

Most Valuable Player

How an injured Iraq war veteran led the New York Giants to a Super Bowl victory without ever setting foot on the field

BY W. HODDING CARTER

Greg Gadson, a lieutenant colonel in the Army's Warrior Transition Brigade, is a natural leader—the kind of guy you'd be looking for on the battlefield. He's also the kind of guy Mike Sullivan, wide receivers coach for the New York Giants, thought could make a difference to his losing football team.

The two men had gone to West Point together but hadn't been in touch much

The Giants were a losing team until Greg Gadson gave them the heart to win.

afterward, until Sullivan walked into Gadson's hospital room at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, outside Washington, D.C., last June. Friends had told Sullivan that his former Army football teammate had suffered serious injuries in Iraq—resulting in both of Gadson's legs being amputated above the knee.

"This man had suffered so much,"

“He’s someone who knows about pressure and sacrifice when it’s life and death, not just a game.”

Sullivan recalls, “yet he was so happy to see me.” The coach, who brought his old friend a signed Giants jersey with the number 98 on it, watched as Gadson interacted with the other patients and the doctors and nurses, encouraging them all. “To see the impact he had on these people—the look in his eyes and how they responded—was overwhelming and inspirational.”

Sullivan couldn't help but be impressed by Gadson's enthusiasm and lack of self-pity. “He was bragging about me and talking about the Giants, and I was like, ‘Hell, I want to talk about you. How are you doing?’”

When the Giants were scheduled to play the Redskins in Washington three months later, Sullivan sent his friend tickets—along with a request: Would Gadson speak to the team be-

fore they took the field? Having lost the first two games of the season, the Giants had already given up 80 points and, worse, seemed to be playing with no heart. The coach felt that Gadson was the perfect person to tell the players something they needed to hear about commitment, about perseverance, about teamwork. “A lot of the guys were

frustrated and searching for answers,”

Sullivan says. “And I thought, This is someone who knows about pressure and sacrifice when it's life and death, not just a game.”

Teamwork was everything to Gadson. He had played football at Indian River High School in the Tidewater region of Virginia and gone on to become a starting linebacker—No. 98—for West Point from 1986 to 1988, despite his relatively slight build of 190 pounds on a 5-foot-11 frame.

Following his graduation, Gadson, the son of a hospital pharmacist and a teacher, planned to serve his compulsory five years and get out. But after tours in the Balkans and Afghanistan, he found himself hooked. “Serving my country is important,” he says, “but for me it's about being a soldier, being there for each other in the biggest sense of the word. I love being part of that team.”

Last May, in Baghdad, Gadson was returning from memorial services



Two champions: Gadson in the locker room with Eli Manning, Giants quarterback and Super Bowl MVP.

for two soldiers from his battalion when a bomb tore apart the truck he was riding in, knocking him clear of the vehicle and leaving him on the side of the road, bleeding and slipping in and out of consciousness.

He awoke ten days later at Walter Reed; a week later, after complications, his left leg was amputated, then his right. "I knew what had to be done even before the doctors told me," he says.

The night before the Redskins game, Gadson spoke with no script, from

his heart. "You have an obligation not only to your employer but to each other to do your best," he told the Giants. "You're playing for each other. When you find a way to do things greater than you thought you could, something you couldn't do as an individual, a bond is formed that will last forever."

He told the team how much it had meant to him when his friends from West Point rallied around him in the hospital, and reminded them how powerful a team really is and how much stronger adversity would

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make them. “It’s not about what happens to you in life,” he said. “It’s about what you do about it. It’s about making the most of all your opportunities because I’m here to tell you, it can end in a flash.”

When he finished speaking, the room was silent. “You could hear a pin drop,” Sullivan says. And then

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it erupted in a standing ovation.

“You see a guy go through the things that he has, and he’s in such good spirits,” says Giants wide receiver Plaxico Burress. “I’ve never met somebody like that. I was like, Wow, I have a little ankle injury. I have to go out there and give it my best.”

The Giants invited Gadson to watch the game from the sidelines the next day. When Burress scored the winning touchdown, he ran to Gadson and placed the ball in his lap. “All I thought about when I made that touchdown was that I wanted to find him and give him that football,” Burress says.

The Giants went on to win their next ten road games. Gadson joined up with the team at the playoffs in Tampa, and again, they won.

Later, at the NFC championship game against Green Bay, the honorary co-captain sat on the sidelines in the subzero weather instead of in the heated box seat reserved for him. This time, it was Corey Webster who gave Gadson a football, after intercepting a pass from star Packers quarterback Brett Favre

near the end of the game. The Giants won in overtime, 23-20, and the ball wound up becoming a piece of history. It turned out to be the last NFL pass Favre threw; he announced his retirement in March.

The Super Bowl was next, and the team flew Gadson, his wife, Kim, and their two children—Gabiella, 15, and Jaelen, 14—to Phoenix for the game against the New England Patriots, who’d had an undefeated season and were widely favored to win. The night before the contest, Gadson again addressed the players. And for the crowning touch on what became a legendary season, the Giants won, 17-14, their first Super Bowl victory in more than a decade.

“He is a powerful man with a powerful spirit,” says Giants head coach Tom Coughlin. “And that is really what he gave us: the idea that the spirit rises above all these adverse conditions.”

Physically, Gadson is making remarkable progress. He spends four hours a day in rehab, learning, among

other things, to use prosthetic legs equipped with Bluetooth technology. Computer chips in each leg send signals to motors in Gadson's artificial joints so his knees and ankles move in a coordinated fashion. He is one of only two double amputees to use this technology, which was designed for single amputees. He uses a wheelchair or two canes most of the time but can also walk without support for short distances.

His family helps him remain upbeat. "I take great inspiration from my wife and kids," he says. "I don't always feel good, but I owe it to them to keep on trying."

Gadson isn't sure whether his role

with the Giants will continue next season. He hasn't been discharged from the military, and his only official duty is to focus on his rehab. The soldier says he'd like to be there when his battalion comes home.

"I'm living the journey right now," Gadson says, reflecting on all that's happened to him in the past year. "I've come a long way, and I still have a long way to go. I don't believe you ever really arrive in life. You live life." And who knows where that will take you? If you are Lt. Col. Greg Gadson, you could go from the battlefields of Iraq all the way to the Super Bowl alongside the New York Giants—in a wheelchair, but never, ever sidelined.

SO WHAT'S WRONG WITH "LARRY"?

A New Zealand couple have named their son "Superman." ⁴Real. Actually, reported the London *Telegraph*, ⁴Real was their first choice, but the government registry nixed the name because it included a digit. Meanwhile, a Chinese couple clashed with their government when they tried to give their newborn this moniker: @. Some celebrities have followed suit, and there's nary a Jane in the bunch.

Kal-el Coppola (son of actor Nicolas Cage)

Audio Science (son of actress Shannyn Sossamon)

Bluebell Madonna (daughter of Spice Girl Geri Halliwell)

Daisy Boo (daughter of chef Jamie Oliver)

Pilot Inspektor (son of actor Jason Lee)

Heavenly Hiraani Tiger Lily (daughter of TV host Paula Yates)

God'Iss Love Stone (daughter of singer Lil' Mo)

Jermajesty (son of singer Jermaine Jackson)