



The Changing Image Of The S A N D I E G O **CHARGERS**

Story by Roy Robertson • Photography by Martin Mann

Philip Rivers Rising to the Challenge

For Chargers' quarterback Philip Rivers, there could hardly have been a more compelling stage or storyline for his first start in the National Football League.

Season Opener:
Chargers **27**, Raiders **0**.



“He’s an extremely bright young man. He’s got great football instincts.”

—Marty Schottenheimer
Chargers Head Coach

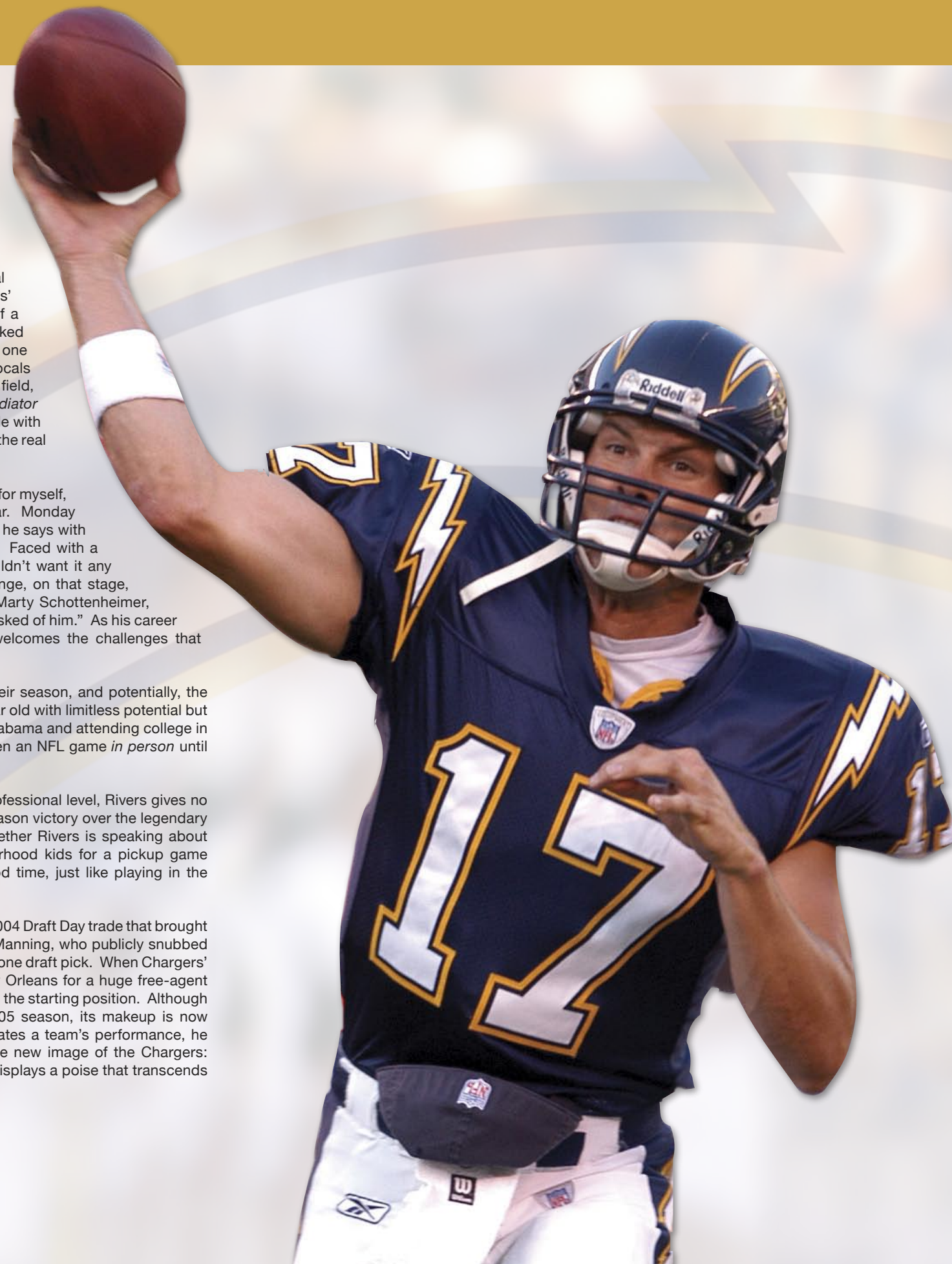
The Philip Rivers Era began September 11, as the Chargers kicked off the season against their archrival Oakland Raiders on Monday Night Football. Rivers’ first real day on the job was played out in front of a national television audience, before a coliseum packed with manic, and at times, maniacal fans populating one of the NFL’s most hostile environments, which locals have tagged “The Black Hole.” As he took the field, the scene was reminiscent of the moment in *Gladiator* when the gates were raised for Maximus to do battle with vicious lions and tigers (except in Oakland, most of the real danger and savagery is generally in the stands).

“I couldn’t ask for a better way to start off a career, for myself, and for the team. It’s a great way to start the year. Monday Night Football, it doesn’t get any bigger than that,” he says with a broad grin, just days before the season opener. Faced with a daunting assignment for his first start, Rivers wouldn’t want it any other way. “If you don’t enjoy that kind of challenge, on that stage, then you’re in the wrong business.” His coach, Marty Schottenheimer, said of Rivers’ debut, “He did everything that was asked of him.” As his career progresses, much more will be asked. Rivers welcomes the challenges that lie ahead.

In 2006, the Chargers are pinning the hopes of their season, and potentially, the future of the franchise, on the shoulders of a 24-year old with limitless potential but very limited playing time. Growing up in Athens, Alabama and attending college in Raleigh, North Carolina, Rivers had never even seen an NFL game *in person* until joining the Chargers two years ago.

When discussing the prospect of playing at the professional level, Rivers gives no indication of pressure or trepidation. After a preseason victory over the legendary Green Bay Packers, it’s difficult to distinguish whether Rivers is speaking about his first ever NFL start, or gathering the neighborhood kids for a pickup game in an Alabama park saying he was “having a good time, just like playing in the back yard.”

Expectations for Rivers have been rising since the 2004 Draft Day trade that brought him to San Diego in exchange for the petulant Eli Manning, who publicly snubbed the Chargers prior to being selected as the number one draft pick. When Chargers’ incumbent quarterback Drew Brees bolted to New Orleans for a huge free-agent contract during the off-season, Rivers was awarded the starting position. Although the Chargers’ lineup is largely intact from the 2005 season, its makeup is now undeniably different. A quarterback not only dictates a team’s performance, he also defines its personality. Rivers personifies the new image of the Chargers: young, talented, self-assured, and optimistic. He displays a poise that transcends his youth and inexperience.



College Highlights

- 2002 MVP of Gator Bowl win over Notre Dame.
- National Collegiate Athletic Association second all-time leading passer.





College Highlights

- 2003 North Carolina State's highest NFL draft pick in more than 40 years.
- Holds every major school passing record at North Carolina State.



Rivers has been prepping for his current assignment for many years. When he left North Carolina State, he had started more college games as quarterback than any player in history. Prior to that, he played for, and learned from, his father Steve, the coach at Athens High. "I've always had a lot of confidence around the game because I was knowledgeable and knew more than my peers," he says, without a trace of conceit or egotism; he seems completely comfortable in his ability to lead. "It's just my personality and some of my characteristics... always wanting to be the leader and the boss of the games, deciding who's going to be on whose team. All of those things were traits of mine growing up, and those traits will be expressed in different ways at this level. They'll be key to whether I'm successful."

Philip Rivers appears poised, prepared, and above all, extremely confident – in both his own abilities, and that of his teammates, who he is quick to praise. "Yes, I'm confident, but I have confidence in the team around me," he says. If he were not quarterbacking for the Chargers, Rivers would fit comfortably into another role within the organization: he could moonlight for the marketing department, selling tickets. His enthusiasm for this team, expressed with a genial Southern drawl, is both genuine and contagious. "I know we've got guys who are going to make plays – not for me, but for us, and that's what makes this opportunity, this challenge, this situation I'm walking into so exciting."

While he acknowledges some differences between his style and that of his predecessor, Drew Brees, he feels the team's collective personality has bridged the change of quarterback. "Drew and I have different personalities," he says. We certainly are not the same person, but this team has established what our image is and what type of character we have.

Now, it's ultimately pushing toward that goal of winning a championship. We've got a lot of continuity, which is huge in trying to win a championship."

The change at quarterback has been the single biggest focus, and question mark, as media and fans debate the Chargers' fortunes in the new season. In a sport that covets continuity, where championships are built on a solid nucleus of proven players, the Chargers handed the reigns of their offense to the 24-year old kid from Alabama. Days before his debut, he appears to take all of the scrutiny and expectations in stride. "All those pressures, outside attention and all of the things that come along with the position; it doesn't matter if you're a rookie or a 15-year veteran. The guys that can manage that will be able to lead."

The confidence between the Chargers' decision makers, and their choice for quarterback, is clearly reciprocal. During the off-season, Drew Brees, just 14 months removed from leading the team to an AFC West divisional championship, was allowed to leave via free agency. Such was the confidence the Chargers' brain trust showed in Rivers, which has bolstered the belief he already has in himself.

"Obviously, they thought highly of me to draft me in the first place, but the last two years, not playing, you can get lost in the shuffle," he says of his time as a backup. "But they still knew the type of player that I was and knew what I could do, and obviously, they saw me bustin' it in the meetings and in the practices. I really tried not to take two years off and feel I have benefited from that. You can't measure it, because I've only thrown 30 passes [before the season began], but I know what I've benefited from that's really going to help me."

“He has the respect of his peers.”
–Chargers’ Antonio Gates



“It’s a good feeling. Obviously the Monday night win was a great win for our team and just for myself... getting that first win and all the things that come with the first start. Obviously I enjoyed it, but it was also a relief.”

–Philip Rivers

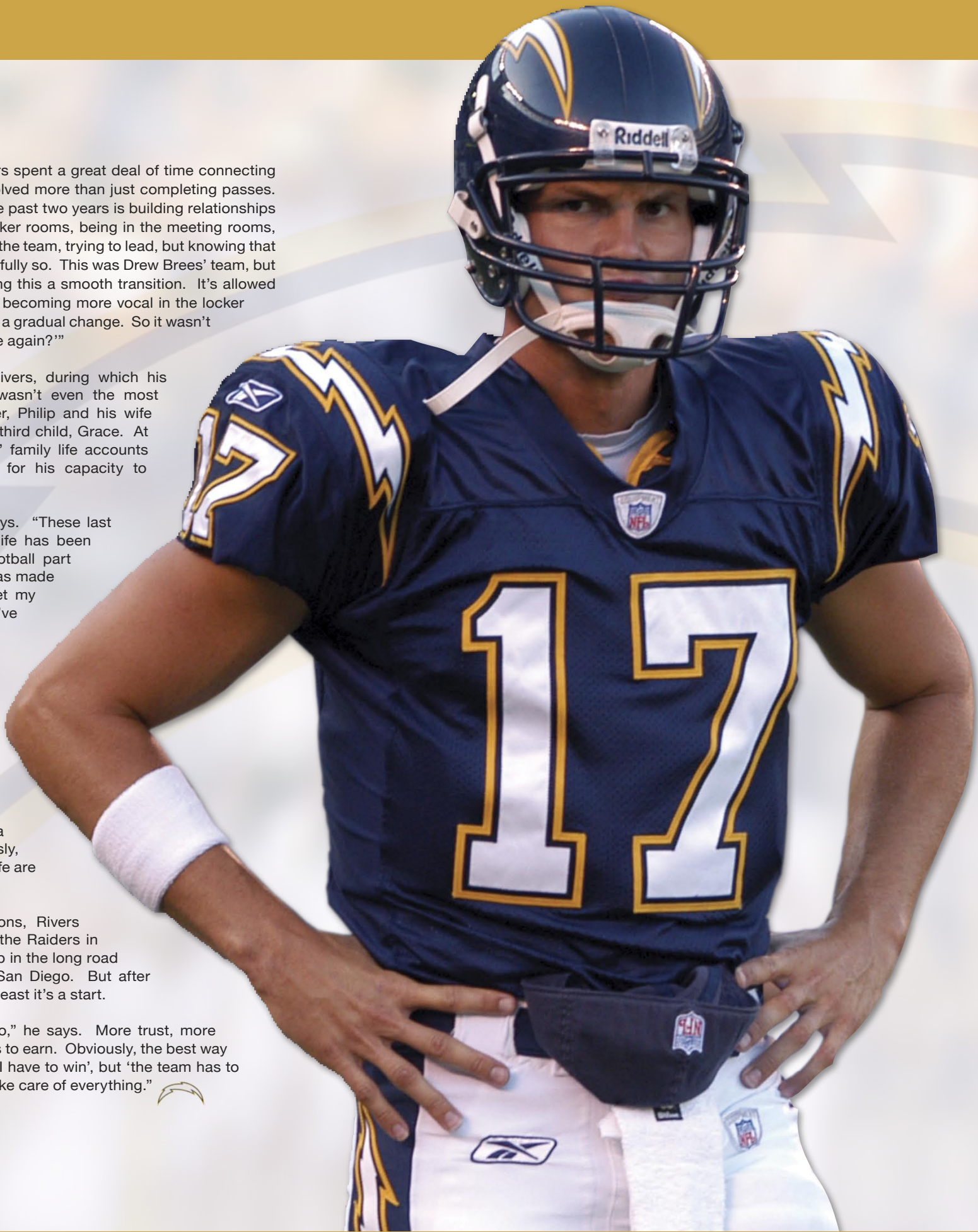
In biding his time behind Brees, Rivers spent a great deal of time connecting with his teammates in a way that involved more than just completing passes. “One thing I put a lot of time into in the past two years is building relationships with my teammates. Being in the locker rooms, being in the meeting rooms, getting to know guys... being a part of the team, trying to lead, but knowing that I had to take a back seat to Drew, rightfully so. This was Drew Brees’ team, but now, I’ve set the foundation for making this a smooth transition. It’s allowed me to take more of a leadership role, becoming more vocal in the locker room.... all of those things that made it a gradual change. So it wasn’t just sudden, like ‘What was your name again?’”

It was an eventful off-season for Rivers, during which his promotion to starting quarterback wasn’t even the most significant occurrence. This summer, Philip and his wife of five years, Tiffany, welcomed their third child, Grace. At 24, a married father of three, Rivers’ family life accounts for maturity beyond his years and for his capacity to stay centered.

“It puts things in perspective,” he says. “These last two years, the “family” side of my life has been fulfilling to the utmost, while the football part wasn’t all there. Having (the family) has made up some for the football side. I met my wife when I was in eighth grade, so I’ve known her forever, and she’s been great the whole time. She loves me for me, as I do her... it’s not the football.” Happy on the home front, he grew anxious awaiting his chance to get in the game. “You can’t be totally fulfilled unless you’re out there playing and doing what you love to do. I’m excited now because I’ve got the opportunity to get back to what I love, playing the game and being a part of everything, and then obviously, my family. So those two sides of my life are clicking. That’s awesome!”

In the face of enormous expectations, Rivers realizes one resounding victory over the Raiders in his professional debut is only one step in the long road toward bringing a championship to San Diego. But after sitting and watching for two years, at least it’s a start.

“Obviously, I’ve still got a ways to go,” he says. More trust, more respect... I’ve got more of those things to earn. Obviously, the best way to earn those things is winning. Not ‘I have to win’, but ‘the team has to win’. That’s the bottom line – that’ll take care of everything.”



Personal Highlights

- At 24, a married father of three, Rivers’ family life accounts for maturity beyond his years and for his capacity to stay centered.

