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Horn knows Saints share special bond with city

By **Graham Bensinger**
Special to ESPN.com

Editor's note: Each week during the season, Graham Bensinger will be talking with high-profile NFL figures for ESPN.com's Weekly Conversation.

Graham Bensinger: Two weeks ago, we spent time together in New Orleans touring the Lower 9th Ward. What stuck out most to you during the visit?

Joe Horn: That the rebuilding process is going so slow. That's what stuck out to me. I thought I was going to be standing on a street and there were going to be houses cleaned off with people working. But there was nothing. Everything was just sitting there. People that I was talking to were like, "Well, Joe, that's just the way it is. It's not going to change." That's what got me.

Bensinger: How much did that surprise you?

Horn: It didn't surprise me because I know how things are. I know people do things when they are ready to do things, especially when they are the head of power. I'm not saying [New Orleans' Mayor] Ray Nagin is the reason why it's like that; it's just taking time for this rebuilding process to take effect.

Bensinger: If you had to describe to someone who has never seen the destruction what you saw, how would you describe it?

Horn: A life after a catastrophe. A neighborhood that was tore up. It's a slow rebuilding process that needs to happen. It's ugly and sad.

Bensinger: We ran into local residents walking around. What did you most gather from the conversations we had with them?

Horn: They have a lot of hope. They are very feisty. They are willing to come back and rebuild a place where they were born and raised. They are very strong-willed people that refuse to give up dreams just because a storm came through here.

Bensinger: Some would say, given all that New Orleanians have been through, who cares about sports? I quickly gathered that wasn't the case. Why do the Saints mean so much to the city?

"The Saints mean so much to the city because we are the biggest sports thing they have going on here. It keeps people's minds off the troublesome times that they have in their life. They love the New Orleans Saints. That's what they thrive off of each week. "

-- New Orleans WR Joe Horn

Horn: The Saints mean so much to the city because we are the biggest sports thing they have going on here. It keeps people's minds off the troublesome times that they have in their life. They love the New Orleans Saints. That's what they thrive off of each week. It's good to have the Hornets, too. It's good to have other athletic ventures here, but the Saints are the heart and soul of Louisiana.

Bensinger: To what extent do you feel it's more than just sports?

Horn: I think it's the way players come across. When you have someone that is close to the fans like me, residents feel like it's more than just football.

Bensinger: We toured the Superdome extensively. What was it like being back in it for the first time since Hurricane Katrina?

Horn: I was happy because I saw the Superdome being rebuilt. I figure if you can rebuild a 1.9 million-square-foot Superdome, people can come back and rebuild their 1,000-square-foot homes. That's what I liked about going into the dome.

Bensinger: Prior to Monday, the last time there was football being played in the Superdome was when children were playing in end zones fouled by human waste. How strange is it to think about that?

Horn: It didn't surprise me. None of that surprised me. People had to find a way to let their kids enjoy themselves during the Hurricane. They got to play on the Saints' football field. Regardless of if there is waste down there, how bad it looked, how bad it smelled, there are some kids that would have never otherwise had the opportunity to get on a professional football field. Some kids were actually happy when they were going to the dome. Kids would ask their mothers, "Can I go out there and play?" They'd respond, "Of course, baby. Go play!" If playing on the football field got their mind off of the hell that they were living in, then go right ahead.

Bensinger: What was the weekend like for you leading up to Monday?

Horn: I relaxed and stayed focused. We wanted to win a football game. That's what the NFL is all about. You win football games and move on. That's what we wanted to do. We knew that for the fans and the city it would be a night to remember. It would put icing on the cake for us to win the football game. You know what? It did.

Bensinger: With the Superdome reopening, I thought it was a win regardless of the final score. How'd you feel?

"You'll never hear me say it's time to move on. We will always remember."

-- New Orleans WR Joe Horn

Horn: Win or lose, I knew the people would be happy because we're back. It would have hurt us as a team if we didn't win that football game. We would have let our city and people down.

Bensinger: What was it like when you arrived at the stadium on Monday?

Horn: It was spectacular to see the fans pumped up and waiting outside for us. It was just spectacular. I felt a sense of joy and calm in preparing to do my job.

Bensinger: I heard [coach] Sean Payton did some unique things in preparing you for the environment.

Horn: He played loud music to prepare us for the environment. He knew our fans were going to be loud! Coach also had us sit in the middle of the field after practice and watch a Hurricane Katrina tribute.

Bensinger: What was it like jogging out onto the field to play a true home game for the first time since 2004?

Horn: It was an unbelievable feeling of happiness for everybody. I was feeling like a little kid in the candy store.

Bensinger: You've never played in a Super Bowl before. You've previously told me that Monday's game was going to be the equivalent of it. To what extent was it?

Horn: If the noise and crowd excitement in a Super Bowl is like what we had on Monday night, I know the people who are fortunate enough to play for a championship will remember it for the rest of their lives.

Bensinger: What was it like after Curtis Deloatch returned the punt for a touchdown?

Horn: It pumped the stadium up. It got everybody going. We basically drew first blood. After that, we kept the pressure on.

Bensinger: I bet the offense was on the sidelines for a little longer than you expected!

Horn: It was a fun time on the sidelines because we knew we were doing something right.

Bensinger: I must admit ... I was shocked you got up after taking that nasty hit.

Horn: I guarantee you that the defense wanted me to stay down, but it

wasn't going to happen. Unless I needed to be carted off that field, I was staying in the game.

Bensinger: Looking back at Monday night's game, what most sticks out?

Horn: That for one night the city had the opportunity to enjoy themselves and rejoice.

Bensinger: How drained are you from the week?

Horn: I'm tired just from "Monday Night Football." You don't finish until 11 p.m! Then, we had to get right back up the next day. The day that most players are off, we were running! You are drained, but that's what happens to everybody when they play "Monday Night Football" games.

Bensinger: What does the reopening of the Superdome signify?

Horn: A new beginning.

Bensinger: The tremendous destruction remains evident. The levees are still incapable of securing the city. I've previously said it's not a new beginning, but rather a continued statement of hope.

Horn: Absolutely. You'll never hear me say it's time to move on. We will always remember.

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