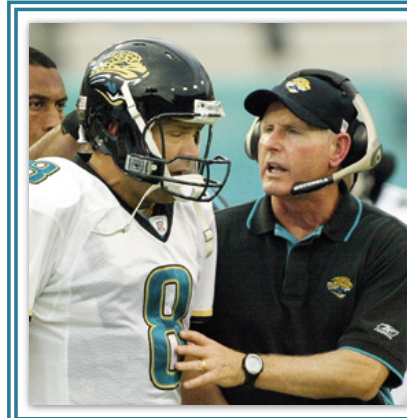


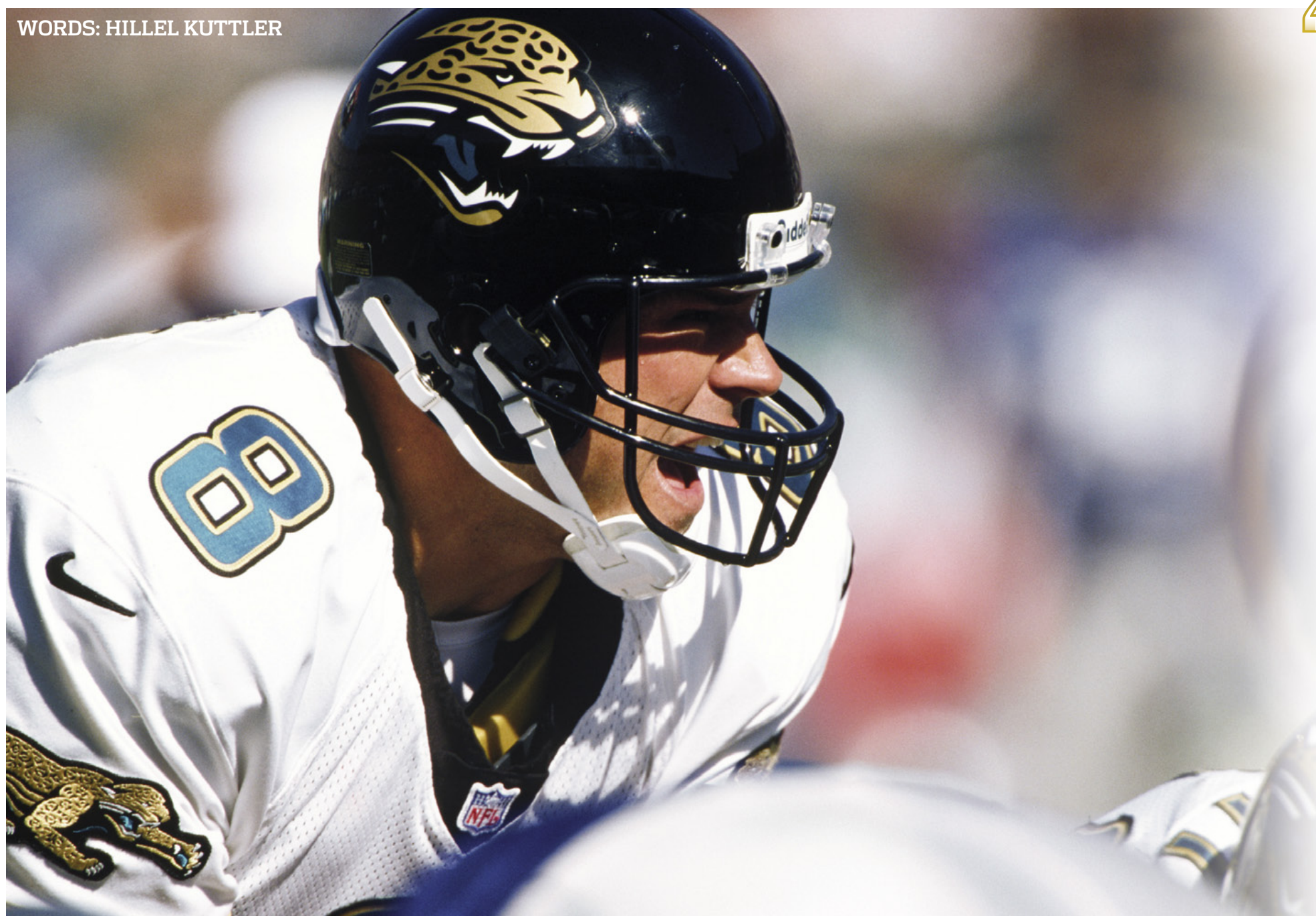
# JAGUARS LEGEND

# MARK BRUNELL



***“We certainly weren’t the most talented team in 1996. But we had good chemistry, we worked well together”***

WORDS: HILLEL KUTTLE



**S**o you’re the one person who bought it.” Mark Brunell wryly tells a caller whose son owns an action figure of the left-handed ex-quarterback.

Brunell, who played nearly two decades in the NFL before retiring in 2011, was selling himself – and his likeness wearing the Jacksonville Jaguars’ teal uniform jersey – short.

After all, Brunell is perhaps the player most fans will reflexively associate with the northern Florida franchise – the guy who was selected for three Pro Bowls (winning Most Valuable Player honours in the 1997 game), led the NFL with 4,367 passing yards in 1996 and won 41 of the 58 games he started in the Jaguars’ heyday from 1996 to 1999.

Sandwiching that four-year stretch were Jacksonville’s to-date only trips to the AFC Championship game. Both ended in losses, just one step from the Super Bowl, but the Jaguars’ getting that far in only their second and fifth seasons remains remarkable.

“It was a good, exciting time. We came together quickly. Our team was built with a good first Draft, a lot of free agents, some trades,” says Brunell, who was dealt to the expansion Jaguars from the Green Bay Packers, the team that drafted him in the fifth round in 1993 after he helped the University of Washington to two Rose Bowl victories.

“We certainly weren’t the most talented team in 1996,” Brunell continues, speaking of the Jaguars’ 9-7 regular-season record. “But we had good chemistry, we worked well together, the guys played hard and we kind of got a little momentum near the end [of the season], which is what you need.”

In the twilight of his career, as a backup to Drew Brees, Brunell celebrated the ultimate victory, when the New Orleans Saints defeated the Chicago Bears 31-17 in Super Bowl XLIV.

“It was a dream come true,” Brunell says of New Orleans’ title, a season in which he played primarily as a holder for

field goal attempts. “Every NFL player wants to be part of a championship team.”

Brunell had visited London his previous season with the Saints, who bested the San Diego Chargers, 37-32. He and his wife toured the city once previously, an experience Brunell, who’d majored in history, said he greatly enjoyed – particularly seeing the Tower of London. Brunell also participated in an NFL delegation that in 2012 visited London, Manchester, Leeds and Edinburgh.

“There were a lot of fans showing up in different NFL jerseys. It was well received, it was a lot of fun and it was a great experience for me to see different parts of the UK. It’s something I’d love to do again,” he says of the last of his three visits.

He’s proud of the Jaguars now playing at Wembley for a second consecutive season, the first time an NFL team has done that since the International Series began in 2007.

Brunell stays connected to the league through his work as a studio analyst for ESPN, where he comments on transactions, free-agent signings, the Draft and, from November through the Super Bowl, the games themselves.

Until early November, Brunell keeps busy directing the football program at the Episcopal School of Jacksonville, where he also serves as head coach. The team’s starting quarterback? Brunell’s son, Joseph.

“I’m really enjoying it,” Brunell says of the work, which includes overseeing spring-time exhibition games, offseason conditioning and 10 competitive games in autumn.

“I am in charge of everything from kneepads to scheduling games. How far I’ve come in my career – ordering kneepads for kids who lose them,” he says, laughing. “Coaching is a lot less painful than playing... I’m the one with the whistle in my mouth.”