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## Brian's Song Reprise

It began as a humdrum affair, this annual dinner put on by the Professional Football Writers. This was on a night in May of 1970 at the old Americana, if memory serves. This writer finished the meal, witnessed a few annual awards presented, heard a few speeches and, naturally, began a discreet move toward the exit.

Gale Sayers, the swift running back for the Chicago Bears, then rose on the dais to accept the award for the most courageous football player of the year, having come back in 1969 from knee surgery the previous season and led the National Football League in rushing.

I stood at the door for a moment, as Sayers began to speak. He seemed serious, and he dispensed with the unusual banter. He began talking about his teammate, and his backup at halfback, Brian Piccolo.

He talked about their friendship, and about how he, a black man, and Piccolo, who was white, roomed together on the road, highly unusual in those days, and not common today, some 20 years later.

Then he said something else, and to recall it exactly I returned to Sayers's 1970 autobiography, "I Am Third," written with Al Silverman.

"He has the heart of a giant," Sayers said of Piccolo, "and that rare form of courage that allows him to kid himself and his opponent, cancer. He has the mental attitude that makes me proud to have a friend who spells out

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the word courage twenty-four hours a day for his life."

People in the banquet hall turned to each other and asked, "Did he say cancer?" Most people had been unaware of how seriously ill Piccolo was.

Also, Sayers had a tendency then to speak quickly, and sometimes in his shyness and in his rush to get the words out they got a little muffled in his throat.

**B**UT Sayers had indeed said "cancer," and for the first time, it was out in the public about Piccolo.

"You flatter me by giving me this award," added Sayers, "but I tell you here and now that I accept it for Brian Piccolo. Brian Piccolo is the man of courage who should receive this ... award. I love Brian Piccolo and I'd like all of you to love him, too. Tonight, when you hit your knees, please ask God to love him. ..."

It was all kind of unbelievable, and the "knees" and "God" and "love" were bunched together, but the sense of it was clear, and I had goose bumps, rooted there at the door.

Piccolo died a few weeks later. The relationship between the two men — and that scene that I witnessed — has been celebrated in a film, "Brian's Song" (Sayers is played by Elly Dee Williams, Piccolo by James Caan), that has been shown regularly on television since the early 1970's.

"I've been retired for 18 years, and I only played 68 games in six seasons," said Sayers, "and a lot of people remember me as a football player, but most people, especially those under 25, remember me from the movie. People bring it up everywhere I go."

Yesterday, Gale Sayers was in town. He is 45 years old and, in gray business suit, still trim at his playing weight of 205. He was here promoting a charity sponsored by Old Spice and called the Gale Sayers Humanitarian Citation. It goes to the rookie in the National Football League who most actively supports his charity through community good works.

There has never been a rookie, however, quite like Sayers. He broke a record in 1965 for touchdowns in a



The New York Times/Jack Manning

Gale Sayers yesterday in Manhattan.

season (22), and tied one for touchdowns in one game (6), and he led the league in scoring. He would be All-Pro five times before a second knee injury brought his career to an end.

"Before Brian died at 26," said Sayers yesterday, "there were only three things in the world that were important to me. They were football, football and football. After that, I realized how selfish I was. I felt I needed to adjust my life, to look around me, at my family, my friends — and my future."

**I**N the fall of 1970, Sayers became chairman of the Cancer Society in Chicago, and has continued to participate in that organization.

Even before this, though, Sayers had taken seriously the advice given him by George Halas, the owner of the Bears, and Buddy Young, a representative of the N.F.L. They had said that it was important for him to prepare to play football, but it was also important for him to prepare to quit.

After his spectacular rookie season, in fact, he went to school to learn to be a stockbroker. The following year he received his license. He did that a few years, tried broadcasting, then missed football and wanted to return, not as a player or coach, but in the front office.

There were no blacks in the front office of the N.F.L., and there are very few today. Also, there remain no black head football coaches, despite 50 percent of the players being black.

Sayers returned to his alma mater, Kansas, earned a master's degree and was an assistant athletic director for four years, and then went to Southern Illinois as athletic director for five years.

Now he was ready, he had paid his dues. He wrote to every one of the 28 N.F.L. teams seeking a position in the front office. Some answered, some didn't. The nicest reply, he said, was "No."

Sayers gave up thoughts of the front office in football — he says he is only a casual watcher of games these days — and is owner of a computer company with offices in Skokie, Ill., and Phoenix.

He says he is not bitter, that one day a black man will break the barriers of the N.F.L., but he says it won't be him.

He says he has other concerns now, and that, just as he discovered 18 years ago, those three elements that were once paramount to him, football, football and football, no longer are.



# How 'Brian's Song' changed Sayers' life

By JIM BRAHAM

In football he had done it all. From college All-American at Kansas to Rookie of the Year and All-Pro for the Chicago Bears. An electrifying, record-setting runner, considered one of the best ever to play the game.

Not even a serious knee injury and surgery could stop him. He had bounced back to lead the league in rushing a gain. "The most

courageous player in pro football," they called him. Bears, Brian Piccolo, who died of cancer in 1970.

But it was not until last Nov. 30 that all of America came to know about Gale Eugene Sayers.

NOT SAYERS the running back. Sayers the man.

That Tuesday was the evening that ABC telecast "Brian's Song," the movie about Sayers and his close friend and roommate on the

The movie, taken from a chapter of Sayers' autobiography "I Am Third," was a smash and it changed Sayers' life overnight.

"I must have received a thousand letters and telegrams after that show," said Sayers, who was in Cleveland yesterday. "Telegrams that said things like, 'I'm sorry your dear friend passed away.' And letters like, 'I thought a great deal of you as a football player, now I think even more of you as a man.'"

Sayers' book (the title means "The Lord is first, my friends are second and I am third") had already been on the market for about a year, but it was "Brian's Song" on TV that shot the book to the best-seller lists, boosting sales "300 percent and more," according to Sayers.

Since then he has been making the rounds of the TV talk shows and the bookstores. He has been a guest of Dick Cavett and David Frost and the Alan Douglas show on WEWS flew him in from Chicago for an appearance yesterday.

SAYERS AGREES with the critics that the movie was very well-done, that he and Piccolo were portrayed well, except for one thing.

"The only thing I didn't care for was that there was so much emphasis placed on the black-white relationship we had. It wasn't that way, really. We didn't emphasize that in the book," Sayers said.

"It was because we played the same position and it seemed only natural that Brian and I roomed together. It wasn't because he was white and I was black. That had nothing to do with it."

Hailed now as much more than a football player, Sayers leads many lives. Not only is his book a hit and the movie an ever bigger hit, so successful it will be rerun next fall, but the easy-going, likeable Sayers also is a successful stockbroker, a city parks commissioner and a deputy sheriff in Chicago. In his city positions he helps youth by planning recreational programs and parks and by working in juvenile court.

HE ALSO is married and the father of two small children.

Sayers, 28, intends to play two or three more football seasons. After recovering from his first serious knee injury to lead the NFL in rushing in 1969, he played only five games the last two years.

Last season he underwent his fourth knee operation and he was on crutches yesterday. But they will be discarded next week and Sayers said he is in "good shape now, the best since 1970."



# plain talk

BY CHUCK HEATON

## Brian's Song Resung

It started out as just another sports banquet, with an emcee going through a rather rusty comedy routine and just about everybody talking a few minutes too long. Then suddenly there came a moment of high drama at the New York Football Writers Awards Dinner at the Waldorf Astoria in May of 1970.

Gale Sayers stepped to the microphone to receive the George Halas Award as the Most Courageous Player in Pro Football. The Chicago Bears' great running back had rebounded from knee surgery to regain his old form the previous season.

SAYERS HAD ANOTHER IDEA about who should receive the award. An articulate but low-key young man from the University of Kansas, he expressed it in an emotion-charged talk which had him near tears at the finish.

The audience was silent for some seconds. Then followed a surge of prolonged applause.

Television viewers, who were fortunate enough to view "Brian's Song" earlier this week saw the setting. They also heard part of Sayers' words which came right from the heart. I was at the actual speech Sayers gave that spring night, it was even more touching than the film version.

The grid star had scratched the speech out on a sheet of paper. He later gave the original to several reporters who thought it was worth putting in print—and it did appear in The Plain Dealer.

HERE'S AN EXACT REPLAY OF what he had to say about the award and the then dying Brian Piccolo, white roommate of the black star of the Bears.

"Of all the honors I have been fortunate to receive I must say in all honesty that tonight's holds the greatest meaning for me. I am most humble when I read the engraved words that describe the reason for it—The George S. Halas Award For Courage.

"It is appropriate that Mr. Halas' name should be identified with this award because the record shows that he is and always has been a man of courage. I am proud and grateful to accept an award sponsored by a man for whom I have great affection.

"But to return to my part in all this tonight, something very personal is represented in this award.

"THERE WERE SKEPTICS—there probably still are some—who wrote or said what they must have firmly believed: that Gale Sayers would never bring back the full 100% of his ability to football. Especially a certain expert who spent a lot of time at our training camp.

"At the occasional sessions when I'd leave off the pads and just go around in shorts and T-shirt, he would come up to me, bend over and put his hands on his knees and stare at my knee as he'd ask the question that was beginning to irritate me—"Gale, do you think you'll ever run or move the way you used to?"

"He didn't know that there was a fierce determination in me to prove my worth. I never set my heart or sharpened my physique so intensely as I did for the 1969 season. The day after my operation I began my exercises and I never stopped them until they were superseded by the routine of training camp in July. I was determined to come back and play as well as ever and the fact that I did is the most satisfying experience of my life.



HEATON

"IT IS SOMETHING SPECIAL to do a job that some people say can't be done. Maybe, that's how courage is spelled out—at least in my case. Although there were detractors, there were a few people who never stopped believing in me and encouraging me to keep driving.

"I'd like to acknowledge their support here and now, especially . . . my roommate and friend—Brian Piccolo.

"Brian Piccolo, who in a kindly and sometimes unkindly way, urged me day after day to fight my way back, Brian Piccolo, who has the sheer, solid, raw courage which entitles him to win over a sickness that makes my injury seem unimportant.

"In the middle of last season, Brian was struck down by the deadliest, most shocking enemy any of us can face—cancer. Compare his courage with that which I am supposed to possess as characterized by this award. There never was any doubt in my mind that I'd run again, knee injury or no.

"But think of Brian and his courage and fortitude, shown in the months since last November, in and out of hospitals, hoping to play football again but never sure at any time what the score was or might be.

"But Brian Piccolo has never given up because he has the heart of a giant and that rare form of courage that allows him to kid himself and his opponent, cancer. He has the mental attitude that makes me proud to have a friend who spells out courage 24 hours a day, every day of his life.

"You flatter me, giving me this award, but I'll tell you here and now that I accept it for Brian Piccolo. Brian Piccolo is the man of courage who should receive the George S. Halas Award. I accept it tonight and I'll present it to Brian tomorrow. I love Brian Piccolo and I'd like all of you to love him, too.

"Tonight when you hit your knees, please ask God to love him."

I'm sure many of those in the audience took Sayers' advice that evening in Manhattan. And through the so touching film—Brian's Song—many, many viewers learned the story of the white Brian Piccolo and Black Gale Sayers and now must feel a great warmth for these two fine people.