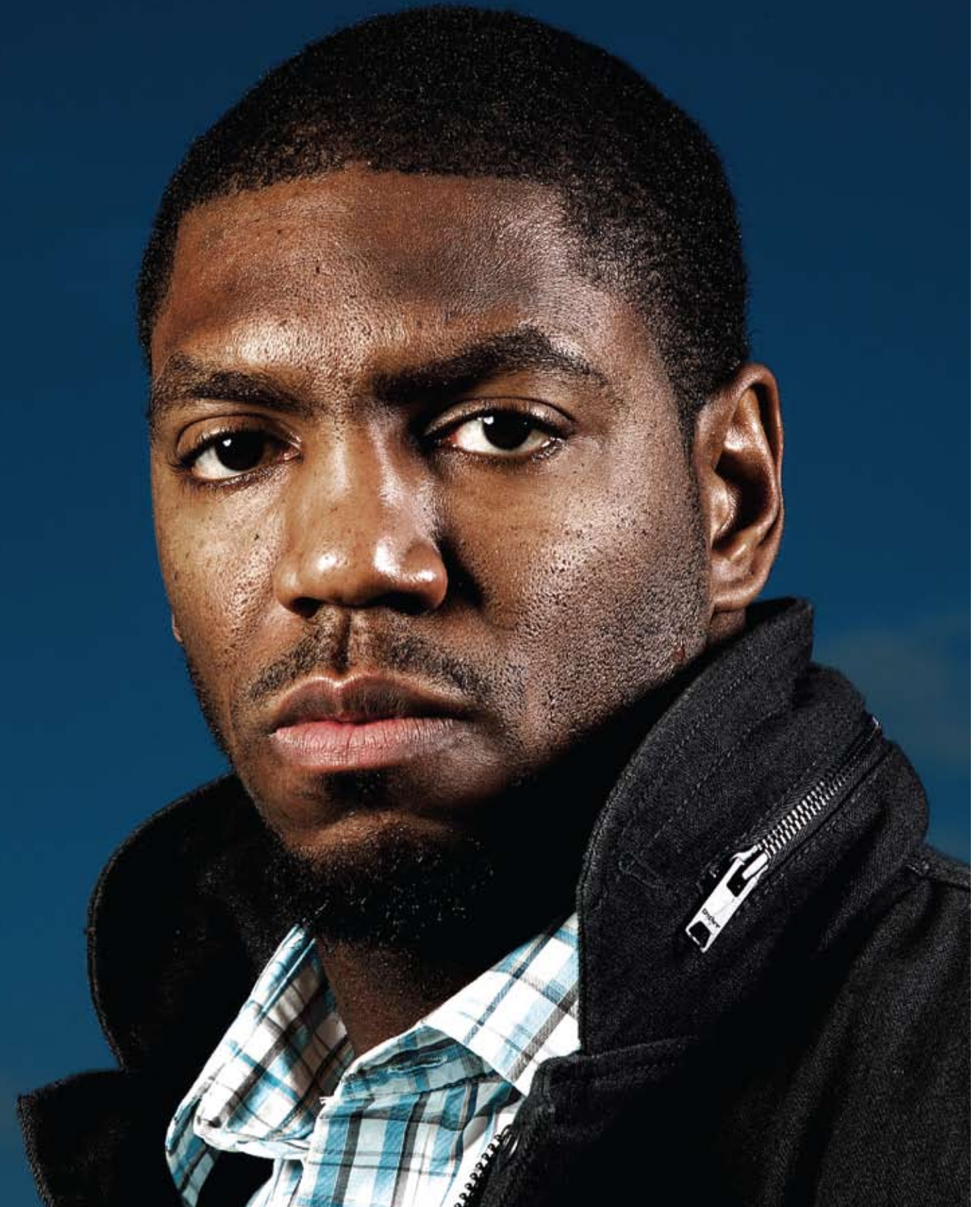


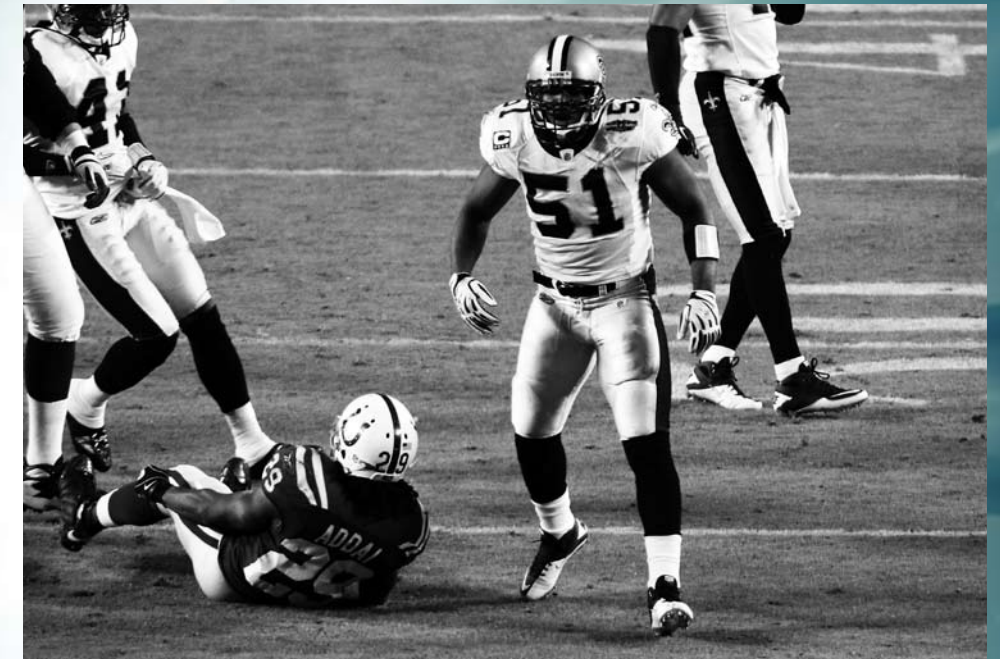


Jonathan Vilma

The Saints' defensive captain helped bring a
World Championship to New Orleans.
Now, he's trying to bring some
needed relief to Haiti



Vilma's intense preparation for every game has been an extraordinary influence on his teammates. Elaborate film study of the Indianapolis offense led to several key defensive plays for the Saints in their 31-17 win.



Jonathan Vilma's parents emigrated to the United States from Haiti in the 1970's to make a better life for their family. Three decades later, they got a chance to see their son succeed on the biggest sports stage in the world, as a Super Bowl champion. "It's a surreal feeling to walk off the field of your last game as a winner," Vilma says. "Usually, when you end the season with a win, it means you didn't make the playoffs. But to win the last game, to be a champion, there is nothing else like it."

But the emotional pinnacle of Vilma's career was cooled by what was happening in his parents' homeland. Just as the playoffs began to unfold, a devastating earthquake ravaged Haiti—a country already beset by issues of poverty and domestic strife. "I was very fortunate," Vilma says. "Within a day, I had heard that all of my relatives were okay. My aunt was alive and well. I know most people were not as lucky."

Over 150,000 people are believed to have died as a result of the earthquake, with countless others left homeless. Once the NFL shifted into gear and began fundraising to support the relief effort, Vilma made himself available to do any public service announcement he could to help. But he knew that PSA's weren't enough.

That is why he is creating a foundation to provide long-term assistance for people in need in Haiti. "Sometimes, when something terrible like this happens, you have to take a step back," Vilma says. "At first, you see people popping up everywhere raising money, and it's tough to separate the organizations who are in it for the long haul from the people who are just there for the moment. That's

why I've been waiting to see which major organization we will partner with. It's important that we get it right from the beginning."

Vilma has seen the impact an environmental disaster can have on a community. When he joined the New Orleans Saints in 2008, the city was still desperately trying to rebuild three years after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. "To this day, people are still trying to rebuild their homes, rebuild their communities," Vilma says. "After we won, so many people came up to me and said, 'Thank you. Our city really needed this.'"

It's ironic that New Orleans was the city that rediscovered Jonathan Vilma. He had almost become a forgotten man in New York, the media capital of the world. Once the All-Pro middle linebacker on a New York Jets playoff team, Vilma hurt his knee and missed most of the 2007 season on injured reserve. His then coach, Eric Mangini, had also decided to change to a 3-4 defense, which further minimized Vilma's sideline-to-sideline skill.

"When it became apparent that the Jets were going to trade me, I didn't act out in the press," Vilma says. "My agent and I looked at other situations and tried to

determine what was best for me. We looked at different cities, different coaching staffs, and different defensive schemes. With Sean Payton as coach, it felt right for me."

In Vilma, Payton has found the leader he was looking for to shore up a troubled defense. A tireless watcher of game film, Vilma brought a level of preparation that helped influence the way the entire defense prepared. In Super Bowl XLIV, that studying paid off when Vilma called defensive audibles in the fourth quarter that helped seal the victory for the Saints.

Vilma feels the Saints should be right there this year as well, competing for the Lombardi Trophy. "We've got a great core of young players, and a great quarterback," he says. "There's no reason why we shouldn't compete again this year." Until then, you can expect to see a lot of Jonathan Vilma in the coming months reminding you not to forget the people of New Orleans or the people of Haiti. "Once the media leaves," says Vilma, "it's time for the real work to get done."

For more information about Jonathan Vilma's foundation, please visit jonvilma.com.

Many pro athletes are raising money and awareness for the people of Haiti. Vilma hopes to coordinate his efforts with other athletes to maximize the impact they can have on an extensive rebuilding process.

