

Brinkley a survivor in more ways than one

By [Chris Jenkins](#)

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After being shot three times, running back Curtis Brinkley overcame adversity to make it to the NFL.

With the win in the bag and the Chargers coming out of the two-minute warning, everybody in Qualcomm Stadium knew the ball was going to the fullback, and the call from the home bench indeed was for a dive by Jacob Hester. But even Hester grinned at the play change in the huddle.

“I’m not sure just one guy actually said anything, but it was like 10 guys were all thinking and saying the same thing at once,” said Hester. “ ”Let’s give the carry to Brink.’ ”

OK, so what we’ve got here is your basic “Rudy” story, the NFL version. Running back Curtis Brinkley’s on-field moment just didn’t have those cascading strings in the background for dramatic effect, the aura of Notre Dame and the Golden Dome, the Hollywood script tugging at the heartstrings, the ride off the field on teammates’ shoulders.

What’s Brinkley’s feel-good story got?

Bullets. Three of them.

Only one of the .357 magnum slugs is still in Brinkley’s body, lodged so close to his heart that surgeons decided it was too dangerous to remove, so they left it there. Brinkley’s left shoulder bears the scars where the bullets entered, his back marked by an exit wound, but the real reminders are all inside.

“My chest hurts when it gets cold and rainy,” said Brinkley. “And I still have the nightmares, wake up with the cold sweats, remembering the whole thing.”

Shot thrice in an apparent case of mistaken identity in a Philadelphia suburb on July 10 of last year, Brinkley woke up thinking less about what happened than what it meant for his football career, whether he'd be able to recover sufficiently to play again and whether the Chargers would jettison him so soon after signing him as an undrafted free agent.

Eighteen months later, Brinkley still wonders what his future holds with the Chargers, who've had him on and off their practice squad all season. Just hours before Thursday night's kickoff against the San Francisco 49ers, Brinkley learned that he'd been released to make room for special-teams reinforcements, but he was in the locker room after the win and will be placed back on the practice squad.

Highly impressive in the preseason, Brinkley has been activated for two regular-season games, going nine yards with the aforementioned carry against Denver and two yards with his only other tote a week later at Indianapolis. Clearly, the Chargers like his talent, and he in turn is grateful that they've stuck with him.

Heck, he's just grateful to be here. Anywhere. Period.

Signed out of Syracuse as an undrafted free agent in May of 2009, Brinkley had returned from offseason workouts in San Diego to his home near Philadelphia, where he'd been a high school star with 7,429 yards gained and local-record 85 touchdowns. He said his sister, Niveka, had called to ask him to pick her up when she got off her evening shift at a suburban medical center.

Driving up and putting a friend's Grand Prix in park, Brinkley said, he had a hand on the steering wheel and was twisted to put something in the back seat as his sister approached. According to police and media reports, Brinkley was mistaken for somebody else by Niveka's then-boyfriend, who began firing his weapon into the car.

“I didn't hear the shots, but felt something happen with the top of the car, and I felt my shoulder drop,” said Brinkley. “When you finally feel it, it *burns*. It really burns. It's a burn I can't even explain. You really don't feel it till after a few seconds, then the burn ... Oh, man, I screamed.

“As soon as I realized what it was, I put the car in reverse, started crashing the car into houses. The shooter came running after the car, but then I heard the gunshots stop and called the cops. Next thing I knew, I woke up in the hospital.”

The gunman, Anthony Peterson Jr., eventually turned himself into police and pleaded guilty to a felony charge of aggravated assault. Only last month, Peterson was sentenced to state prison for 7-to-14 years.

That the Chargers didn't simply cut ties with Brinkley, instead putting him on the “Reserve-Non-Football Injury” list for the entirety of the 2009 season, was a huge relief to the running back. At the same time, he knew what people were thinking, especially those who didn't know him.

“I'm sure their impression was that I was a thug,” said Brinkley. “I'm nowhere near that at all. Growing up, I never had any character issues. I always had good grades, never got suspended. I had a good upbringing.

“But that goes to show people. You don't have to be a thug for something like that to happen to you.”

Brinkley now is making the Crime Victims Fund his personal cause. His professional crusade is to make it with the Chargers, who've basically kept him as their fifth back, the lone runner on the scout team. When the Chargers play Tennessee or Jacksonville, he's Chris Johnson or Maurice Jones-Drew.

He said the football part came back to him pretty quickly once he got the ball back in his hands. Physically, he was concerned about the pain in his chest when he first resumed contact drills, but a doctor's exam reassured him that the bullet fragment an inch from his heart wasn't moving and he'd be okay to play.

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His heart started beating especially hard as he entered Qualcomm Stadium on Aug. 14, the night the Chargers played the Chicago Bears in their preseason opener. His first professional game.

“So emotional,” said Brinkley. “I just walked on the field, going to warm up, and tears started coming out of my eyes. I’m really not an emotional person, but because of what happened to me, I thought I wouldn’t be able to play again. I didn’t think I’d have another shot.

“As a kid, you go to games and you say, I want to be out there someday. That day finally came for me. And the tears ... they just came out of nowhere.”

By its very nature, the NFL is not the place for sappiness, and you’ll find nobody in the Chargers’ locker room who’ll get all gushy about Brinkley’s first arrival in the offensive huddle late that night of Nov. 22. “Rudy” was a movie.

But teammates will remember that _ with the second-and-7 situation at midfield, a 35-14 lead and Philip Rivers one play from being able to start taking a knee _ Curtis Brinkley got the ball and the first down. And they were happy for him.

“He’d been through so much,” said Hester. “With what he had to deal with last year, coming back and making it on the active roster, plus the hard work he puts in on scout team to give us a look ... When he got in the game, we definitely wanted to get him a carry.

“That was pretty cool. And he got nine yards.”

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