





# THE place WHERE he belongs

By Danette Baker

*Steven E. Brooks, M.D., (SOM Resident '11) has one of those stories hard to ignore. Brooks' natural athleticism, good looks and an infectious personality landed him a spot in the NFL and on the big screen. But there is another chapter to his story. One, his residency director describes as that of a "very determined, goal-oriented, young man that has proven to be a leader and role model."*

Photos provided by Steven E. Brooks, M.D.



Brooks enjoyed a dual career in the NFL and with the Screen Actor's Guild before he entered medical school.



From the first time he put on a uniform at age 8, Steven E. Brooks, M.D. (SOM Resident '11) always looked forward to that season tucked between summer and winter – those precious few months when he was all-consuming by “suing up, taping up, knocking people around and catching the football.”

For 19 years, football dominated Brooks' life. He played at Occidental College and then signed with the Los Angeles Rams in 1994, after the team extended an invitation to try out. Brooks' plan was to go to medical school, but instead he began a five-year career in the NFL. He was a tight end/long snapper for the L.A. Rams, San Francisco 49ers, St. Louis Rams, New Orleans Saints, and Washington Redskins and before ending up back home in Detroit, playing for his hometown Lions. Those were the best of times and the worst of times, Brooks said, enjoying hometown support of family and friends and being spoiled with his grandmother's home cooking, but struggling with the stresses that come with the game.

The time had come, he realized, to get serious about what he really wanted to do.

Brooks completed a five-year general surgery residency at TTUHSC this summer and began a two-year fellowship at Vanderbilt University. Becoming a physician was something he dreamed about since

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high school, and he took steps throughout his academic career to reach his goal. As a two-sport student athlete at Occidental College (he played basketball and football), Brooks majored in psychobiology and worked part time as a phlebotomist.

But getting into medical school — especially after a six-year absence from the classroom — wasn't easy. There was skepticism, Brooks said, on the part of some medical school administrators about his ability to succeed as a student; while others recognized that his professional athletic experience might be beneficial.

Brooks, however, knew that he belonged in medicine and convinced those at the American University of the Caribbean School of Medicine. Working as a phlebotomist had solidified Brooks' career goals; but even as a child, he was captivated by his mother's work as a critical care nurse and a nursing educator. In a January 2011 article for the American College of Surgeons, that he recalls visiting his mother at work and the awe he felt looking at the lights, sounds and equipment in the intensive care unit. But there was something else that drew him to medicine. Her work, Brooks describes with the lyrics from a Tracy Chapman song, "I've seen and met angels wearing the

disguise of ordinary people living ordinary lives ... filled with love, compassion, forgiveness and sacrifice."

"She never pushed me to become a doctor," Brooks said, "but she did inspire me. She still reminds me when I'm tired or stressed about the importance of my job, of 'giving service.'"

There's a certain part of that Brooks must have inherited. John Griswold, M.D., professor and chairman of surgery for the School of Medicine, says the former resident's compassion for patients was one of the qualities that set him apart from other "exemplary" surgery residents that come through the department.

Brooks does credit his parents as the inspiration for his accomplishments, on and off the field. "My father (a teacher and football coach), at 6'4" and more than 300 pounds, was comic book huge. But his imposing stature was balanced by his ability to joke and smile.

"He taught me that toughness and kindness were not mutually exclusive, thankfully, I inherited that, too."

Like many football players, Brooks dedicated his time off the field to helping others. He spoke on behalf of the NFL making presentations for charitable organizations such as the Make-

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A-Wish Foundation and DARE programs and discovered he had some natural talent. After taking formal acting classes, he was accepted into the Screen Actors Guild, and came up with a positive, productive way to spend his off-seasons. Brooks landed small parts on HBO's *Arliss* and in the motion picture *Space Jam* and was also in several national commercials for companies including Federal Express and Nike. But his most memorable experience was as a character called "The Viking Optometrist" for a skit on the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno*.

"It was a bit surreal to be in front of a national television audience holding a broadsword and eye chart and wearing nothing but a loincloth."

It now seems that Brooks has a stellar third career ahead of him. During his residency, he was recognized almost a dozen times for his dedication to his own education as well as for being an inspiration to others. In addition to the accolades earned locally, Brooks was named by the American College of Surgeons as 2010 Resident Award for Exemplary Teaching.

"Steve has a sixth sense about teaching and specifically motivating adults to learn," said Griswold. "His teaching style instills confidence and motivates those he is working with. His personality draws in students and makes them feel comfortable with him and the topic being discussed. He is incredible at 'thinking out loud' as he performs tasks, a skill so important when teaching in a technical field like surgery."

It is a specialty, Brooks says, that he finds enjoyable in the physical and mental demands and pronounced treatments. "Artists and musicians describe a loss of time sense when they are working and creating. I have always had that same feeling of 'unperturbed awareness' in surgery."



*Steven E. Brooks, M.D., with members of the surgical critical care team at Vanderbilt.*

Upon completing the acute care surgery fellowship at Vanderbilt, the plans are for Brooks to return to TTUHSC, something Griswold says will benefit the university and the residents of this area.

Acute care surgery consists of trauma surgery, surgical critical care and emergency general surgery. Griswold explained how physicians with the specialty training care for patients with non-traumatic emergent and urgent surgical diagnosis. This would include those with bowel obstructions, appendicitis and inflamed gallbladders to name a few, he said.

Traditionally, general surgeons often care for these patients by trying to work them in amongst their elective practice, he said. “This focus of acute care surgery allows for a more efficient way to deal with these patients affording better outcomes.”

There currently are no such specialists in the West Texas region, and that’s one of reasons Griswold looks forward to Brooks’ return. Not only will patients benefit, but students will as well.

Griswold and Ari Halldorsson, M.D., School of Medicine residency program director, speak highly of Brooks’ natural teaching abilities and ability to impart knowledge. Halldorsson mentions as example, an interaction between Brooks and a medical student after a long night on call. The medical student inquired of Brooks how he was able to be so enthusiastic when teaching even when it was obvious that he too was exhausted. Brooks’ reply: “Because teaching is the part of my job that I love the most.”

For those who were skeptical, Brooks has confirmed that he belongs in medicine, and that the lessons learned through professional sports are applicable in everyday life.

“To become truly excellent at something, attaining the highest ability or proficiency, takes tons of work. So much so that, in competition or in comparison, the ‘winner’ is often the person willing to suffer or endure more and push their limits in practice or preparation.

“Likewise, interactions among teammates matter. This holds true in my surgical experiences as well. The trauma bay and the operating room are team environments in which the best performances occur not due to one star, but due to an organized, coordinated group of talented people who plug in and perform each of their respective jobs at a high level.”

Brooks, it seems, is on his way to another successful career.