

Life could have been so much easier for Marlin Briscoe.

Had he been born 10 years later, he would not have been a student-athlete attending Omaha University during the racially-turbulent late '60s. He would not have gone on to enter the National Football League at a time when the idea of a black man playing quarterback was met with opposition and hostility.

Had Briscoe not left football for a job in the fast lane of high finance in Los Angeles, at a time when drug use was socially acceptable — even fashionable — he might not have become hooked on cocaine.

Had he not been involved in a marriage that washed away like a sand castle, he might not have sunk deeper into the dangerous, self-deprecating cycle of drug abuse.

So many ifs.

Longtime friends can look at Marlin Briscoe today and wonder aloud what his life could have been like.

But not Briscoe.

course was shaped by a loving mother and a father he never really knew.

He was born Sept. 10, 1945, in Oakland, Calif. His mother and father separated when he was very young. At age 5, he, his mother, Geneva, and his 3-year-old sister moved to Omaha, lured by family and the promise of the packing industry. They lived in south Omaha at Southside Terrace Homes, a whiff away from the bustling livestock yards.

Even in his early teens, studying and playing ball at South High School, Briscoe was looking ahead, for a way out.

New Life

By Nick Schinker

Like a man obsessed with reaching an imaginary goal line, he is looking forward. To a life forever free of drugs. To a renewed teaching career, passing not a football but what he knows on to others who could learn from his mistakes. To coming back to Omaha, where so many things began for a kid seemingly born to overcome the odds.

"I've always been challenged, all my life, and I feel I've met them successfully," Briscoe says. "When I'm gone, I'd like to be remembered as a person who stood up to the challenge.

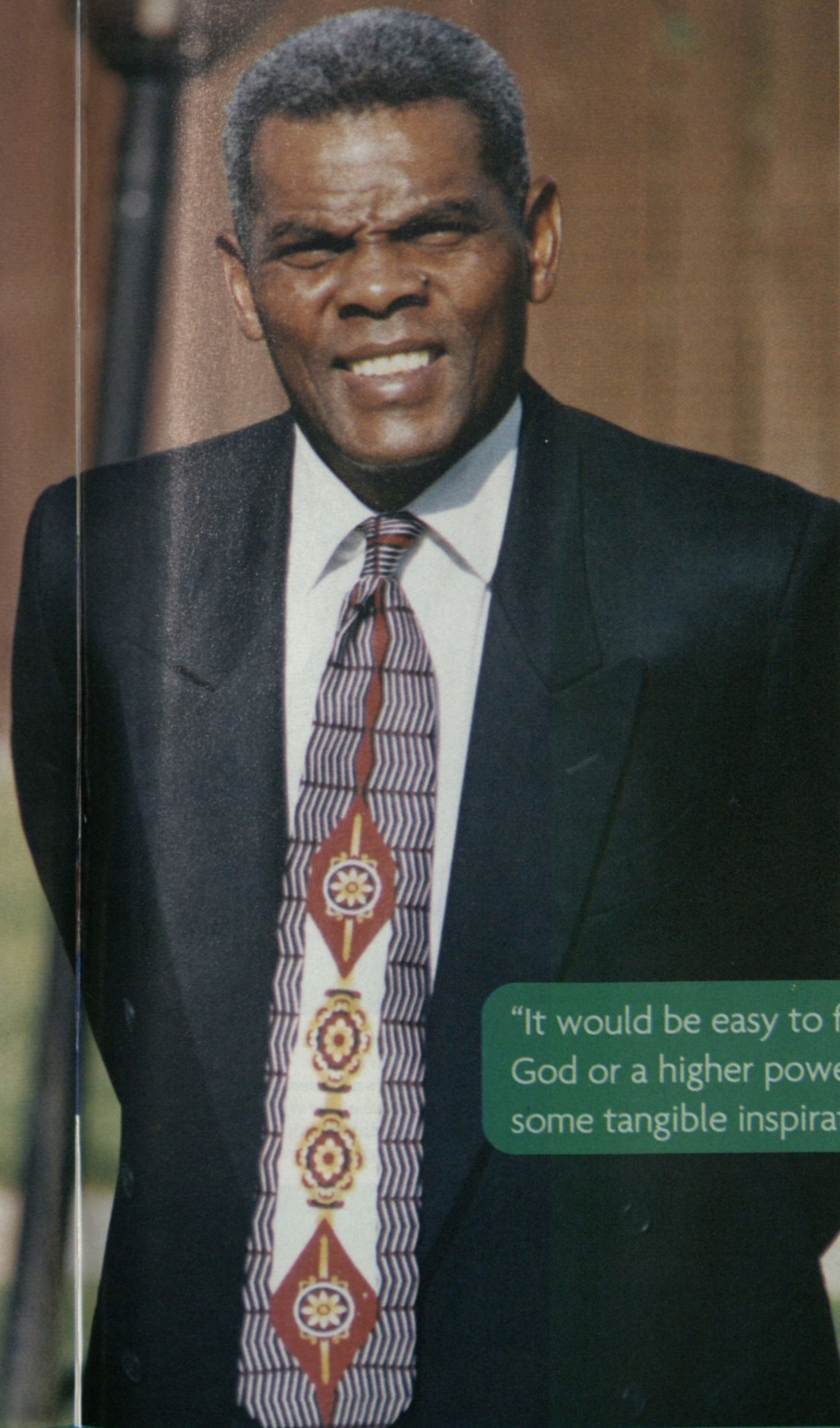
"I'd like to be remembered as somebody who always tried."

Before Marlin Briscoe ever wore an Omaha University football uniform, his

"When I was growing up, I couldn't care less about playing professional football," he says. "That was a fantasy. I wanted to get a scholarship so I could go to college and get a good job.

"Back then, we were realistic about our chances. We grew up in the projects. We didn't have the quest for all the glitz and glamour that's out there now. We wanted to excel in sports so we could get an education."

Briscoe got that chance at Omaha University, where he found more than an education and an opportunity to play football. He found a surrogate father, a figure to help provide the honest guidance missing from his life. The man was football coach Al Caniglia.



"It would be easy to fall back if you don't have God or a higher power, in my case it is God, and some tangible inspiration."

"OU at that point in time was a real growing up period for me. I was in engineering school at first, and I was playing two sports, basketball and football. Not having a father, so to speak, a lot of the things I had to learn to be a man was done on my own. I had to learn to be steadfast in my goals. Al Caniglia helped. Al Caniglia was a great man."

OU halfback Roger Sayers was another inspiration.

"Roger Sayers helped me to become a student-athlete," Briscoe says. "I looked up to him, not only because he was a great athlete, but because he was also a great student.

"I used to sit next to him on the bus so I could get his attention and talk about academic life. I patterned myself after Roger as a student-athlete."

Sayers, who today serves as director of benefits administration at Union Pacific Railroad Co. in Omaha, also recalls those conversations on the team bus.

"When I was in school, those bus rides were a time for me to do my studying, my reading or catch up on my homework," he says. "I had no idea then that talking with Marlin would serve as an inspiration. It was nothing deliberate. It just happened."

Briscoe graduated from Omaha University in 1968 with a bachelor's degree in education. On the football field, "Marlin the Magician," as he was known, led the then-Indians to Central Intercollegiate Championships in 1965, 1967 and 1968. He set 21 records and was named to several All-American teams his senior year. The Denver Broncos selected him in the 14th round of the NFL draft. He thought he was

destined for success.

Before he left Omaha, he got a taste of what he would be up against, as a black man ready to change a world that was not yet ready to be changed.

It was 1963 when Martin Luther King made his famous speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. By year's end, the United States had placed 15,000 troops halfway around the world

After football, Briscoe bought a big home in Los Angeles and began hanging with “the beautiful people.” He became a bond broker, got married and lived life to its fullest. And he took drugs.

in a place called Vietnam. As the 1960s passed, opposition to the war and membership in radical groups swelled. Near the end of the decade, demonstrations organized by the Weathermen, Students for a Democratic Society and the Black Panthers turned violent.

Omaha was not immune to the unrest. Marlin Briscoe, the first black member of the OU Student Council, recalls being moved by it all, and being forced to take a stand.

“We — myself and some friends — we integrated Peony Park,” he says. “They never used to allow African-Americans to swim there, so a bunch of us one day went there to swim. They were hesitant about letting us in, but we were peaceful.”

That was not the case one summer day as Briscoe stood along Dodge Street near Elmwood Park, watching as a peaceful anti-war demonstration across the street in Memorial Park turned violent.

“I got beat by the police that day, right in front of OU,” he says. “It was a big rally, and there were cops there in riot gear. I was just standing there watching when a cop came up from behind me and clubbed me with a baton. I remember it vividly, but I still don’t know why it happened. I guess my being black was the problem.”

He moved away from Omaha, but the problem went with him.

Marlin Briscoe became the first black starting quarterback in the NFL, setting a record for most touchdown passes by a rookie while at Denver — 14 in 11 games, a record that still stands. When the Broncos played in Oakland, Briscoe had a surprise visitor step forward from among the fans.

It was his father.

“We talked, and we found out we had a lot of things in common,” he says. “He died in 1984. I’m sorry I never had the chance to know him.”

Despite his first-year success, Briscoe never played a second season in Denver.

“I was drafted as a defensive back, but Al Caniglia told me to negotiate my own contract,” he says. “I did, and in it I

asked for a three-day tryout at quarterback. Everybody was impressed during my tryout, and later when Steve Tensi got hurt, I got my chance. But the coach, Lou Saban, really didn’t want a black quarterback, so I asked to be released.”

Saban announced Briscoe would not return as quarterback because of his size — 5-foot-10 and 175 pounds. Briscoe cleared his locker and returned to Omaha, to his mentor.

“Al stood by me; counseled me. I stayed in town a while and worked out at UNO. One day he told me, ‘Hey. You proved you could play. Life is not fair. In order for you to play, you’ll have to either go to Canada or make the transition to another position.’”

Briscoe went to Canada to play quarterback but stayed just one day. He returned to the NFL, playing as a wide receiver with Buffalo from 1969 to 1971. He led the AFC in receptions in 1970 and earned All-Pro status. He then put in three years with Miami, winning two Super Bowl rings and playing on the 1973 Dolpin squad that went 17-0, the only NFL team ever to go undefeated.

He finished his pro career at New England and left the NFL after playing nine years. He was 31.

“My top salary was \$100,000 my last year,” he says, “with a no-cut clause in my contract. And guess what? I got cut.”

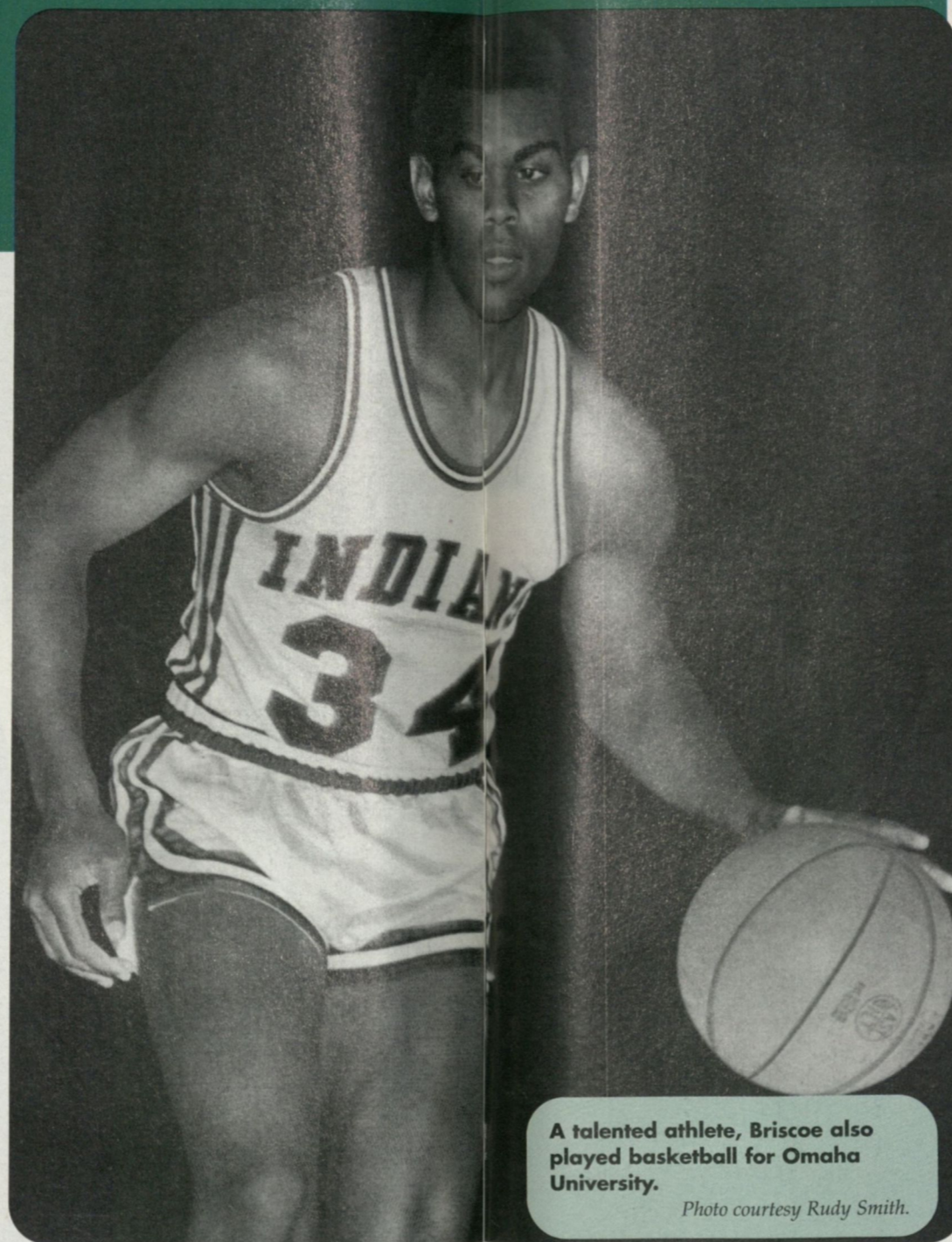
Though he played just part of one season as quarterback, Briscoe is confident he helped pave the way for the black quarterbacks of today.

“The very next year there were four black quarterbacks drafted out of college. They had never done that before me. When I played, I played well, and at least it brought to mind that a black man could think and throw the football at the same time.”

After football, Briscoe bought a big home in Los Angeles and began hanging with “the beautiful people.” He became a bond broker, got married and lived life to its fullest.

And he took drugs.

“I got involved with the wrong crowd out here,” he says. “I got



A talented athlete, Briscoe also played basketball for Omaha University.

Photo courtesy Rudy Smith.

involved with drugs socially, and I let my guard down.”

Soon he was addicted to cocaine. As more and more of the white powder disappeared, so did the hope of a happy, lasting marriage.

“My low point was the divorce. I think so much of my drug use stemmed from the divorce, from my character flaws and from my inability to cope with adversity. I had never experienced failure, not to that degree, not that I couldn’t overcome.”

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“I moved to San Diego, but my problem just got worse.”

In 1988, Briscoe hit bottom. San Diego police arrested him for possession of cocaine. He spent 90 days in jail. And he stopped running away.

“I never went through rehab,” says Briscoe, who hasn’t used drugs since. “You have to want to quit. I’ve known too many people who went through rehab and lapsed worse once they got out. It’s easy to lapse, if you don’t truly want to stay clean.”

Religion, he says, has played a major role in his turnaround.

“It would be easy to fall back if you don’t have God or a higher power, in my case it is God, and some tangible inspiration.”

Marlin Briscoe lives in Long Beach, Calif. His inspiration comes in the form of young people.

There are his two daughters: Angela, who works at Dow Jones in New Jersey, and Becky, who recently entered New York University. “I am so very proud of my girls,” he says.

And there are the young people he speaks to, including those in a special needs class he has taught in Los Angeles and those at his church.

“I think we relate so well because I know where they’re coming from. I’ve been there, and I think they can sense that. I don’t have to make up some experience to help us bond. I can steer them clear of all those cliffs I jumped off before I learned my lesson.”

Briscoe is employed as an interviewer for MacroInternational, an independent marketing research company. He stays in shape, weighing just five pounds

more than he did his first year in the NFL.

“I run, I play a little basketball, and I play golf — that’s my drug of choice now. For as many times as I’m hitting the ball I have to be in shape.”

He is active in his church, First Presbyterian in Inglewood, where he serves as the congregation’s representative on the regional Black Advisory Committee. The Rev. Dr. Wayne Hawkins, Briscoe’s pastor, says he’s seen the change in his friend.

“Marlin’s the one who took the initiative,” Hawkins said. “He’s hung in there through some real difficult times.”

“When he first came to us, he sat with us talking about his hopes and his desires, not his problems. His is not a flashy story but a story of step-by-step persistence, a dedication to hang in there that served him well in pro ball and serves him well now.

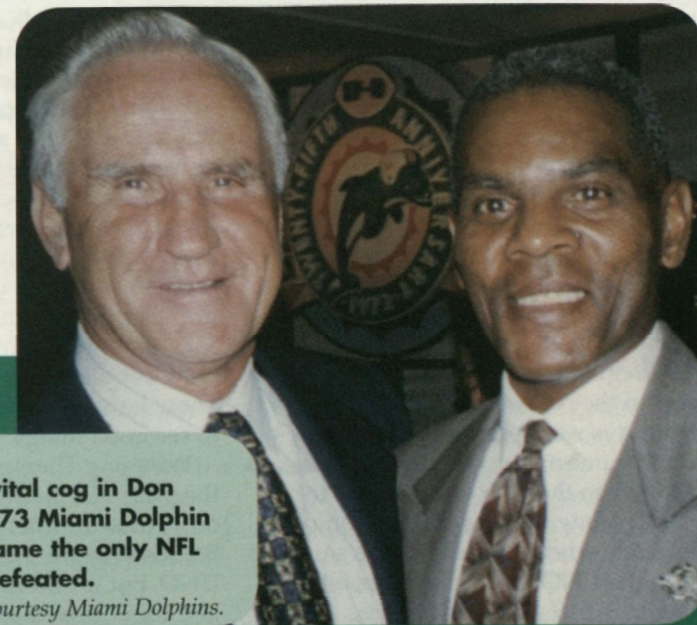
“I truly believe he will make it through his journey. He has that will.”

Briscoe says he’d like to move back to Omaha one day, perhaps to teach, to continue spreading his message. “I’d certainly have to be able to make a living for myself and be a productive part of the community.”

His old friend Roger Sayers believes that if Briscoe sets his mind to it, that’s what will happen.

“I’ve known Marlin for quite some time now, on and off the field. He’s always been a class-act, a nice kid, intelligent and a hard worker,” Sayers says. “He’s a good man. He’s going to do OK.”

As long as he keeps looking forward.



Briscoe was a vital cog in Don Shula's (left) 1973 Miami Dolphin squad that became the only NFL team to go undefeated.

Photo courtesy Miami Dolphins.