

2012

Intercepted

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McKnight, Michael, "Intercepted" (2012). *University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters*. 126.
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The Rise and Fall of NFL
Cornerback Darryl Henley

MICHAEL MCKNIGHT

University of Nebraska Press | Lincoln & London

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McKnight, Michael.

Intercepted: the rise and fall of NFL cornerback
Darryl Henley / Michael McKnight.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8032-3849-7 (cloth: alk. paper)

1. Henley, Darryl, 1966– 2. Drug dealers—United States—Biography. 3. Prisoners—United States—Biography. 4. Football players—United States—Biography. I. Title.

HV5805.H39M35 2012

364.1'77092—dc23

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2012012169

Set in Scala by Bob Reitz.

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For Kelly
words cannot express

Author's Note

Speech or writing that appears between quotation marks was taken from a document, an interview, or a recording, or was verified as accurate by more than one source. Rare exceptions are specifically noted as one person's recollection. In these cases, the veracity of the source was taken into account, and the general tone and content of the statement (if not the precise words) were verified by other informed sources.

Speech that appears without quotation marks is the recollection of a single source who was not the speaker but was privy to the conversation. Quotation marks are not used in such cases because I cannot be certain that the words written were precisely the words spoken.

This is a true story, not one based on real events.

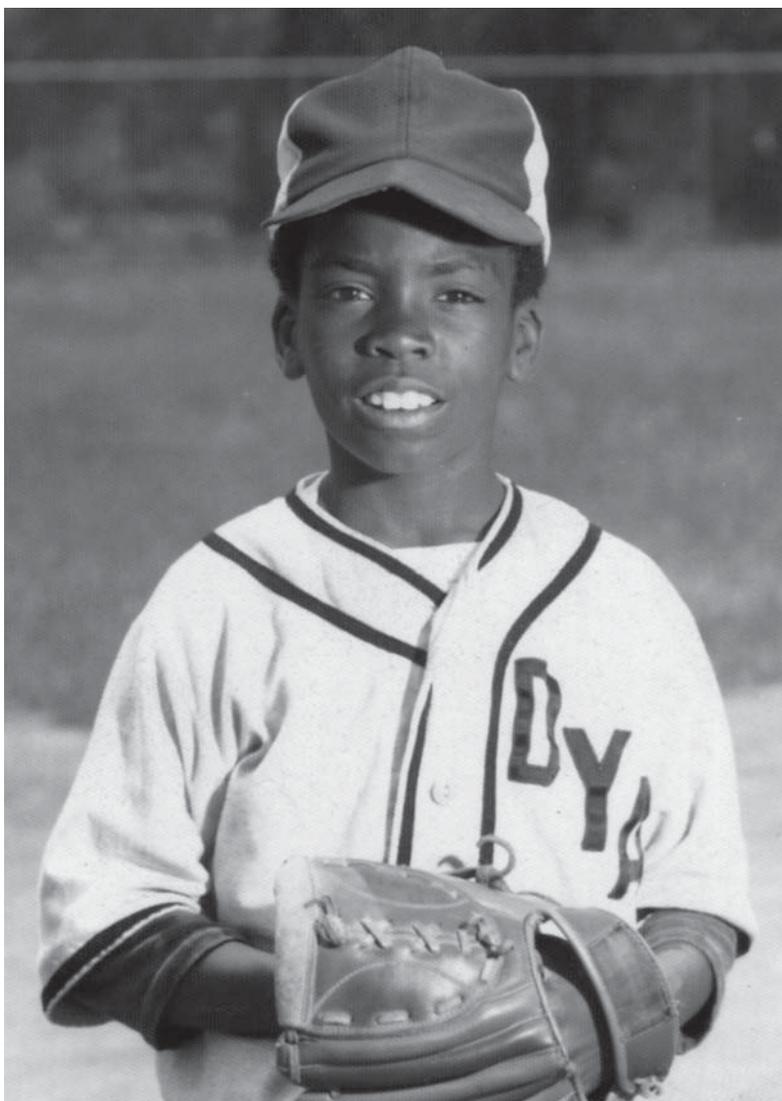


**MAP OF
LOS ANGELES
AND VICINITY**

“What has happened to me?” he thought.
It was no dream.
—FRANZ KAFKA, *The Metamorphosis*

Introduction

The black box was designed by a prisoner. Darryl Henley would not find this out until later, but it was true. The unwieldy block of steel that bound his shackles to his belly chain was the invention of a nameless inmate who had devised a better way to restrain himself. This irony would not have mattered to Henley had he known just then, as he stood staring at a hot tarmac stretching beyond an airplane emblazoned “Federal Bureau of Prisons.” It was the same runway where he’d boarded over thirty flights destined for NFL road games, “dressed to impress and smelling like new money,” as he liked to say. But on this day he was wearing a plain white T-shirt, pocketless khaki pants, prison-issue plastic slippers, handcuffs, a belly chain, leg irons, and the black box. Always the black box. He had recently been sentenced to forty-one years at the U.S. penitentiary in Marion, Illinois, the worst federal prison in the



Darryl Henley, age nine. (Courtesy of the Henley family)

country, with no possibility of parole. Darryl Henley did not smell like new money anymore. He smelled like fear.

At his sentencing a month earlier, he'd been ordered to serve a little more than twenty-one years for cocaine trafficking, plus

nineteen years for the heroin deal and double murder plot he'd tried to pull off from behind bars. This second set of crimes happened when Henley paid a prison guard at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Los Angeles to bring a mobile phone to his cell each night. He then used that phone to arrange a million-dollar shipment of heroin from LA to Detroit. His newfound supplier, a Mafia soldier named Joey Gambino whom Henley had never met, had presented Henley with the heroin deal over the phone and followed it up by offering to do away with the young woman who had been the star witness at Henley's trial, Rams cheerleader Tracy Donaho, and the presiding judge, too. Two hits in exchange for a portion of Henley's imminent heroin profits.

Henley accepted Gambino's offer. Only Joey Gambino wasn't a Mafiosi. He was an undercover DEA agent named Mike Bansmer who recorded all of his conversations with Henley.

Once a jovial, popular, articulate NFL player with a clean criminal record, Henley found himself in court a few days later pleading guilty to soliciting two murders, including the assassination of a federal judge.

And now Henley was waiting to board the plane that would take him to Marion, the end of the line for American criminals. No one could explain how or why a man who made \$600,000 a year playing pro football had sunk to such depths, especially this exceptionally bright young man who had been raised by a close-knit Christian family in the LA suburbs, excelled in parochial schools throughout his youth, and graduated from UCLA as a B-average history student. As perplexed as they all were, though, no one stood more confused by the events of the previous four years than Henley himself.

Standing there on that hot runway at LAX, he saw a mirage in the shimmering heat distorting the asphalt. It was an image of himself, wearing a tailored Armani suit bearing just the right sheen, a \$400 tie, \$300 sunglasses, and Italian loafers that cost more than the tie and shades combined. His friends, fellow Rams defensive

backs Todd Lyght and Keith Lyle, were standing with him, diamond studs in their earlobes, all three men eager to board the jet droning next to them so they could slide on their headphones and catch a nap on the way to Atlanta. Or New York. Or Miami. Only this time it would be to Marion, a secluded collection of cages built in 1983 to replace Alcatraz. This was the prison that Henley's sentencing judge had referred to as "the highest level of security known to the federal prison system."

"This defendant should be locked down in the Marion facility," the judge had said, "because it is obvious that he is even more dangerous in custody than out of custody."

One of USP Marion's greatest security advantages is its location in a vast, desolate swamp in southern Illinois—much closer to Arkansas than Chicago. An escaped inmate would be easy to find because the only thing around for miles would be him. The hills around the prison were grayish-green the day Henley arrived, the grass just starting to breathe again after a long winter. Tall guard towers jutted from the meadow like gray flowers; atop the nearest one Darryl saw a darkened window slide open and a guard lean out and aim his rifle down at the van like a hunter tracking a deer. The brakes groaned, the door slid open, and Darryl saw the man he would later refer to as the Thin Man.

He was a caricature of himself, a prison boss straight out of *Cool Hand Luke*. Wearing black boots, black sunglasses, a black jacket, and a black **BOB** baseball cap, he stood atop the stairway that led inside the penitentiary. As Darryl was led up the stairs, he noticed that the Thin Man was chewing tobacco and that his teeth were the color of candy caramels. The Thin Man's slight build accentuated the immensity of the prison behind him—the silence of its exterior hiding the ugliness that Henley knew breathed inside. For only the second time in his life—the first being the announcement of his trial verdict—Henley's legs nearly failed him. As he reached the top of the stairs, the Thin Man, his ring of keys

glinting in the sun, knowing full well that the inmate before him was the pro ballplayer everybody in the compound had been talking about, gestured like a game show host revealing what's behind door number three and said to Henley and his fellow inmates, "Welcome to Marion, ladies."

Chapter 1

The Rams lost the day Darryl Henley was born. It was October 30, 1966, and the Rams' "Fearsome Foursome" defensive line could not stop Johnny Unitas on what the history books show was a cold, blustery day in Baltimore. Twenty-five hundred miles west, in the Jungle section of South Los Angeles, it got up to ninety-six degrees that day, and no one gave much of a damn about the Rams and the Colts. By then, gangs had begun sowing their seed in the Jungle, an area that over the next twenty years would spawn the most violent urban culture in American history. Only a few people called it the Jungle back in the mid-1960s, when the man who would become Darryl Henley's father, Thomas Henley Jr., stepped off a Greyhound bus from rural Texas onto the cracked asphalt of Crenshaw Boulevard. Back then people called it Baldwin Village. Populated almost exclusively by young black families cramped into small

houses that would soon be converted into smaller apartments, its residents spent many nights watching televised images of the civil rights struggles in the Deep South, a region from which a healthy number of Jungle dwellers had come, seeking a brighter future for their children.

Thomas Henley had left Texas for Los Angeles on the Fourth of July, 1965, in search of the American Dream. A four-year football letterman at West High School, just outside Waco, he'd discovered shortly after graduation that his girlfriend, Dorothy, was pregnant, so he did what he thought a real man should do: he bypassed his shot at a football scholarship to Prairie View A&M, married Dot, and like thousands of other southern black men at the time, headed for California in search of work. His aunt Idella let him sleep in the extra room in her house in Baldwin Village until he earned enough money to bring Dot and their newborn son, Thomas III, out from Texas.

The Henleys arrived in LA, coincidentally, at the same time as *Newsweek* reporter Karl Fleming, who had covered the civil rights movement in the South since 1960 and discovered upon arriving in Los Angeles that it "was in real senses more segregated than Mississippi." Thomas Henley discovered this as well, but he was an optimist by nature, and he held tight to his dreams of giving Thomas III all the things *he'd* never had. Little Thomas came into the world two weeks before the Watts rebellion erupted down the street. Thirty-four people died, most of them the same age and skin color as the Jungle's newest father. That fall, Henley took the money he'd saved from his work as a day laborer and moved his wife and son into a two-room apartment on Wall Street, about twenty blocks south of Baldwin Village. The Henleys were closer to the smoldering tension in Watts, but they were on their own, and that mattered to Thomas Henley.

This is the world into which Darryl Keith Henley was born. By all accounts there was something unique about him from the beginning. He was precocious, always up to something, but he

was so joyous — “always smiling” is the phrase used most often to describe him as a child — that he was hard to scold. Darryl was his mother’s favorite and by far the most emotional member of a family that would soon add a third son, Eric. Darryl was quick to lash out and quick to cry, with skin that seemed too thin for his environs. Fortunately for him and his brothers, their parents had skins of iron.

His father’s new job at Western Union was the rope that pulled the Henleys out of the cauldron of South Los Angeles and into the suburbs. Thomas and Dot chose Duarte, a working-class town in the San Gabriel Valley — an hour north of Watts by freeway — and moved their family into a two-bedroom house on Wesleygrove Avenue, a mostly black enclave where folks still washed clothes by hand and hung them on shared clotheslines that dangled over their yards like the power lines drooping over the street. “Everybody on that whole street, man, they liked each other,” Darryl’s father recalled. “And everybody in that neighborhood knew T.H. And T.H.’s sons had to succeed.”

Darryl’s father was rarely called Thomas in Duarte. “Thomas Henley was a man’s name,” said Chris Hale, who was coached by him in Pop Warner and would later play in two Super Bowls. “T.H. was a legend.” As coach of the nine- and ten-year-old Duarte Gorillas, T.H. earned a reputation for being strong-willed and stern, “the consummate coach that you didn’t want to play for,” Hale said. “I shouldn’t say didn’t want to play for — it was more like you were *scared* to play for him. You knew he was a good coach, you knew he was a good man, but you were scared of him *because* he was a good man.” Henley’s reputation was combined with a sturdy 5’11” frame that conjured a longshoreman, and a facial expression that usually lingered closer to scowl than smirk. When someone broke into his car one night and stole his radio, T.H. found out who did it and knocked on his door. His radio was back in his dash and playing the Isley Brothers again by nightfall.

T.H.’s neighbors pitied his sons for what he and Dot demanded

of them, while simultaneously envying the Henleys for raising their boys so fiercely. It seemed as if Darryl and Thomas were always doing chores or reading books. T.H.'s sons, after all, had to succeed, and succeeding meant private school. Private school meant that T.H. and Dot worked overtime to pay tuition. Money was tight for the Henleys even before Eric was born in 1969. The three Henley brothers would sleep in the same bed for most of the next four years, until the glorious day when T.H. came home with three-story bunk beds, a gift whose luster wore off the night Darryl discovered that Eric, who slept up top, was not completely potty-trained.

The two older boys were like night and day. Thomas was docile and obedient, and everyone liked him for it. Darryl was brash and confident, and everyone loved him for it. Darryl was the Henley child to whom grownups gravitated, taking an extra second to crack a joke with him or poke fun at him because they knew he could crack and poke right back. And, boy, could he play ball. All three Henley boys were fast and strong—traits that were like currency in their sports-mad neighborhood—and all three had exceptional college football careers ahead of them, but Darryl was the most gifted, the purest athlete, one of the rare few born to compete with his body. A number of famous champions throughout history have had their first competitive fires stoked by older siblings, perhaps the most notable being Michael Jordan, whose older brother Larry bullied him in their one-on-one basketball games until Michael became both tall and famously averse to losing. Michael had been considered the laziest of the five Jordan kids; so it was with Darryl Henley. He excelled without trying. By age seven, he was the best football player in the Arcadia youth league, where his father had sent him, two towns away, so he could get the best coaching and equipment possible. That same year, Darryl's older brother, Thomas, was cut from his Pop Warner team. Thomas was no slouch on the football field, as he would soon prove, but that day left him humiliated.

Darryl wasn't sure how *he* felt about Thomas's failure. He'd always looked up to his older brother, but his hero worship back then was reserved for only one kid.

Willie McGowan, who would later have a dramatic impact on Darryl's life, was three years older than Darryl and the undisputed star of T.H.'s Pop Warner team, for which Darryl served as water boy. A swift running back, Willie wore number 45 on his jersey, and white athletic tape wrapped just so around his wrists and cleats. Darryl mimicked this "spatted" look in his own pee-wee games and copied Willie's running style as well, leading his team to the championship game against Pasadena, the best pee-wee team in the valley. Just before the opening kick, Darryl's mother came out of the stands and reminded him of what he'd learned in *The Power of Positive Thinking*—the Norman Vincent Peale book she made her sons read as soon as they were able. After repeating Peale's mantra with his mother — "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" — Darryl scored a touchdown on the first play from scrimmage and added three more before the game was over. An opposing coach came up to him afterward and said something that Henley would never forget: "Man, you are *good*."

Willie McGowan's approval meant more to Darryl than that of any adult, though. Decades later Henley would remember spending time with Willie after practice, learning his feints and cuts and stutter-steps. Darryl felt on top of the world, hanging with the neighborhood's golden boy, the young man everyone in town smiled upon, knowing that if Willie kept his priorities straight he'd end up in the pros. "Willie was a good kid back then," Darryl's father recalled. "His mother was an upstanding woman. . . . Everything with Willie back then was 'Yes sir' and 'No sir.'"

The Henleys' dual incomes and penny-pinching allowed them to buy a home in Ontario, a nearby community that—with its neighbor Upland—was known as "The Model Colony." It was a step up in real estate terms and in the quality of its high school football programs, which began paying close attention to Thomas

and Darryl Henley, in that order. Thomas had always been bigger and stronger than Darryl, but he'd also been a step slower. That changed around 1979, when Thomas suddenly became the Henley everyone expected to see playing on tv someday. And just as suddenly, Darryl became "just a little tiny thing," recalled Chris Hale. As for all the high school recruiters, T.H. told them to save their time. He'd already decided that Thomas was going to Damien High, an elite parochial boys' school in nearby Laverne.

With its distinction of having sent more boys to West Point than any school west of the Mississippi, Damien was a place that emphasized life after graduation, in stark contrast to the public schools just down the street, where a diploma often meant that school was out for life. Thomas Henley III aced Damien's challenging entrance requirements and never looked back, embarking on a quest for academic achievement that would earn him degrees from the West Coast's finest universities. "Thomas caught on early," his father said. "He knew what we wanted out of life for him at an early age." "And everybody expected Darryl to be the same way," their mother added.

Instead, Darryl seemed committed to becoming Thomas's opposite. Darryl was always polite, and he had no trouble with the law, but he owned a rebellious streak. At the end of his eighth-grade year, Darryl decided he wanted to go to Chaffey High, a minority-heavy public school where most of his church friends went. Surprisingly, his father agreed to it. It was the happiest moment of Darryl's young life until his father added: "But you can't compete against Thomas." It was a simple condition, but a harsh one: when Chaffey played Damien, Darryl would have to sit out. And so, very much against his will, Darryl became a Damien Spartan, too.

The rivalry between the two brothers would deepen over the years as Thomas and Darryl competed to become the first of T.H.'s sons to succeed. More often than not, Darryl finished second in this race. "Darryl was a good athlete," said Willie Abston, one of Darryl's best friends at both Damien and UCLA, "but Thomas was

a *great* athlete. Darryl was a good student, but Thomas was a *great* student. Thomas was always more, and Eric was looked at as the next Thomas, not the next Darryl.”

The only thing Darryl had that Thomas did not have was a natural strut in his walk, a hipness that Thomas would have looked goofy trying to pull off. Darryl may not have been smarter than Thomas, or even a better athlete, but he was by all accounts cooler.

T.H. was working as a supervisor at Lockheed Aircraft by this time, and Dot Henley was a grade-school teacher. Their combined salaries were not enough to bankroll two private tuitions, so Thomas and Darryl helped pay their way at Damien by working as campus groundskeepers during the summer. That fall, on the same field they had seeded and watered in summer, Thomas and Darryl unleashed a level of football talent that their small school opponents were ill-prepared to handle. In 1981 Thomas Henley became a football star, setting a career rushing record at Damien that stood for more than twenty years (until it was broken by college All-American and NFL player Ian Johnson). Protecting the football as securely as he guarded his perfect grade point average, number 25 rumbled up and down high school fields in the San Gabriel Valley in the autumns of 1981 and 1982 with a humility that belied his age. After each of the school-record twenty-nine touchdowns Thomas scored as a senior, the first teammate to greet him was a smaller kid who, fittingly, wore number 24, for Darryl always seemed one less, one back.

Thomas Henley III was captain of the football team, president of the student body, a 4.0 student, league champion in the triple jump, and was named the second-best Catholic school athlete in all of California.¹ Most important to his parents, however, Thomas was someone T.H. and Dot could point to, right across the dinner table, as the perfect example for Darryl and Eric to follow. Many of the college coaches who came to visit Thomas that fall winked at Darryl as they left the Henley home in Ontario. “See you next year,” they’d say, just as they’d done with the younger brothers of

other recruits. Except Darryl winked back and whispered to himself: “Damn right you will.”

He never claimed to be an angel. Darryl tried to steal a bike from outside Kmart when he was eleven. In high school, he became the first and only Henley son to come home drunk. It did not happen again. He tried to turn in a paper he had copied from a football buddy—an act of plagiarism that inflamed Damien’s headmaster, Father Travers, and resulted in an F on Darryl’s report card. Incensed by what he saw as over-punishment, T.H. drove Darryl the next morning to Ontario High School and enrolled him there as a transfer. As the story goes, Darryl, who had been groomed as Thomas’s replacement at running back for the Spartans, returned to Damien two days later, after Damien’s Father acquiesced to Darryl’s father.

Despite their promises, usc and Nebraska did not see Darryl next year. The consensus was that he was too small. But to everyone’s surprise, Tom Hayes, the defensive backs coach at UCLA, began driving to Damien twice a week to watch practice. Damien’s athletic director, an amiable bear of a man named Tom Carroll, couldn’t figure out why. Darryl was a good kid, but he was no Thomas. He was fast enough, but he needed rocks in his pockets to weigh 150. “What do you see in him?” Carroll asked Hayes on the sideline. “One of those big Pac Ten fullbacks will come around the corner and you’ll have to scoop Darryl up with a damn shovel.”

“No, no, no,” replied Hayes. “We’re not recruiting him so he can take on fullbacks. We want him to cover all these track stars in our conference who are dressed up as wideouts. This kid has the quickest feet of anyone we’re looking at this year. And from what I’ve seen, he’s not afraid of anything.”