live, how much money they make, and their time with their husbands are completely out of their control. They are dependent on their husband’s careers for answers to those major questions in their lives. Most NFL wives who are in control of their homes have already recognized what is controllable and what is uncontrollable. They manage their finances, their children, and their homes.

Despite his limited contact with players, Ortiz (2006) concluded that professional athletes control their families in response to their insecurities as an athlete and as a husband. Control tactics identified by Ortiz (2006) include teasing, selective listening, spoiling the children, relegating his wife to the role of mother, guilting their wives into trying to be perfect, and emphasizing his perceptions of her inadequacies. Contrary to the image advanced by Ortiz, I found that the life of an NFL wife is one in which the family is controlled primarily by the wife. Perhaps Ortiz misunderstood wives’ descriptions of teasing, spoiling the children, relegating his wife to the role of mother, etc. as control tactics. My seven years traveling in the spaces among NFL players suggest that the actions Ortiz commented on may have been the result of a player’s socialization within the sports locker room. Players might have behaved at home the same way that they behaved in the locker room. Many NFL wives in my study complained that their husbands did not know how to fit in with their families when the season was over. They had to learn the rules of the system so that they might learn to fit within their families during the off-season.

Ortiz’s conclusions were likely a result of the style of his research. For example, in a piece he wrote positioning himself as a therapist, Ortiz (2001) quoted a sports wife
who said, “I’ve grown into this controlling monster that he helped to create. So I think he has to take responsibility for it too. But I think the interviews helped me to see it, so now I talk to him about it (p. 212).” The sports wife had little to gain with a comment like this except for identification with Ortiz.

Ortiz (2001) admitted that he shared his life experiences and opinions of masculinity, marriage, and what men value with the wives he interviewed. “My openness in sharing my life experiences, thoughts, and views was quite useful in their framing of the interview situation (e.g., knowledge of masculinity issues, marital issues, what men value, sports, and their world) and encouraging them to be open themselves” (p. 202). What Ortiz may have learned instead of how sports wives viewed their marriages, was how the participants understood and responded to the ideas that he held about masculinity, marriage, and relationships. Ortiz may have unknowingly framed himself as an empathetic shoulder to cry on, encouraging his participants only to focus on the negative aspects of their lives and hyper-masculine views of their husbands.

My initial resistance to Ortiz’s research on control work and mutually dependent relationships led me to explore the evolving identities of professional sports wives. His work was useful not only on its own but also as a springboard for me to uncover how NFL wives saw themselves within their lives in sports marriages and how their identities differed from how the women perceived themselves before marriage.

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Gardocki.
Sally Gardocki (1997) was an NFL wife who wrote a book on her experiences. When I read her book before getting to know other NFL wives, I admittedly read it as an academic who stood in judgment of her as an NFL wife, rather than in relation to her.

Years later, upon rereading her work, I unexpectedly identified with a story that she shared about the first time she lost good friends on the team because of player roster moves:

I pulled off the road, into the nearest parking lot, and cried. ‘Sonofabitch, sonofabitch, sonofabitch’ was all that ran through my head. Steve and Lynne were good people. She was pregnant with their first child. Why was this happening? Never again would we go to their house for Thanksgiving or Christmas dinners. Never again would everybody sit around their kitchen table playing ‘Balderdash’ or ‘Taboo.’ The group of wives who watched away games together would never again be complete, because the circle had been irreparably broken. In our group of wives, this was the first cut, and it was too close to home. (p. 252)

The first time I read Gardocki’s story, I sympathized with her. “It must be hard to say goodbye to a friend,” I reasoned. I couldn’t imagine, however, crying on the side of the road because an NFL wife was moving. “That’s the nature of the game,” I reasoned. Years later, returning to her stories and having lost all of our closest friends and then being cut ourselves, I empathized with Gardocki in a new way. I realized that “the nature of the game” is a way of seeing from the outside. Within the NFL, our experiences are not a game, they are our lives. Sarah (chapter 6) talked about how NFL wives today really care about the sport:
I’ve heard outsiders say, “Oh come on, it’s just a game! It’s just a sport.” To us, it’s not. It’s our team. It’s our family. I understand that it’s a sport, it’s a game and there are really bad things that happen in this world, and there are some real life and death things going on. But, our everyday reality as wives of Seahawk’s players is that we really care if the Seahawks beat the Forty-Niners. We really care. We connect with it in such an emotional and different way. It’s not just a game to us. It means more.

_O’Toole._

Shannon O’Toole was both an NFL wife (a coach’s wife at the time of her research) and an academic (getting her master’s degree). She took a more analytical approach to her research, much of which was done through surveys, and found that there wasn’t a “typical NFL experience” (xvi). She stated reasons for differences in experiences that included vast differences in salaries, levels of fame or anonymity, and the number of years spent in the NFL. The largest commonality she found among NFL wives was their inner strength.

Like Sarah and Sally Gardocki, O’Toole (2006) cared deeply about the sport:

But the truth is, I care a great deal about my husband’s job - and in ways that most people don’t realize. No matter how much some of us might try to minimize it, the NFL plays a big role in all of our lives. We might wish that people would recognize us on our own terms once in a while, but we are also very emotionally involved in our partners’ careers. When people criticize ‘my’ team, it makes my
blood boil, and after a win, I experience a deep sense of personal satisfaction. But it’s not my job. It’s not my defeat or victory. (p. 82-83)

I too found that NFL wives deeply connect to the team’s wins and losses.

The biggest difference between O’Toole’s research and mine was the amount of time that I spent in the field as a player’s wife. At the time of her research, O’Toole was a coach’s wife. Also, the majority of her research was done through a survey she sent out to NFL wives. Her credibility within the league likely helped her to receive helpful responses about the attitudes and opinions of NFL wives. By living seven years in the league as a player’s wife, experiencing and discussing life with many NFL friends, watching them develop and change, I was immersed in the lived experience of these women and their social networks.

...

**Looking back.**

Looking back, the story of my life as an NFL wife was a good one, full of happy moments. Cheering at the games, believing in the team, and being a part of The Super Bowl was a lot of fun. I formed great companionship with other women; we laughed and cried together, had Bible studies, threw baby showers, and spent holidays together. We thought it would never end. But, I don’t want to over-romanticize NFL life either. As the previous chapters, stories and analyses try to show, NFL wives experience both much joy and a considerable amount of angst.

I do not regard the other studies of sports’ wives such as the studies of Ortiz as completely misguided and untrue accounts. They are particular, situated, and context
dependent and like many academic studies they tend to focus on the most critical and negative observations of the researchers who, like Ortiz, are not really invested in the lives of the women they’ve studied. No doubt, there were dark moments in our lives as NFL wives, moments that some of us spent wishing that we had husbands who could wake up at night with the babies or help out around the house. There were times that we were scared to be alone and longed for a husband who was home more, whose body didn’t hurt, who could participate in non-football sports with us. There were times that we wanted to be seen as more than NFL wives, or to be seen at all -- but none of those things defined our lives in the NFL.

Even the best of the life we lived as NFL wives proved ultimately a short-lived career for each of us. When our husbands’ playing days ended, so did our time as NFL wives. For most of us, it happened suddenly, thrusting us outside of the story we didn’t think would end, leaving us with seemingly unanswerable questions:

*Who am I now if I am no longer an NFL wife?*

Without warning, we are no longer a character in the story that we had been living. Narratively, our story had no ending, just an abrupt departure.

*What’s going to happen to my husband?*

NFL players don’t spend a lot of time at home, but when the game is over, suddenly they have no where else to go. Most of them have no idea what they want to do next because in the NFL, it is taboo to talk about the end of one’s career.

*What will happen to our marriages?*
NFL couples have always had football to focus on together. Suddenly, many of us find that we have little in common. NFL marriages can become overwhelmed with uncertainty and ambiguity. Yes, most of us have money in the bank, but what will give our lives together meaning after football? Perhaps that’s where Ortiz had a point. Much has been sacrificed both by NFL players and their wives. A price has been paid. Our husband’s dreams became our dreams. We enjoyed those dreams and they were productive and enjoyable while they lasted. But, then, often (for many of us) without warning, they were gone.

Now what? Can our dreams now become their dreams?

Many NFL wives entered the league with dreams of their own. When a player’s career ends, many NFL wives feel that it is their turn to live their dream...be it new or old. Some of them let go of or lost sight of their dreams, giving into premature narrative foreclosure (see Freeman, 2001) but many of them have held on to or created other post-NFL dreams. Of course, some opportunities were time sensitive, opportunities that were missed because of the length of a the player’s career.

...  

“It was only now, after the fact, that she could see what exactly had happened. And it was only now, upon this seeing, that she could begin to do something more real, more in tune with her true interests and passions” (Freeman, 2011)

Tonight, I return to Bochner’s (2012) question that opened this dissertation: “Is there an important difference between a good life and a happy life or are these one and the same” (p.7)?
My eyes blurry from staring at the computer screen, I attempt to write the conclusion to the narrative of my life as an NFL wife. Indeed, I’ve experienced a lot of happy moments as an NFL wife, living a life that was “good” within the socially constructed world in which I lived. But I can’t be an NFL wife anymore. Thrust from that life, I have no choice but to turn back to my academic dreams, to remembrances of who and how I was before. Unexpectedly, I find that I’m no longer that person either. I’ve grown and changed, gotten married, had children, and I’ve been undeniably influenced by the circumstances and conversations of the last seven years. I cannot move forward as the NFL wife that I once was and I can no longer be the first year graduate student I was before I fell in love with Craig and followed him to Seattle. Instead, I am challenged to write my life and my dreams authentically forward, with respect to the past, in a new direction of freedom (Freeman, 2009, p. 149).

My dream of finishing my doctoral degree nearly expired as the time limits to graduation neared. I was among the fortunate. Craig’s first year out of the game was the last year that I had to complete my dissertation and walk across the stage.

Since Craig has been out of the game, I have worked full time on finishing my dissertation. In many ways, our roles at home are reversed. While I am training for “the Super Bowl” of my doctoral studies (my dissertation defense), holed-up in my office, Craig has taken on the full-time parenting of our daughter. He cooks meals for our family, does the laundry, and cleans our home. He makes sure that I get enough sleep at night and that I have everything I need to succeed.
Perhaps we are an exception to the rule, but my dream seems to have become our
dream as we discuss my future possible careers and how we might both be integrated into
those plans. Yes, Craig may still dream of being an NFL player on the field or a rockstar
on stage. He may have other dreams that are brewing within him, just as most NFL
wives have when their husbands enter the league. But tonight, I imagine myself living a
good life with happy moments, continuing to write and to teach courses on love and
communication, perhaps with him there beside me, co-teaching based on what we have
studied and our experiences in life and love together.

Seeing others see themselves.

It is my hope that these stories mirror the lives of others, “in the mutual sense
where each image serves as a basis for the other (Steier, 1995, p. 75), just as they did for
me as I lived them. As an academic, I hope that other academics will find useful meaning
within the socialization processes and subsequent identity re-creation of these women and
that they might also find parts of themselves and their relationships there.

By taking part in this project, I hope that NFL wives were able to honor the
viability of their experiences and that it created a space for them to think reflexively
about how they saw themselves and how others might see them (Steier, 1995). I also
hope that the interviews and subsequent stories and analysis will allow future and former
NFL wives to reflect on and better understand their time in the game. As Varela (1984)
explained, “We stand in relation to the world as in a mirror that does not tell us how the
world is: neither does it tell us how it is not. It reveals that it is possible to be the way we
are being, and to act the way we have acted. It reveals that our experience is viable” (p. 322).

NFL wives who recognize themselves within this research might recognize their own subjectivity within the highly objectified world of the NFL. Others may see that others do not necessarily see them the way they see themselves (Fernandez, 1980). By taking a reflexive stance on the NFL wife experience, they might see both beyond and within others and themselves. What is more important, they might understand that selves change and that defining meaning within or from somebody else isn’t possible (Weick, 1995). Regardless of how they read this work, I invite them to talk back to it. Tell me where I have been mislead and where I got it right, which I have tried so hard to do.

By looking at our lives reflexively, we as NFL wives, or as women who were NFL wives, are invited to embrace the complexities and ambiguities within and between each other and ourselves. My final hope is that this dissertation helps us all to “develop an awareness of the multiple conversations, contexts, and relationships in which...we interactively participate” (Steier, 1995, p. 82) and how those conversations, contexts, and relationships shape how we understand ourselves, others, and our possible futures.

**Directions for future research.**

“In light of the contingency and chance on which a life turns, it is never safe to assume that a life will continue on more or less the same course until it expires” (Bochner, 2012)

Most of the research on sports wives has been focused on the time when their husbands were active players. Future research is needed to investigate the stories of what happens to the identities of former NFL players and their wives when football is
over. In what ways are they socialized again (a new secondary socialization) into life outside of the NFL? Perhaps if we had stories of successful transitions as models, more couples could transition successfully out of the game.

How do NFL couples restructure their lives and their marriages when there is no training camp, no football Sundays, no Tuesday off days, no requirement that NFL wives be alone most of the week? How do NFL wives move on without the women with whom they have come to most closely identify? For those marriages that end in divorce, what accounts are given? Future research is needed specifically on former NFL wives that follows the stories of their lives and shows their transitional processes after the game.
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Appendices
Appendix 1

Seahawks Wives Questionnaire

1. How did you meet your husband?

2. If he was playing in the NFL, what were your initial thoughts about dating/marrying an NFL player? If he wasn’t, what were your thoughts on draft day?

3. What was one of the happiest times for you (so far) as an NFL wife?

4. What was one of the scariest times for you as an NFL wife?

5. How is your life different from your friends who didn’t marry an NFL player?

6. What is unique about NFL life?

7. What advice would you give a brand new NFL wife who wanted to know what it was going to be like to be an NFL wife?

8. What is the best advice you have received from an NFL wife?

9. What do people outside of the NFL assume about your life that isn’t true?

10. In what ways are you a “typical” NFL wife?

11. In what ways are you different than a “typical” NFL wife?

12. What has surprised you about the Seahawks’ Wives?

13. In what ways is your public persona as your husband’s wife different than who you feel you really are?

14. In general, do you think NFL wives are probably more satisfied or less satisfied with their marriages than non-NFL wives? Why?

15. For what are you most proud of your husband?

16. What are your favorite things about being an NFL wife?
17. What sacrifices do women make to be a “good” NFL wife?

18. What would you change about your life, if you could?

19. What are your plans for when your husband’s NFL career ends?

Your Name:

Age:

Husband’s/Partner’s Name:

How long have you been married?

Do you work? YES NO

If so, where/what do you do?

If so, does your time-off coincide with your husband’s time off?

Do you have a religious affiliation? What is it?

Would you like to be contacted for future interviews? YES NO

Phone/E-mail:
Appendix 2

NFL Wives Questionnaire

1. Describe your childhood

2. What were your thoughts about the NFL before you met your husband?
   a. Did you watch football?
   b. Had you dated any athletes before?

3. How did you meet your husband?
   a. Was it love at first sight?
   b. Was he the type of man that you thought you might marry?

4. Describe the day your husband was drafted/picked up by an NFL team

5. Take me through your life in the NFL in relation to your husband and your family…also the league…
   a. What was one of the happiest times for you as an NFL wife?
   b. What was one of the scariest times for you as an NFL wife?
   c. Were you involved in any charitable foundations or programs? (if so, please describe)

6. How is your life different from the lives of your friends who didn’t marry NFL players?

7. What do people outside of the NFL assume about your life that isn’t true?

8. What advice would you give a brand new NFL wife who wanted to know what it was going to be like to be an NFL wife?

9. What is the best advice you have received from an NFL wife?
10. In what ways were you a “typical” NFL wife?

11. In what ways were you different than a “typical” NFL wife?

12. In what ways was Christianity present in your NFL life?

13. Did you participate in any Bible Studies?
   a. PAO?
   b. Were you a Christian before meeting your husband?
   c. Was your husband a Christian before the NFL?
   d. Did you have primarily Christian friends in the NFL?

14. For what are you most proud of your husband?

15. What are your favorite things about NFL life?

16. What makes love in the NFL interesting? Why should people want to read about it?

17. In general, do you think NFL wives are probably more satisfied or less satisfied with their marriages than non-NFL wives? Why? What makes it that way?

18. How has the NFL changed from when your husband first played to today?

19. What sacrifices do women make (now and then) to be good NFL wives?