

**THE
SAINTS
THE
SUPERDOME
AND THE
SCANDAL**

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AND THE
SCANDAL

Dave Dixon

Foreword by Peter Finney



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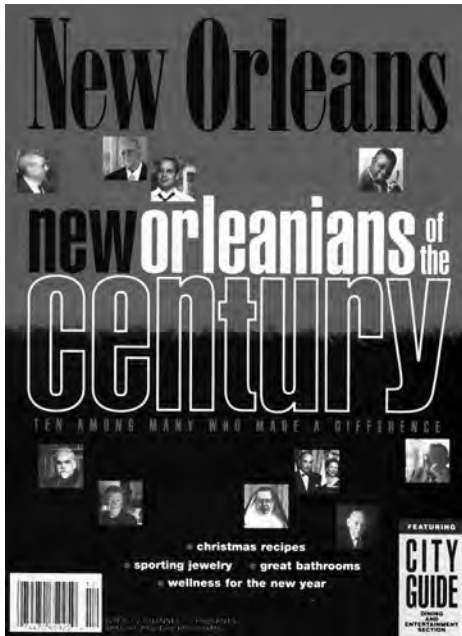


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New Orleans Magazine cover, "New Orleanians of the Century," December 1999. (Photo courtesy New Orleans Magazine)



New Orleans Magazine cover, "Dave Dixon—Superdome Mastermind," July 1973. (Photo courtesy New Orleans Magazine)

Foreword

When the next history of New Orleans is written, there has to be a chapter devoted to Dave Dixon. Without such a chapter, no history of the Big Easy would be complete. You can come up with all kinds of lists, dealing with movers and shakers; with music and food; with political leaders, good and bad; with saints and sinners; with people who made a difference, large and small, spanning generations, shaping a skyline. You do all that and Dave Dixon has to be in the mix, way up there.

"At my age," an eighty-three-year-old Dave was telling me, "I weep easily." He's saying this as the Saints, an NFL franchise he brought to his city, were preparing to play their first home game of the 2006 season in the Louisiana Superdome, that giant mushroom of a building Dave dreamed into reality. This would be no ordinary football game. It would be an extraordinary moment full of symbols: New Orleans rising from the dead, in prime time on your TV set, at the very spot in the days following Katrina where a nation had watched horrible scenes of a city swimming, of its people begging for help.

"You bet I cried," Dixon recalled about watching the horror on television. "The Superdome had become a symbol of our nightmare. But as awful as those scenes were—and they made me weep—I know that the Superdome saved lives just by affording shelter to desperate people who were chased from their drowning homes." Such sentiments were typical Dave Dixon, always in search of sunshine in the face of, in this case, an unprecedented disaster.

"Think about it," he said. "A year later, the Superdome became a post-Katrina miracle, like a nightmare being washed

away, sort of like our Eiffel Tower coming back to life. What a moment! Good people whose lives were changed forever were sitting there telling one another, 'Are you ready for some football?' Our Superdome was out there, front and center, leading a city's comeback."

Because of the hand and vision of Dave Dixon, a comeback of sorts for our great old city began on All Saints' Day 1966 when city officials gathered at the Pontchartrain Hotel to hear Commissioner Pete Rozelle announce that New Orleans would be part of the NFL. Dave not only had used his salesmanship skills in selling the city to the powers of pro football, he had used them in selling Tulane officials on Tulane Stadium becoming the interim home of the Saints while he and Gov. John McKeithen were selling Louisiana voters on a domed stadium. Dave was sitting in the rear of the Patio Room that day when Rozelle came up to him and said, "Thank you, Dave, for making all this possible." Whereupon, Dave, already looking ahead to an upcoming statewide vote on a domed stadium, said: "Thank you, Pete, for helping us sell a new stadium." The Superdome would open in 1975 and, in time, host Super Bowls, Final Fours, and a visit by the Pope, not to mention countless mega-entertainment events, conventions, and trade shows, enough to generate billions of dollars for the city.

In John McKeithen, Dave met the governor of his dreams, a rabid LSU football fan who told Dave, "In this state, telling voters football is king is akin to a political wisdom." Dave likes to tell the story of the day he made his domed stadium pitch to a governor who was lying back in his chair, eyes closed, feet propped up on a table. "I talked for thirty minutes about what a great thing it would be for the city, the state. I was trying to sell a man from north Louisiana where plenty of voters looked down on our town. I'm talking away and it looks like the governor is fast asleep. Finally, I stop. The governor opens his eyes. He says, 'Is that it?' I nod. The governor gets up, raises his fist, slams his hand on the table, and shouts: 'By God, we're gonna build that sucker.'"

It was built for a final tab of \$163 million, a project with some delays, some infighting, but without a hint of scandal. Dave

would carry a cardboard model of his dream around the state. In forty-six days, he would make seventy-six speeches to groups, large and small. The final vote was five to one in favor of building that has become an architectural wonder frozen into the city's skyline. It makes you wonder if anyone had a greater impact on the city than the man who never stopped dreaming.

Dave is the man who founded the United States Football League, a temporary burr under the saddle of the National Football League and one that would produce countless stars in the NFL. He's the man who cofounded World Championship Tennis with Lamar Hunt, bringing colorful outfits to what had been a white-dress-only sport for men and women. He's the man who continues to dream, at the moment about a "fan ownership football league" that could not miss, in Dave's words, of "succeeding overwhelmingly." "I'm absolutely convinced," says Dave, "that sports teams have become so civic in nature they should be majority-owned by hometown fans everywhere. And not by individual owners."

A crazy idea? Crazy idea? That's what so many out there were saying back in the days New Orleans was on the outside, its nose pressed to the window, looking in on the big time. Crazy idea? That's what they were saying when people were laughing at the thought of the little Big Easy building a much bigger, much better dome than the Astrodome.

What follows is Dave Dixon's story. It's the story of a senior citizen who has found his way to the fountain of youth. Someone who weeps easily. And dreams endlessly.

—Peter Finney,
National Award-Winning Sports Columnist,
New Orleans Times-Picayune

Acknowledgments

My book is a story about New Orleanians and Louisianians . . . and people everywhere. A ghost writer almost certainly would write more eloquently than I, but I feared that some of the passion that my wife, Mary, and I feel for the people of our city and our state inevitably would be lost. So, I decided that every single word, thought, and experience herein would originate with this passionate New Orleanian and Louisianian.

This book would not have been written without the assistance and constant encouragement of my distinguished nephew, Julian L. McPhillips, Jr., a prominent Montgomery, Alabama, attorney. I do not have a better friend, anywhere.