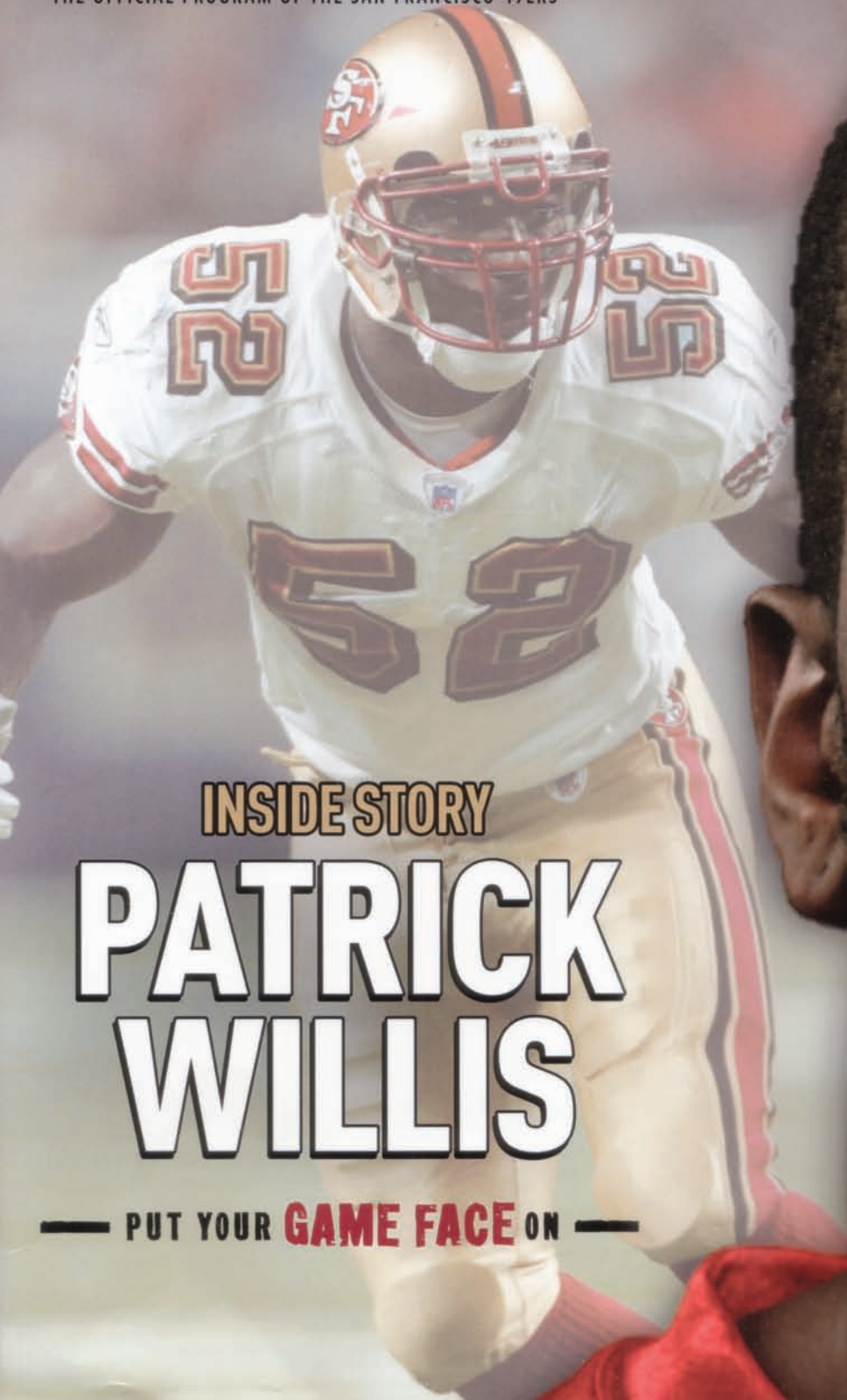


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INSIDE STORY

PATRICK WILLIS

— PUT YOUR **GAME FACE** ON —

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BUD LIGHT

49ERS WEBZONE EST. .COM 1997

By Kristin Swartzlander

Members of the 49ers Webzone were invited to watch a practice and tour the 49ers headquarters in Santa Clara during 2008 training camp.

While the biggest gatherings of San Francisco 49ers fans happen on Sundays at Candlestick Park, the 49ers Webzone, a popular Internet community devoted to providing news, features and user forums, brings the 49ers Faithful across the country together daily.

When David Bonilla was asked to create a website for a UCLA class project in 1997, he had no idea that 11 years later it would boast 50,000 visitors a day during the NFL season. But the site's webmaster isn't shocked that his beloved team, and website, attract so many members.

Acquaintances often ask him what running a 49ers-oriented website is like.

"People don't understand," Bonilla said. "It's not just a 49ers site. It's like a big, huge family of thousands. We're all really close. It's a great community."

The 49ers Webzone provides a space for 49ers fans across the country to read stories about the organization, check statistics and chat about their favorite players. Many of the frequent users have formed personal connections with fellow members. Some friendships even transcend the Internet.

Bonilla and editor Valerie Gonzales are among more than 75 of the site's members that gather annually in person at Candlestick Park to tailgate for the home opener. The avid fans travel to San Francisco for at least one game each year, and are always invited to spend time with Webzone

friends, old and new, during their stay in the Bay Area.

"Everyone is just super nice to each other," Bonilla said. "It's good because we all have at least one thing in common so we all have something to talk about."

The friendships extend beyond Candlestick Park, too. Webzone members are known to help raise travel money, offer lodging in the Bay Area and provide transportation for fellow users. There have also been a few relationships forged on the forums.

"People have met on our site, gotten married and had kids," Bonilla said with a laugh. "We have other people who are couples now."

Gonzales joined the 49ers Webzone community after meeting Bonilla in Los Angeles, where they both reside, and became an instant fan.

"It's so easy to fall in love with the whole spirit of the 49ers," she said.

During the team's 2008 training camp, the 49ers Webzone writers, editors and moderators were invited to tour the club's Santa Clara headquarters. For many of them, it was the first time they had met in person. One moderator even traveled from Texas for the event.

"I kind of compared it to when I was young and going to Disneyland for the first time, except that this was better," Bonilla said. "I'm in awe. I don't have enough words to describe how I feel about that day. It was probably one of the highlights of my life."

The 49ers were happy to welcome the 49ers Webzone staff to their facility, providing them with a full tour of the business offices and fields, and playing hosts to them at practice. Frank Gore, one of Bonilla's favorite players, even autographed a jersey for the site's owner. Bonilla plans to frame it.

One of the biggest challenges for the 49ers Webzone is managing costs: the popular website generates only enough to maintain itself. This fact is most noticeable during the NFL Draft when the site crashes daily due to the extreme spike in visitors. While Bonilla wishes for the resources to steel his site against slow load times during peak usage, the dedicated webmaster doesn't mind not getting paid for his work.

"We put our hearts into it more than anything else," said Bonilla.



49ers Webzone members visited the team's 2008 training camp in Santa Clara.