

# *God's Mysterious Merciful Providence*

**A Sermon Preached by  
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*[T]hus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you.*

*Jeremiah 29:10-12 NRSV*

*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ... What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.") No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

*Romans 8:28, 31-39*

The cover story in *Sports Illustrated* (August 24, 2009) was sub-titled: Three lives, Two Hits, One Happy Ending. Before we find out what a story about football players has to do with God – and us – we’ve got to get the players straight. There’s Herman, and Henry, and Marc. Marc is the guy in the photo. He’s the one with the “Happy Ending.” But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Henry Jacobs was 13 years old and a junior high quarterback when his neck was snapped in a freak football accident. A ninth grader named Herman Mull hit him cleanly from the blind side. By the grace of God Henry recovered, mostly. But the accident became the first in a series of ominous cloudbursts over his head. A few years later his sister died young in car crash. Then his apartment burned. Finally, he was in a car accident that left him with chronic headaches and pain so bad that he still vomits for days on end. But he counts himself lucky when he compares his life to that of Marc, the guy in the photo.

You may have heard of Marc’s father, Nick *Bouniconti*, who was a star player for the Miami Dolphins football team. Marc was positioned to follow in his father’s large footsteps, at least until he couldn’t walk anymore. When Marc was 19 and playing defense for the Citadel he put a vicious headfirst hit on an East Tennessee running back named Herman Mull. The same Herman Mull who hit Henry Jacobs a few years earlier. Herman walked off the field that day, but not Marc. He left on a stretcher and hasn’t walked since.

The intertwined stories of these three men raise all kinds of questions about life and its purpose. They also reveal something important about God: he doesn’t work quite the way we want him to. There’s no Hollywood happy ending at the end of this sermon. There’s no miraculous recovery. Marc is still in a wheelchair and will likely die from complications related to his paralysis over twenty years ago. The other two face physical or mental



*Note: The text of the original Sports Illustrated article is included beginning on Page 8 of this sermon.*

demons that may never go away. None of the three is especially faithful. But there's still at least one happy ending here. A *Biblical* happy ending. Which is to say an ending in which, to paraphrase the Rolling Stones, the player didn't get what he wanted but got what he needed.

That's the way God's providence works. Providence is a two-dollar word for the way God provides for, or cares for, us. It's the way he works in our lives. God wants good things for us to be sure, but our *comfort* is not God's primary goal. But if you listen to some popular TV preachers today, you'd think that God spends his time trying to figure out ways to make us more fulfilled, more successful, and more, well, *comfortable*. And if we would just open ourselves to these blessings God would shower them upon us. I don't know what Bible those guys are reading because my Bible says that those who seek to save their life will lose it, that the path to greatness is one of *downward* mobility, that the way to the head of God's line is by standing in the back.

God is not out to protect us from the pain of life, including the painful consequences of our actions. If we play recklessly we will get hurt. If we mess around we might get pregnant, if we aren't careful with our words we may permanently destroy the trust of someone we love. God is not particularly interested in making us rich or famous or even protecting us from ourselves. No, God wants us to draw closer to him in this life, and will sometimes use even the tragic miss-steps of our life to do it.

Herman is the guy who was on the giving and receiving end of two of the tragic tackles. Physically he's fine. Mentally he was probably the worse off of all three, at least until recently. You see, he blamed himself for what happened to Henry. He even blamed himself for what happened to *Marc*, and it was Marc who put the illegal hit on *him*. Have you ever done that: felt so badly about someone's pain that you've taken responsibility for it, even when it's not your fault? Herman blamed himself. "What is it about me?" He asked God. "Why? Why? Why?" One friend was so frustrated with him: "You grabbed him around the neck and said, 'This wasn't your fault,' but something mentally wouldn't let that connect. It scarred him right down to his soul."

Later life brought more setbacks and ...

*he began to wonder if he was being punished ... for what happened. Every few weeks after work, Jacobs would pop [the video tape of the tragic game] in the VCR and watch [the hit] in soundless slow motion. When his friend said, "I don't see how you can watch it at all." Jacobs replied, "I can't stop watching it."*

When I read this I wanted to say to him, *shout* to him, "Get rid of the tape! Destroy it before it destroys you!"

But how many of us are just like Herman? We replay our sins again and again and again in our head. The Devil wants us to do that, doesn't he? He wants to dwell on *our past* instead of thinking about *his future* (Joyce Meyer). The Devil wants us to take on more responsibility than we deserve, and he wants us to feel guilty even when we've been forgiven. When we beat ourselves up for something that God has already forgiven us for, we make a mockery of what Christ did on the cross. Either he died for our sins or not. If we keep playing the tape of our lives and keep re-opening guilty wounds, we're living as if Jesus died in vain. It's time we stopped playing those tapes. When the Devil puts them in your mental VCR, we've got to eject, eject, eject. It's a matter of faith.

That was Herman's story, at least part of it. For years he was paralyzed by guilt.

Then there's Marc. Physically he's a mess. Mentally he's in the best shape of all three, but it took a lot of work to for him to get there. Like Herman, Marc tried to make sense of his life, especially what happened on the football field that day. For years he saw it as punishment. The author of the *Sports Illustrated* story says,

*Throughout, there was a feeling he couldn't shake. Maybe he deserved it: life in a chair, life in pain and fear, life with strange hands prodding and turning him like a side of beef. Maybe God was exacting payment.... 'I'm serving a sentence,' he would tell his friends, 'For all I did when I was bad and younger. ... Many nights I was at home awake, looking out the front window waiting for ... the police. It got crazy...vandalizing, doing pranks. Random bad things. Those*

*are the ...kinds of stupid things that make you say, You know what? You do deserve it.'*

Before the accident Marc was on his way to jail or the cemetery. He is "certain that, had he remained ambulatory, he would have flunked out of the Citadel, returned to Miami and fallen back into trouble. ..." Instead, in the years after the accident, "He enrolled at Miami to study psychology and specialized in posttraumatic depression. He made the dean's list several times, and graduated in '93. "This chair made me grow a conscience," Marc says, "I never had one before." "Once he stopped grieving, once he felt himself cared for by so many selfless people, saw so many strangers give time and money to help cure him, Marc began to believe: Being paralyzed didn't end his life. Being paralyzed saved it."

He and his family channeled their energy into the establishment of a research center on spinal cord injuries. It's known as the Miami Project. One person familiar with it said, Marc "*is* the project, the animating force behind the 250-person staff; the decade-old, \$40 million research center; the mind-boggling \$300 million that has been raised... Without Marc, that never would have happened. Said a Citadel classmate: "When he enters a room he changes people's lives." Can you imagine being in a wheelchair and having the courage to say, 'I don't think there's any help for me, but I want to get other people out of wheelchairs?'

It would be easy to think that God was pulling the strings that day, paralyzing Marc to serve a bigger purpose. But apart from Jesus himself, God's own flesh, we have no record of God ever *forcibly* using a human being for the good of others. Instead, I think God saw the tragedy of Marc's broken life and said of the shattered pieces, "This life can be saved." God isn't in the *punishment* business and God doesn't turn people into "means" to achieve his good "ends." But God *is* in the *redeeming* business and God does use people, *if they are willing*, to make huge differences in others' lives. That's what I think God is doing through Marc.

A few years ago, Marc, by then one of the most famous and respected men in Miami, reached out to Herman. He found that Herman was stuck in a dead-end job, wallowing in guilt and anger. To make a long story short, Marc hired him to be one of his personal caregivers. Later, Marc arranged for him to attend culinary school. Now they are now the best of friends. I

have a feeling that God might have a Happy Ending in store for Herman, too.

When it says in the Book of Jeremiah that has a plan for our lives – for our welfare and not for harm, to give us a future with hope -- it does not mean that God is planning a life of ease for us. It doesn't even mean that God has every step planned out for us and if we take one step in the wrong direction he's going to guide us right back. That's not how God provides for us. God's providence works more like the guidance in your car's GPS. We can – and do -- make wrong turns. God won't stop us, not even from driving off a cliff. But God will keep telling us how to get back on track.

And if we don't turn around. If we take a wrong turn and our life falls apart, well... Look at the stained glass windows over there. If an artist can do that with broken glass, surely God can take every one of our broken lives and make something beautiful and good of them. That's what Marc is learning right now. I pray that he will live long enough to see that God hasn't been punishing him, that God has been helping him, that God has been turning the water of Marc's tears into the wine of new life for himself and others. The article ends with these words,

*[T]he lights from the restaurants, the sight of all the healthy people walking by, shone in Marc's eyes. 'I'm a rock, man,' he said. 'I'm going to live forever.' As if to say, 'Don't worry about me.' As if to say, 'Don't let this scare you.' As if to say, in a rasp that sounds like wisdom, 'Sometimes life works out exactly as it should.'*

At the Last Supper Jesus broke the bread and gave it to the disciples. Did you ever notice that? It is *broken* bread that heals, that satisfies, that makes us stronger. When we put the broken pieces of our lives in God's hands he can make something new from them. That's how God's providence works. That's what we mean when we say with confidence born of painful experience, "All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purposes." Amen.

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# Three Lives, Two Hits, One Happy Ending

*Sports Illustrated*, August 24, 2009

S.L. Price

**Fate chose Marc Buoniconti to be the one left a quadriplegic, but he became the force behind a research center that has saved or improved the lives of other spinal-cord victims. He also brought peace of mind to Henry Mull and Herman Jacobs**

Henry Mull was 13 years old then, poor and sports-mad and hardly intrigued by the long view. Who is at 13? So, no, he never thought about the odd ways lives can meld—not in the hours before his neck got snapped, and certainly not in the hours after. Strangers sliced the shoulder pads and helmet off the Middleton Junior High quarterback and sped him through the streets of Tampa to the hospital, where more strangers shaved his head, their voices and faces and hands fluttering while he lay terrified. His mother hadn't arrived yet. "Am I going to play ball again?" he asked. Now someone was pressing a metallic device to his head, now eight grim-faced people were holding down his arms and legs. Whatever anesthetic they used, it didn't take. The boy screamed when they screwed the first four-inch bolt into one side of his skull, just above the ear. He kept it up as they twisted in the second, screaming all the way into blackness.

When Henry awoke in University Community Hospital that October day in 1979, the world had gone quiet. His head had been immobilized, set in traction with weights attached to a cable attached to a steel bar attached to those Frankenstein screws, and he was strapped into a grim and primitive rotating bed known as a Stryker frame, facing the floor. "Am I going to play ball?" he asked. He didn't blame the burly ninth-grader from Van Buren Junior High who had flattened him with a perfectly clean blindside tackle. Henry never even thought about Herman Jacobs.

Maybe it was because Henry got better. His swelling subsided, he regained feeling; the paralysis lasted only two days. Four months later he walked out of the hospital, spine fused at C1, C2 and C3 with bone sliced out of his hip, an eight-inch scar running down the back of his neck. Football was out: Henry couldn't turn his head. But he did play baseball again, well enough to pitch in the same Hillsborough High rotation as Dwight Gooden and land a college scholarship. He'd see Herman Jacobs in the halls of Hillsborough High, but the hit never came up. What for? They were young. Only today mattered.

But the fates weren't done with Henry yet. When he was a senior his apartment building burned down—he became a hero for running into the building and saving a child—and a month before he graduated his sister, Donna, died in a car crash. He left Western Carolina after two years, went to work installing pools in Tampa. Then, in 1993, while making a morning round for Loomis Armored, he broke his neck again when his partner accidentally fell asleep at the wheel and their truck crashed. Another surgery, another piece of hip bone fused to his spine, followed by dizziness and disorientation. Henry Mull is mobile but permanently disabled. Every few months the spinal headaches come back, and the pain is so searing that for days he can't stop vomiting. Self-pity would seem an option.

But this has always stopped him: On Oct. 26, 1985, in the first quarter of a game between The Citadel and East Tennessee State at the Mini-Dome in Johnson City, Tenn., Citadel linebacker Marc Buoniconti hurtled headfirst at the Buccaneers' upended tailback, his helmet colliding with Herman Jacobs's lower back. Buoniconti rolled over, his neck dislocated at the third and fourth cervical vertebrae, his spinal cord hacked as if by a dull hatchet. Soon after Mull heard the news that the 19-year-old Buoniconti had become a quadriplegic, a strange sensation washed

through him, one he would feel for decades. On nights when he couldn't sleep, he would look over at his wife, Cindy, or, later, think of their young daughter, Victoria. He would wonder about the titanic odds against Jacobs's being involved twice in such catastrophic hits, and he would whisper to God, "Thank you."

"I feel it's a circle among us, with Herman and Marc," says Mull, now 43. "Why did Marc end up one way, and why did I end up another? I could've suffered the same fate. I always think, I'm very fortunate. I think of Marc: What does he have to do from the moment he wakes up?"

**Once he** wakes in the expansive South Miami high-rise apartment where he has never taken a step, Marc Buoniconti, 42, calls into a nearby speaker to the full-time nurse. Some days it's Lance, some days Peter, some days Mike or Martin. Within seconds the man appears, places pills in Buoniconti's mouth, pours medicine down his throat and inserts a catheter into his penis to drain the urine. After removing the catheter he unrolls onto Buoniconti's penis a condom that is connected to a plastic bag strapped to one leg. He checks Buoniconti's vital signs, stretches his limp arms and legs and examines him for skin lesions or swelling or redness. He pounds Buoniconti's chest to clear his lungs. If Buoniconti is due for a bowel routine, he places suppositories in his rectum. Then he picks Buoniconti up, places him in a waterproof wheelchair and guides him to the shower.

Sometimes it's three hours before Buoniconti is fully dressed. Still, he is far better off than most quadriplegics. That he has survived nearly 24 years in this state is testament to his deep reservoirs of patience and grit, not to mention the power of money. Much of Buoniconti's \$500,000 annual nursing bill, as well as the cost of his \$60,000 customized van and \$24,000 electronic wheelchair, is covered by the health-care package that his father, Dolphins Hall of Fame linebacker Nick Buoniconti, received during his post-NFL days as president of U.S. Tobacco.

"My dad did well for himself, but if we didn't have the insurance I have, we'd be broke trying to take care of me," Marc says. "No—I'd probably be dead."

Even so, Buoniconti's life is an emergency waiting to happen. In April he went into surgery to treat a recurring urinary tract infection—a routine affliction of quadriplegics, along with kidney stones—and nearly died when his blood pressure spiked. That was his fourth brush with death: Two years ago he suddenly couldn't breathe, and his blood pressure plummeted; in the late 1980s he had a blood clot in his lungs; and the night of his injury he went into pulmonary arrest en route to the hospital. He spent seven months on a respirator before doctors put him through the weeks-long torture of jump-starting his diaphragm, forcing his body to relearn to breathe. They would decrease his oxygen supply so that he could take just 10, then six, then four breaths per minute. Buoniconti refused to sleep because he was sure he'd suffocate. He lost 100 pounds.

The most devastating pain, though, came a few weeks after the accident, during an MRI in Miami. Dye was injected into Buoniconti's spinal cord through a needle placed in a guide tube driven deep into the side of his neck. Morphine had no effect: After pushing the tube and the needle through nine inches of skin and muscle, the doctors found both instruments were too short and had to repeat the procedure. Buoniconti wept as they tunneled back in. "I'd rather die than go through that again," he says.

Throughout, there was a feeling he couldn't shake. Maybe he deserved it: life in a chair, life in pain and fear, life with strange hands prodding and turning him like a side of beef. Maybe God was exacting payment. The feeling would stay with him even after he grew into a kind of icon, the optimistic face of an unparalleled drive to cure paralysis. "I'm serving a sentence," he would tell friends, "for all I did when I was bad and younger."

So, no, for years Buoniconti didn't have the energy to worry about anyone else who had been in on the play that night. He didn't see himself as part of any circle.

**A player collides** with two others on football fields six years apart, and the results seem clear-cut: One kid walks out of the hospital impaired, the second never walks again and the third walks away whole. But over time it becomes less clear who got paralyzed. The victims bull forward, try with every fiber to prevent their frailties from defining them, keep *moving*. On that cool October afternoon in 1985, only Herman Jacobs's life stopped cold.

In high school he tried not to blame himself for what happened to Henry Mull. The following season, without saying why, he refused to play defense; he wanted never to be in the position to hit, much less cripple, anyone. But after The Citadel game, when a trainer reminded him that Buoniconti had been injured tackling him, Jacobs thought of Mull, felt a new guilt rising and for the first time saw the circle as it tightened around him like a straitjacket. *What is it about me?* he asked God. *Why? Why? Why?*

Before that moment Jacobs had been the top offensive threat for East Tennessee State, a powerful runner with 4.4 speed. When younger players challenged him for the starting job, he warned them, "You're going to have to go through hell—and then some—to get it." NFL scouts were watching. Jacobs finished with 835 yards in 1985; his senior year he would gain 889. But after the Buoniconti hit, the Buccaneers' coaches sensed a change; Jacobs shied away from tackles, was more reserved in the locker room and seldom flashed his "million-dollar smile," says Mike Ayers, then the Buccaneers' coach.

"You grabbed him around the neck and said, 'It's going to be all right. This wasn't your fault,'" Ayers says. "But something mentally wouldn't let that connect. It scarred him right down to his soul."

That made no sense: Buoniconti had hit *him*. But when ETSU played at The Citadel the following season, Jacobs heard his tacklers growl, "That's for Marc," and found nothing wrong with that. Maybe they were right. Maybe he needed to be punished.

Jacobs left East Tennessee State in 1987 without a degree, then played semipro ball for a team in Johnson City. In the summer of '88 he traveled to Charleston, S.C., to testify in Buoniconti's civil suit against The Citadel team doctor who had cleared him to play despite neck pain that had kept him out of contact drills the week before the game. The Buoniconti family sought \$22.5 million in damages and was awarded none; the school and its trainer settled out of court two weeks before the trial's end for \$800,000. At the courthouse Jacobs met briefly with Buoniconti, who insisted he didn't blame him.

"I heard him say it wasn't my fault, but as fast as he said it, it went away," Jacobs says. "That picture that I was seeing—him in that wheelchair? All I'm thinking is, *How often can this happen to one person? Why me?*"

That fall, in a semipro game, an opposing linebacker intercepted a pass, and as Jacobs girded himself for the tackle, that picture of Buoniconti popped into his head. He shoved the player out-of-bounds instead and knew: He didn't like playing football anymore. He drifted into a job as a fast-food cook, first at Mrs. Winner's Chicken & Biscuits, finally at a drive-in called Pal's, in the shadow of the Mini-Dome. Efficient and demanding, he did his job well, rose to assistant manager, but his enthusiasm had been replaced by a menacing quiet. Most employees gave him a wide berth.

At the trial Jacobs asked lawyers for a copy of a one-minute tape that included his collision with Buoniconti. Every few weeks after work, Jacobs would pop it in the VCR and watch it in soundless slow motion. One day a Pal's coworker and East Tennessee State student named Daniel Weaver walked into the apartment and saw the tape on Jacobs's coffee table. The two of them watched it in silence, again and again, until Jacobs began speaking of Henry Mull and how he seemed destined to hurt people. "I don't see how you can keep watching this, Herman," said Weaver. "I don't see how you can watch it at all."

"I can't stop watching it," Jacobs said.

**His hands** flop on the wheelchair armrests, his skin browned to the tone that once sent a fun-in-the-sun message: *Hit the beach! Play 18!* Study them long enough, though, and they become a cruel joke: Marc Buoniconti, son of Miami, the boy who used to fish all day in the waters east of U.S. 1, who spent fall Saturdays with his brother Nicky running and jumping in the Orange Bowl while his dad's Dolphins walked through Sunday's game plan, sports a tan on his hands because he has no choice. He can't move them.

The iPhone rings beneath his fingers. Peter hustles over, holds the phone up to show who's calling, pushes the button and stands there, arm extended, as Buoniconti speaks. He gets calls all day—from family members, buddies, staffers at the Miami Project to Cure Paralysis—and answers in a voice that ranges from near whisper to brassy baritone as he takes the shallow breaths afforded by a diaphragm operating at 30%. Afternoons he spends at the Miami Project, a few Dan Marino bombs from where the Orange Bowl used to be. In January 2008, Buoniconti became president of the 23-year-old organization, making official what had been clear for years: He is the project, the animating force behind the 250-person staff; the decade-old, \$40 million research center; the mind-boggling \$300 million that has been raised for research by the Buoniconti Fund.

University of Miami surgeon Barth Green, the project's cofounder and chairman, had been rejected for an NIH grant two months before The Citadel played in Johnson City in 1985. But in Buoniconti, the cause suddenly had a stirring story to tell, complete with a famous dad who could tap all his moneyed contacts in sports and the media. Nick raised \$2 million the first year alone, and once his 20-year-old son left the hospital, once Marc appeared at halftime of a Dolphins-Jets game before 80,000 standing fans, the cause had its irresistible face, young and tragic and disarmingly upbeat. Marc Buoniconti—an incorrigible flirt with pretension-puncturing wit and a knack for charming everyone from kids to civic leaders—could get jocks, entertainers and business types to write checks like no one in a lab coat ever dreamed of.

Without Marc? The Miami Project, Green says, would still be a small-scale research center incapable of assembling the team that pioneered its hypothermia treatment, which helped Bills tight end Kevin Everett to walk again after a helmet-first hit in 2007 dislocated the same two cervical vertebrae that Buoniconti broke. Without Marc, Green and his team probably would not be poised to begin, pending FDA approval, the first testing regime for the effectiveness of Schwann cell transplants on human subjects—a regime already proved to restore 70% of spinal-cord function in lab animals.

"Every hospital in the world and paramedics are using hypothermia for cardiac arrest, in cardiac and vascular surgery, and in the future they'll be using it for brain injury and spinal-cord injury and stroke," Green says. "Even though we haven't cured paralysis, we've done a lot to change the practice of medicine. Physical therapists are using electrical stimulation because the Miami Project proved [its effectiveness] scientifically. Doctors in operating rooms all over the world are checking patients' brains and spinal cords because the Miami Project got monitors approved by the FDA. We're making babies from paraplegics and quadriplegics because we changed a research project into a clinical practice. We've made some good contributions to the quality of life for people who are and aren't paralyzed.

"Marc was the catalyst. And Marc is truly the president: He makes the policies, he's the speechmaker—a much better talker than his old man and me put together. Used to be, I didn't want to follow Nick on the stage. Now I don't want to follow Marc."

The cruel subtext is, of course, that a young man had to be paralyzed for these breakthroughs to happen, had to give up use of his own body so that others might someday walk and run and live. Marc is the only public figure in gimlet-eyed South Florida who is universally admired, and if that's partly due to overcompensation by those who feel guilty about being more mobile and less benevolent than he is, so be it. "He's more of a man in that wheelchair

than I'll ever be with two legs and two arms," says John Stephens, one of Buoniconti's Citadel teammates. "Because when he [enters] a room he changes people's lives. When they hear him speak, people want to be part of what he's doing. Can you imagine being in a wheelchair 20 years and having the courage to say, 'I don't think there's any help for me, but I want to get other people out of wheelchairs'?"

Even Marc's mother, Terry, can't help but see him as a secular saint. "I'm the churchgoer in the family," she says, "but I've said to him, 'You don't have to. You've lived what it's meant to be.'"

She laughs at that, too, because no one seemed less likely for the role than Marc. Undisciplined in high school, indifferent to any intellectual pursuit, he lived for football's mayhem. On the field he resembled his dad, canny and fierce. Former Dolphins coach Don Shula, whose son Mike was a Columbus High teammate of Marc's, is sure Marc could've played pro ball. Even from the top row of the stands Marc's hits sounded like no other. "They didn't have to announce who made the tackle," Don Shula says. "You could hear it—just a great impact. He had that great ability to gather himself and unload on the ballcarrier."

Away from the game, though, Marc was lost. His grades were a mess, his report cards always misplaced or strategically smudged. "Marc was the biggest conniver I've ever been around," Nick says. "He played every angle. He always looked for the easy way out." Terry tried every clampdown known to moms, including campusing—confining Marc to his room for weeks at a time—but he never complained. "He knew what the price was, he was going to pay that price, but he was not going to compromise," Nick says. "He wouldn't ever apologize to his mother. He had his own value system, and it really enabled him to deal with his injury."

But before that? Life his senior year of high school was a game, his mother the enemy, and with Nick in Greenwich, Conn., for his duties at U.S. Tobacco, the house was a war zone. Marc left home at least once, Terry hurling his belongings out the front door. The air was filled with recrimination and pot smoke. Marc barely graduated. His own football coach warned off interested college programs. The family line that, had he not been paralyzed, Marc would have ended up dead or in jail is delivered these days with chuckles. But ask Marc why he's been "serving a sentence," as he puts it, ask if he actually hurt people, and his voice sinks. His eyes fill. "Sometimes," he says.

"Are there certain things that would have put me in jail for 20 years? Yeah, I've done s--- that I could definitely get more than 20 years, combined," he says. "I'm giving you hints, man: *Miami, the '80s ... having a good time?* My parents know I was experimenting at the time, not only with partying but with different groups of people, some nefarious. Put it this way: Many nights I was at home awake, looking out the front window waiting for either a car I didn't know or the police.

"You know what elephant turds are? Those white cement blocks that line your property so people don't go on your grass? You pick them up and drive around town and see how many cars you can throw them through. Windows of cars, houses: It got crazy, but you're all f---- up, vandalizing, doing pranks. Random, bad things. Those are the a---- kinds of stupid things that make you say, You know what? You *do* deserve it."

**By the time** Marc left for Charleston, even he sensed his life had spun out of control. The Citadel was the only Division I college to offer him a scholarship, but it seemed perfect: an extreme dose of military school to counter years of self-indulgence. While Buoniconti got through his knob year—that brutal initiation marked by sleeplessness and upperclassmen spitting in his mouth as they screamed from a quarter inch away for no reason but to break his will—he was hardly reformed. His grades still stunk. Each time Buoniconti would sneak in food from the training table for a ravenous buddy or slip away with another teammate to a lake to skip stones, he was still conniving, working the angles. It would take him years to understand the steely bond formed when 90-plus cadets, collected into a company called F Troop, endure such abuse together.

He was one of only two freshmen to make the travel squad, and by his sophomore year he was starting. John Stephens, the kick returner, always grabbed Buoniconti's jersey and followed him upfield; he was becoming known as The Citadel playmaker opponents had to account for. "I'd heard about him through the season, and the week we had to prepare for them, Marc had all my attention," Jacobs says. "We dressed a guy in number 59, put BUONICONTI on the back of his shirt. Our concern wasn't the other guys. It was Marc."

But by the East Tennessee State game, Marc's neck had been hurting for weeks. He couldn't tip his head back, but the team doctor let him play. The trainer, Andy Clawson, ran a 10-inch elastic strap from his face mask to the chest plate of his shoulder pads; between that and a 4¼-inch hard-rubber collar, Marc's head essentially became a battering ram. Laid out and launched at Jacobs, he could barely see what he was aiming for.

On the Buccaneers' second offensive series Jacobs tore off a nine-yard gain. "Second-and-one, they ran I formation up the middle, and I hit him dead in the hole and knocked him back for no gain," Buoniconti says. "Then it was third-and-one ..."

Jacobs took the pitch, got tripped up by linebacker Joel Thompson and shot forward. Buoniconti rocketed to meet him, diving just inches off the turf. Jacobs had never been hit harder: Years later a doctor would find that the tackle had cracked one of Jacobs's lower vertebrae.

"... and they got denied again," Buoniconti says. "At least I got that silver lining, man. It would've sucked if I'd broken my neck and they still got the first down."

In the aftermath nobody got off easy. Family lore has it that Nick, horrified that his great love, hard-nosed football, had destroyed his son, had to be stopped from wrenching off his Super Bowl ring and flinging it. Terry wondered if she was to blame, having let Marc play in high school even after learning that he had an unusually narrow spinal column. But the Buonicontis found a place to direct their anger and fear: Soon Nick noticed that all his calls to The Citadel were being directed to lawyers; soon it became clear that the school would refuse to pay Marc's medical bills or honor his scholarship. F Troop was whipsawed between loyalty to Marc and loyalty to the institution. His close friend Stephens, who shared a love of Bob Marley songs with Marc and who would testify at the trial on Buoniconti's behalf just after graduating, felt the friendship caused him to be blackballed for his last 2½ years on campus. "I had a target on me," he says. "They knew which side of the fence I was on."

In 1988 Buoniconti returned for his class's graduation only because he felt he owed it to his company-mates. He went back once more, for an off-campus 10th-year reunion, but relations between The Citadel and its most famous cadet remained icy. "We were shammed in the case," Buoniconti says, referring to the jury's three-hour deliberation and decision to award him nothing. More galling was his belief that the school's legal strategy, which argued that Marc's injury occurred because he speared Jacobs, portrayed him as a reckless freelancer. "Where's the military code of honor the school is supposed to have?" he says. "Am I not a soldier to them? It's like going out to battle, getting shot and being left there."

His disgust marinated for more than two decades. It was as if, in allowing himself to hate this one place, he found an escape valve for all the anger, the nastiness, the love of leveling some poor ballcarrier that had made him such a good linebacker. Because there was no room for venom in his new existence. Once he stopped grieving, once he felt himself cared for by so many selfless people, saw so many strangers give time and money to help cure him, Buoniconti began to believe: Being paralyzed didn't end his life. Being paralyzed saved it.

This isn't just because Buoniconti is certain that, had he remained ambulatory, he would have flunked out of The Citadel, returned to Miami and fallen back into trouble. It's that as the Miami Project grew, as he rose to lead the Buoniconti Fund in 1999, he found that no other high matched raising money, pushing for a cure, seeing paralyzed people gain hope. He enrolled at Miami to study psychology and specialized in posttraumatic depression. He made the dean's list several times and graduated in '93.

"This chair made me grow a conscience," Marc says. "I never had one before."

It wasn't enough. He still had 19 years to make up for. So Marc didn't limit his transformation to the time he spent working at the Project. He and Terry, who divorced Nick in 1997, grew close; his dad became his best friend. He made his apartment, four stories down from his mother's, a crash pad for friends down on their luck: drugs, broken marriages, no income. He put himself on call. If anyone needed help, he was waiting.

**Herman Jacobs** needed something, Lord knows. He was a religious man, he prayed and sang Christian songs, but his was not an active faith. It's as if, in the years after college, he'd forgotten the old saw about God helping those who help themselves. No, worse: He felt that any movement, any effort at all, just wasn't worth the risk. Henry Mull was part of that, yes, and so was Marc Buoniconti. But Jacobs's haunting had begun much earlier, in Tampa's Ybor City. Hadn't he been the one to greet his dad at the door?

He was five years old the day Willie arrived home from work with all hell rolling in behind him. A man, an acquaintance of one of Herman's sisters, met Willie outside and began yelling about money, and the man pulled a gun and Willie started to run—onto the street, behind cars, into a startled neighbor's house. Herman trailed behind. The man put two shots into Willie's back, and Herman couldn't help but want to look. There was the body. "I walked in," Herman says of the scene and nothing more.

The family moved to Tampa's notorious Rearview Terrace. Herman and his twin brother, Herbert, were inseparable but as different as night and day. In the choose-ups for games, Herman's speed and smiling demeanor made him irresistible; he'd run 50 yards for a score and never show up an opponent. Herbert was bigger. His nickname was Fat Daddy. He'd beat people senseless if they looked at him wrong. Herbert drifted into drugs; Herman helped the Fellowship of Christian Athletes chapter at Hillsborough High grow from 14 to 314 members in two years. But the twins could reach each other like no one else. Herbert, a defensive tackle, knew just how to motivate Herman, make him harder and meaner. Herman could calm Herbert down when his temper sparked. An injured back ended Herbert's football career in high school, and he dropped out in 11th grade.

Four years later the lines from Tampa to Tennessee hummed with worry: Herbert's in trouble. It was December 1986, during finals; Herman had just finished his senior season. He called Herbert, pleaded with his brother to come live with him in boring, safe Johnson City. And Herbert actually listened. He had started going to church. "He was trying to do good," Herman says. Herbert said yes. He was coming.

Two hours later Herbert walked into an apartment where someone was supposed to give him money. He was shot three times in the chest and spilled outside, yelling, "They set me up!" Herman's coaches told him the next day that his best friend, his brother, was gone.

Coming just 15 months after the collision with Buoniconti, Herbert's death sealed it for Jacobs: Too many people he came close to ended up suffering. The only way to make sure it didn't happen again was to retreat behind a wall of cool passivity. Tamp down any ambition, avoid all contact beyond the superficial. Just let life ... go.

Jacobs had gotten married as a college freshman, and that soured fast. Angie went back to Tampa his sophomore year, gave birth to their daughter, Mitzi, and in the spring of his junior year demanded a divorce. Herman didn't argue. His daughter was six months old when he last saw her. The first conversation he ever had with her was by phone after her high school graduation.

In 1991, while working the window at Pal's, Jacobs met a nurse named Patti Rowe. She had two young daughters, Ashley and Amber, from a previous marriage. Jacobs and Rowe were married in '97. It took years for Patti to learn about Marc Buoniconti, and then only because she walked in on her husband watching the tape. Henry Mull? Herman never mentioned him.

"He was always distant," Patti says. "Even when he was trying to open up, he would stop himself from showing any kind of emotion or affection." And professionally, she says, "it was like he was stuck in neutral."

Occasionally Jacobs would talk about becoming a chef, complete with a toque and his own menu, maybe in his own restaurant. But he worked at Pal's, that mustard-yellow dead end, off and on for 18 years—still an assistant manager, always passed over for promotion, seething at slights but unwilling to do or even say anything about them. East Tennessee State discontinued its football program in 2003. Every six months or so Jacobs would come home from work and watch the tape, rewind it, watch it again. His team and his game were gone. Yet he and the Mini-Dome, standing across the street, remained.

In early 2007 Daniel Weaver, the student who had watched the tape with Jacobs in 1990, received notice at his home in Memphis, Mich., of his 20th high school reunion. He wondered about Jacobs, searched for him on the Internet, found his name in a South Carolina newspaper story about Marc Buoniconti that mentioned his Citadel teammate Joel Thompson. He contacted the writer. He called Thompson. Neither man knew Jacobs's whereabouts. Weaver called the East Tennessee State alumni association.

"Herman Jacobs?" said the man on the other end. "I think he works at Pal's."

Weaver felt as if he'd been kicked in the stomach. "There's no way," he said. "I worked with him there almost 20 years ago." But within seconds he knew it was true. And he knew precisely why.

**The forgiving** had been under way for a while by then. But Jacobs didn't know it, didn't know that the ice around the feet of Buoniconti's former team- and company-mates had begun to melt.

In late 2004 Thompson finally got over his shame at falling out of touch with Buoniconti for so long, his conflicted feelings about The Citadel and the lawsuit, and called his old road roommate for the first time in years. He followed up with a visit to Miami, said he wanted to get involved in the Miami Project. He finally asked Buoniconti, "You ever think of getting back to The Citadel?"

"No," Buoniconti said. "They want to make amends? I'm not against it. But I'm not making the first move."

When Thompson visited again, Buoniconti motioned him into his closet and nodded to something hanging there: his carefully preserved Citadel home jersey and a few of his old cadet hats, including the antiquated shako worn for parade formation, plumed feather still high. "Do you mind if I talk to some people there?" Thompson asked.

He started making calls, not knowing that the officials from his time at the school had begun to retire or die, and something—the admission of women or simply the passing of the years—had softened the hard-assed institution enough for it to see the benefits of détente with Buoniconti. The chairman of the Board of Visitors, Billy Jenkinson, had wanted Buoniconti back in the fold, and he took it as a sign when Thompson called. "It's going to happen," Jenkinson said. "It's time."

In February 2006 The Citadel notified Buoniconti that it wanted to retire his jersey and invited him back for its annual Corps Day. Nick was wary. "I'm not doing it for me," Marc told his dad. "I have teammates, classmates who hate the school for what they did to me, and a lot of people hate me for what I did to the school. I'm doing it for everybody who has been dealing with this void in their lives all these years."

Still, when Marc went back the next month, he was nervous. Then Jenkinson walked up, laid a hand on his and said, "Welcome home."

In September of that year, at halftime of a football game, The Citadel took the same jersey sliced from Marc's body 21 years before and retired it. But the real shocker had come a day earlier, when Buoniconti's kickoff buddy Stephens presented him with his Citadel ring, the first awarded to a living ungraduated cadet. Inside was an inscription: Marc's name and Bob Marley's words GET UP, STAND UP, THEN #59 BULLDOGS.

A jet salute screamed overhead as Thompson slipped the ring on Buoniconti's finger, but Marc didn't notice. He couldn't stop staring, through tears, at his hand.

**Sometime during** that warm weekend, Thompson and Stephens and Buoniconti looked at one another and agreed: Herman Jacobs should be here. Seven months later, after Weaver passed on Thompson's number and Jacobs called him, Thompson could hear the worry in his voice. "Does Nick blame me?" Jacobs asked. "Would it be all right if I called Marc?"

Marc called him first. They talked a few times, but Patti saw a change the moment Herman hung up after the first call. "He just opened up and just became—not a different person—a better person," she says. "It made a world of difference between him and the kids. He became more understanding."

The following fall, in Charleston, with Buoniconti's return to The Citadel now established as a fund-raising event for both the Miami Project and a Citadel scholarship, Jacobs flew in for the weekend. He walked into Buoniconti's hotel room late the first night and gave him an awkward, cheek-brushing hug. Surrounded by players from the game, they talked for hours. "I could've sat there all night," Jacobs says.

"Out of all the things I've done—raising money, the jersey with Joel, the ring ceremony—that, to me, was the best feeling I've had," Stephens says. "I saw the weight of the world fall off Herman when he made eye contact with Marc and realized he was among friends."

Still, Buoniconti sensed what others did in Jacobs: a low-grade malaise. During a quiet moment at a tailgate party he hit Jacobs head-on one more time, asking, "Are you doing what you like to do? Are you happy?" Jacobs was shocked; no one had ever asked him that. And Buoniconti wouldn't let up. He invited Jacobs to visit him in Miami, to bring Patti and the girls. By the time they arrived for a week the following January, Buoniconti had it all worked out: Herman would move to South Florida, go to culinary school. Patti would take a nursing job at a hospital. "You've got to get out of Johnson City," Marc told Herman. "You're buried there."

He got out. But this is no movie: It didn't happen instantly or cleanly. Buoniconti needed to be sure Jacobs was coming for himself, not out of some misplaced sense of guilt, needed him to crack the walls he'd built around himself and *move*. It was only when, over the next few months, Jacobs made the necessary calls, collected and sent in his application and transcripts, that Buoniconti took the next step. He cold-called the admissions director at Johnson & Wales University and offered his own name, one of Miami's most prominent, in the service of the school. Suddenly it was done: Jacobs was enrolled as a student in the school's renowned College of Culinary Arts, with enough financial aid that it would barely cost him a nickel.

When he made the 15-hour drive down in September 2008, though, Jacobs was alone. The girls were in school back home, Patti's mother was ill, and Miami scared her. Also, truth be told, she had been a bit thrown by this new Herman. He had come back from Charleston that first time and made a point of apologizing for everything. "I had been a damned ass," he says. But he also kept telling Patti she had never known the "real me," had never seen him when he was driven and alive and fun.

"We've had our trials, let's say that," Patti says. "But we're trying to keep it together as much as we can. That's his dream, to be a chef; I could never tell anybody they couldn't do what their dream is. But it's hard. In the end we'll figure it out, one way or the other. Where he's at is the best place for him."

For pocket money Buoniconti hooked Jacobs up with a cooking job at the Dolphins' stadium, but he knew that wouldn't be enough. Jacobs needed to get his feet under him: He would move in with Buoniconti. Marc told his nurses they were getting a roommate. "Take one for the team," he said. Jacobs settled in for the fall 2008 semester. Buoniconti warned him at the start: "My name's out there, too, now. Don't half-ass it."

He kept on Jacobs about his studies, helped him write a paper on Sicilian culture; they scored 100 on that one. Jacobs was up at 5 a.m. for classes. Buoniconti would wake to find a note about another good test and beam over Jacobs's A's and B's like a proud parent. The two men went to concerts and barbecues together, Marc including Herman in everything, Herman feeling reborn.

"The lack of confidence, the feeling selfish, holding myself responsible: All that went away," Jacobs says. "See, I'm getting back to ... me. I thank Marc all the time, I want to do for him and the Miami Project—as much as I can."

It might seem a one-sided exchange, but Buoniconti says people get it backward. "Herman has helped me," he says. "I've felt recently that you need to tie up all things that are incomplete. The fact that he was in the state of mind he was in and I could help him? It makes me feel good. I haven't done much—phone calls, made some promises, that's all. Tragedy brought us together, but we're turning it into something beautiful."

Last December one of Buoniconti's nurses had a heart attack, leaving him unable to perform the rigorous, delicate tasks needed to keep Marc going. Jacobs had filled in before—spooning food into Buoniconti's mouth, fetching him drinks, helping him blow his nose—but this was different. At bedtime Buoniconti needed to be moved gingerly from his wheelchair to his bed. So night after night Jacobs would lean over and gather up Buoniconti, all 170 pounds of him, lift him out of his wheelchair and turn toward the bed. Even in that small moment, with Jacobs gasping and Buoniconti floating, the balance kept shifting. It was hard to know who was lifting whom.

**Now Buoniconti** is sitting outside, as the Miami sun chases everyone else into the shade. It's May, the school year is winding down, and the freshman has just come from class, wearing his white Johnson & Wales chef's uniform, blue scarf pulled tight around his neck, HERMAN JACOBS name tag on his chest. They talk about the hit and its aftermath for the umpteenth time, but soon the two middle-aged men are bantering in that jeering ex-jock way, two guys who know what it was like to sink cleats into the dirt and feel young and strong and special.

They're speaking about the season after the accident, when Jacobs went to The Citadel and got tackled and heard *That's for Marc* but romped for 112 yards and two touchdowns anyway. "You won the game too," Buoniconti says, eyebrows wagging.

"Yeah, we did," Jacobs says softly. When he laughs, Buoniconti's face brightens too, and Jacobs wants to keep it going. "Actually I had a good game that day—a *real* good game!" And for those few seconds Buoniconti is a linebacker again, mean and loving it that Jacobs is embracing the code that says you stick it hard to whoever dares push you. "Yeah, that's for *me*," Buoniconti says, smiling. "Bitch."

"For the longest time, no matter what anybody said to me, I just took it," Jacobs says. "So I started working on that, every day. If someone says, 'Herman, I don't like your shoes,' now I'll say, 'I don't dress to make you happy. It's for me.' I had to get back control of who I am."

He moved out of Buoniconti's place after six months, moved in with one of Marc's friends. Seeing the way Buoniconti has spent the last few years reconnecting, Jacobs has caught the bug too. He e-mails photos back and forth with his stepdaughters in Johnson City, speaks weekly with his daughter in Tampa and in July went there to visit his mother. He also, for the first time since high school, tracked down Henry Mull.

They met for lunch, talked a half-dozen times, and slowly Jacobs learned about Mull's life: How he eventually went back to school and got a degree in English literature, how at 43 he's finishing up a second degree in education, how he wants to reach and teach Tampa's toughest kids. Jacobs also learned that Mull wanted to meet Buoniconti and feel their circle close in a new way.

So a month later Buoniconti and Mull are sitting at a table at a Miami restaurant called Mr. Moe's. This is where Jacobs works between classes, where he's working now, back in the kitchen preparing the salads. And somewhere in all the talk of women and sports and teaching, the war stories begin. Mull speaks of the obese biker with whom he shared a hospital room, the one with an amputated leg who fell out of his bed when Henry was in that Stryker frame, 13 years old and so frightened, and the biker's stump hit the floor and the blood from it splashed all over Henry's unsuspecting face.

"I'm looking at the floor and going, 'Oh, my God, what just happened?' and he's just screaming," Mull says.

"They've got six people trying to get this fat guy off the floor, and I told them, 'Hey, guys, listen, I felt something hit me. Did he spill his water?' And I start to feel it dripping, and my mom walks in the room, and she's in hysterics because she's thinks it's my blood. That was horrible."

There's a pause, and then Buoniconti says, "All right, I've got a good one." He tells how an obese former teacher fainted at the first sight of him injured and fell, all 400 pounds of him, right on top of Marc's paralyzed body. That was in the intensive care unit.

"Guy next to me with an ice pick in his eye: Icepick Eddie," Buoniconti continues. "Another guy had a knife stuck in his throat. Eventually everyone started dying off, and when I'd rotate, I'd see [attendants] zipping them up, putting them in the bag. Four or five people died around me, and every time the nurses came to me and said, 'It's O.K.,' to make sure I didn't think I was next."

Jacobs doesn't hear any of this: He's in the kitchen. But in all the storytelling there's no hint that he played the smallest part in setting such horrors in motion. The men laugh over the slapstick, the grossness. The food is superb. If only the new chef could take a break: They'd love for him to join the conversation.

**He still dreams** of football. Not of that catastrophic hit but of ranging across the field at The Citadel and, strangely, of playing for the Dolphins. Marc Buoniconti dreams of what he never did, in the Orange Bowl or Land Shark Stadium: play in a uniform just like his dad's. "I would've liked to give it a shot," he says.

There's a miniature replica of Michelangelo's *David*, the ideal male body, on the desk in his apartment; Buoniconti sees it every day. During good weeks he'll simulate walking in a high-tech contraption at the Miami Project called a Lokomat. For 40 minutes he is strapped in and propped up, and he takes steps again, standing tall. People see this, and they often cry.

The odds aren't good for Buoniconti to walk unaided again, no matter what happens with the research. Lately he's been musing about how long he has to live, and that "penance thing," as he calls it, has lost its sting. Serving 24 years in a chair to make amends for 19 years of uncaring might have made sense once, but, he says, "I'm past that now. I'm sitting overtime."

So he rolls on: fund-raising, the annual trip to The Citadel, outings with family. At one dinner last spring he sat at a full table in one of those Coconut Grove restaurants where everyone knows everyone and oh-so-cool Miami feels like a small town. His thin voice barely pierced the din, but he'd long ago learned to compensate, mouthing the words broadly, exaggerating his smile. He's still a flirt; rakish helplessness is a rare combination, catnip for women, and every few minutes another one came over to giggle and touch his shoulder.

Still, no matter how famous he is, the sight of Buoniconti blowing through the tube that sends his wheelchair trundling down a sidewalk always causes someone to squirm. ABBA's *Dancing Queen* played on the outside speakers as he left; a perfectly coiffed blonde averted her gaze and mouthed the song's words as he buzzed by. "I fall in love 10 times a day in this town," Buoniconti said.

He reached the van at the end of the street. Peter opened the side door, lowered the ramp; Buoniconti's hair brushed the top of the door frame as he inched in, turned, got locked into the space where a front passenger seat would be. Then came the final routine: Peter hooked a thick strap to one side of the wheelchair, then another, the steel clasps clicking into place. He pulled the shoulder and lap belt across Buoniconti's sunken chest, his spindly arms: another click.

Through the windshield the lights from the restaurants, the sight of all the healthy people walking by, shone in Marc Buoniconti's eyes. "I'm a rock, man," he said. "I'm going to live forever." As if to say, Don't worry about me. As if to say, Don't let this scare you. As if to say, in a rasp that sounds like wisdom, Sometimes life works out exactly as it should.