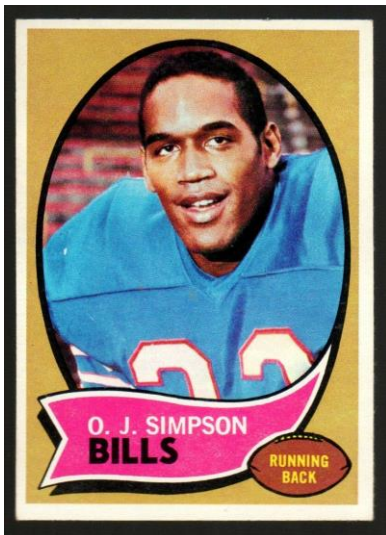


O.J. Simpson

This article is written by Budd Bailey

O.J. Simpson always was able to change his direction in a split second. On the football field, he was quick enough to leave defenders grasping at air as they failed to tackle one of the transcendent running backs in the history of football.

That quality helped Simpson reach the Pro Football Hall of Fame. But his life after football also changed direction without warning, shocking the entire country in the process. Few public figures have ever been so thoroughly transformed from beloved to toxic in such a short time.



The change can be summed up in a pair of phrases, and they will be used in association with Simpson forever. One is “2,003 yards,” as he became the first NFL player to run for more than 2,000 yards in a season. The other is “not guilty,” the verdict in his murder trial.

You could write a long book on the life and times of O.J. Simpson; this is a very condensed version, relatively speaking. This website is devoted to football research, so football has to be the priority of an analysis of Simpson’s life here. However, it is impossible to tell Simpson’s story without briefly examining his life after football and how that affected his legacy.



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“Why should we celebrate an abuser? Why should we glorify him? Why should we celebrate, for his athletic feats, someone who is so odious?” University of Southern California law professor David Armour said to writer Jason Reid of *The Undeclared*. “This is why: Because every Fourth of July and Presidents Day we still celebrate a cast of slave owners. We make distinctions about people and the things they do in their lives.”

Orenthal James Simpson was born on July 9, 1947. The first name was given to young Simpson either because an aunt liked a French actor by the name, or it was the name of a church organist the aunt knew. He was the son of Jimmy Lee and Eunice, a bank custodian, and a hospital administrator. After the two split, Jimmy Simpson later worked as a drag queen, announced he was gay and eventually died of AIDS. Eunice raised O.J. and three other children in the Potrero Hill section of San Francisco.

Simpson must have seemed like an unlikely candidate to be a running back as a toddler. He developed rickets, which left him pigeon-toed and bowlegged. The other kids, naturally, capitalized on this by calling him “Pencil Pens.” Around the age of 13, Simpson and friend Al Cowlings joined a San Francisco gang called “the Persian Warriors.” O.J. was ordered to spend time at the San Francisco Youth Guidance Center. Between poor grades and bad habits, Simpson appeared to be headed for trouble in spite of starting to show great athletic potential at a young age. He was suspended from school several times, and had a fight practically every weekend. Baseball great Willie Mays of the Giants agreed to spend an afternoon with him.

"I had an entirely different outlook on everything after that day with Willie Mays," Simpson told *Sports Illustrated*. "I can't really say that it turned my life around, just like that. I honestly believe that I would have made it on my own. But that time with Mays made me realize that my dream was possible. Willie wasn't superhuman. He was an ordinary person, so there was a chance for me."

Simpson and Cowlings both attended Galileo High School in San Francisco. There were some hiccups – junior varsity coach Jack McBride found Simpson shooting dice in the boys’ room on the first day of football practice. O.J. started at tackle for the Lions football team, but was moved to running back. Simpson also ran track and played baseball. As you might have guessed, he was really, really good – an All-City choice and inductee into the school’s Hall of Fame. That was enough to attract some interest from college recruiters to take a look at Simpson, but they went the other way when they saw Simpson’s grades.

O.J. headed to City College of San Francisco and played football there. He was even better at the junior college level, playing running back and defensive back. Simpson



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scored 26 touchdowns and averaged almost 10 yards per carry as a freshman, and he was an All-American pick as a sophomore.

Simpson made a couple of big decisions in 1967, choosing a wife and a college. As for the former, Marguerite Whitley had been dating Cowlings in high school when she got to know Simpson. As for the college, O.J. didn't need much of a sales pitch from the University of Southern California to go there. He had always wanted to be a Trojan.

It took no time for O.J. to feel comfortable in major college football. He ran 291 times for 1,543 yards as a junior, leading the NCAA in both categories. Simpson scored 13 touchdowns. He capped the regular season on Nov. 18, 1967 against arch-rival UCLA. The Bruins were No. 1 in the country while USC was No. 4. The Trojans were trailing in the fourth quarter, and Simpson had been battered by the UCLA defense throughout the day when his number was called again. "I was so tired," he said. "I couldn't even run a pass pattern. I almost went into motion because I wanted to say, 'No.' I thought, 'Not only am I tired, but it's a horrible call.' But by then, the ball was snapped, and it was all instinct."

Simpson took off on a spectacular, winding 64-yard run for a touchdown to give USC a 21-20 win and a trip to the Rose Bowl as conference champions. It's considered one of the great plays in Southern California's history, if not college football history. "It's a 5-yard run," USC Coach John McKay said. "But he turned it into something else. It's one of the greatest runs I've ever seen."

UCLA's Gary Beban won the Heisman Trophy in 1967 as the nation's best player. Simpson finished second, although there was a feeling that O.J. was simply waiting his turn to capture the trophy. In the meantime, the Trojans beat Indiana, 14-3, in the Rose Bowl to capture the national championship.

Simpson took his numbers to a new level as a senior in 1968. He carried the ball 383 times for a remarkable 1,880 yards that season and scored 23 touchdowns. He led the nation in carries, rushing yardage, touchdowns, and points. When asked about Simpson's workload, McKay responded with an answer that became famous: "He doesn't belong to a union. Anyway, the ball doesn't weigh that much."

The Trojans jumped off to a 9-0 start, including wins over four ranked teams. But they stumbled a bit in their closing game, a 21-21 tie with ninth-ranked Notre Dame. Still, USC had earned the PAC-8 championship and another trip to the Rose Bowl, where No. 1 Ohio State was waiting. The Buckeyes spotted the Trojans 10 early points, including an 80-yard run by Simpson (part of a 171-yard day), and then took control in recording a 27-16 win and a national championship.



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All pro football teams were scouting Southern California that fall, but a handful of teams had a particularly strong interest. They were the ones who had a chance at the first overall pick, which meant they could take Simpson in the AFL-NFL draft in January. The Eagles were the early “leaders” for the worst record in the league. After 11 games, Philadelphia was 0-11. Buffalo was 1-9-1, Atlanta was 2-9, and Pittsburgh was 2-8-1. The fans of the Eagles were ready to welcome Simpson to the City of Brotherly Love.

Then, something unexpected happened: The Eagles got hot. They blanked the Lions, 12-0, on four Sam Baker field goals. Even so, one more loss would wrap up the top pick. But Philadelphia also beat New Orleans, scoring the final 16 points. That put Buffalo in the driver’s seat for O.J., and they did what was necessary – losing to the Oilers, 35-6, to cap a season-ending eight-game losing streak. The Bills finished 1-12-1, a half-game worse than Atlanta and Philadelphia (2-12).

That’s how the most glamorous player in college football became a member of the Bills. Many adjectives could be used about Buffalo’s football team at that point, but glamorous was not one of them. Buffalo’s only win in 1968 had come against the Jets when Joe Namath threw five interceptions, and three of them were run back for touchdowns. The Bills played in War Memorial Stadium, a building that dated back to 1937 and hadn’t aged well. About the only sign of hope for 1969, besides Simpson, was that the team had hired former Oakland Raiders coach John Rauch for the same job with the Bills.

With that sort of negotiating situation, it didn’t figure to be easy to sign Simpson to his first contract. The Bills offered O.J. a five-year, \$250,000 contract. Simpson responded with a demand for a five-year, \$650,000 contract, plus a \$500,000 loan. O.J. asked for a trade; owner Ralph Wilson said no one wanted to pay him that sort of money.

“Ralph Wilson said something during my first negotiation with him,” Simpson recalled later to Tim Graham of *The Buffalo News*. “My agent, Chuck Barnes, told him, ‘O.J. can be the guy to turn this franchise around and fill the stadium and make them a championship team. Ralph’s reply was, ‘What good would a championship do me? All that means is everybody wants a raise.’ Me, being a 22-year-old kid, I had never heard anybody in athletics talk that way. That’s when it dawned on me this guy is all about the business and not about the game.”

Finally, on August 9, the two sides reached a deal – one report at the time said it was four years for \$215,000, as in less than \$55,000 per year. That was a big salary for a rookie back then, even if Simpson already had signed an endorsement deal with General Motors for three years for a total of \$250,000. About 2,500 people greeted Simpson at the airport



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when he arrived two days later. O.J was given uniform number 36 at first, but received his familiar #32 (worn at USC) once Gary McDermott was cut.

The Bills opened with the defending champion Jets on Sept. 14. They were tied, 19-19, in the fourth quarter, only to lose by a score of 33-19. It was only one game, but Simpson probably figured out things had become much different for him. He only had 10 carries for 35 yards, a quarter's worth of work at USC. Buffalo used three different quarterbacks in the game, and had a rookie fullback in Bill Enyart.

That game was rather typical of the season. Simpson ran for 697 yards, with a longest run of 32 yards. The Bills went 4-10 – better than 1968, but not much better.

Rauch was proving to be an awkward fit at best. He wanted Simpson to be more of an all-around back than simply a runner; the word “decoy” is often attributed to Rauch in that sense. “We knew he had a lot of ability, but the way Rauch was using him was weird,” Paul Costa said. “There was no rhyme or reason to it. You’ve got a rookie running back, and he’s got a lot to learn, and you’ve got a coach that’s insecure, so they didn’t really hit it off. ... He didn’t use him right – decoy, wide receiver, and all that.”

Simpson was left feeling confused, and the rest of the team wasn’t happy about their new boss either. “After the first couple of weeks, it was like a bad dream,” cornerback Booker Edgeron said. “He was the worst coach that I ever had. The guy was terrible.”

Things with the Bills weren’t much better in 1970, as the team fell to 3-10-1. Simpson only played in eight games due to a knee injury, finishing with 488 yards rushing. His potential only was displayed on kickoff returns, where he averaged an astounding 47.6 yards per return. After the season, Simpson was rather fed up with the game. “The last two years I was playing football just for the money,” he said in preseason in 1971. “I couldn’t wait for the season to end so I could get out of Buffalo and go back home. Well, man, I finally realized that was no way to be. I had to get my mind right and go to work.”

Simpson’s attitude received a boost when Rauch’s time in Buffalo ended in an odd way. The coach criticized a couple of ex-Bills on a television show, and Wilson was ready to issue a statement defending the players. “If you do that, go get yourself another coach,” Rauch said, and Wilson took him up on his offer. Harvey Johnson took over as interim coach, but it didn’t help. The Bills were back in the league’s basement that year with a 1-13 record. After a 43-0 loss to Baltimore, Johnson said about his Bills that he’d “never seen a team so inept.” Simpson ran for 742 yards for the year, but it was obvious he needed a better team around him to thrive. O.J.’s best work often came when he turned what looked like a five-yard loss into a one-yard gain.



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Something had to happen for Simpson to live up to his vast potential. Something did happen. Lou Saban arrived.

Saban had coached the Bills to the best times in their history at that point – the two AFL championships in 1964 and 1965. He had left the Denver Broncos earlier in the 1971 season, and was available when Wilson talked to him. The two quickly reached an agreement. Saban was smart enough to realize that he had a lot of work ahead when it came to rebuilding the roster, but he also knew that he had a huge underutilized asset in Simpson. “We have a great runner, a game-breaker who is a big-play athlete. I intend to use him,” Saban said.

The Bills took Reggie McKenzie of Michigan with their second-round draft choice, and he needed no time to move into the starting lineup. The rest of the line already had a decent pair of tackles in Donnie Green and Dave Foley. Saban gave the ball to Simpson a lot in 1972 – 292 times. O.J. responded with 1,251 yards, a personal best for him. It was good enough to lead the NFL in rushing. The Bills were 4-9-1 that year, and followers of the team had hope about the future for the first time in years. “I don’t think he’s even scratched the surface yet,” Saban said about Simpson.

Early in 1973, the Bills had two first-round draft choices. They used the first on Paul Seymour, a tackle from Michigan who could catch the ball when necessary and therefore found a home at tight end in Buffalo. Then the Bills picked Joe DeLamielleure, a guard from Michigan State, who was a perfect fit. Bruce Jarvis and Mike Montler were the new centers, and suddenly the Bills had a fully rebuilt offensive line. Simpson looked around at training camp and told roommate Reggie McKenzie that he might run for 1,700 yards in 1973. McKenzie said, “Let’s shoot for two grand and really set the world on fire.”

The offense made a big statement in the very first quarter of the very first game - Simpson ran 80 yards for a touchdown against the New England Patriots. He finished the day with an NFL record 250 yards on 29 carries, while fullback Larry Watkins added 105 yards. Patriots linebacker Edgar Chandler said, “O.J. had more yardage than Secretariat (a horse that won the Triple Crown that summer).” Buffalo won, 31-13, and a jolt of electricity went through the entire organization and fan base.

The numbers kept coming for Simpson, whose nickname had become “Juice” (short for “Orange Juice” as in O.J.) and the offensive line had become known as the “Electric Company” (“They turn on the Juice”). He picked up 171 yards against the Eagles, 166 against the Colts, 157 against the Chiefs on Monday night football (passing the 1,000-yard mark in seven games), and 219 yards in the rematch with the Patriots. He only had fewer than 100 yards in three games.



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“I think to this day that we were struck by the success we had,” Jarvis said. “The Bills had been a losing franchise. Things had not been going well. One thing that people forget is that we had a new stadium that year. We had over 80,000 fans coming each week to watch us. Because of that we were enjoying a tremendous upsurge in fan appreciation. I believe that really made a difference for us.”

The Bills were 8-5 at that point, but needed some help to reach the playoffs. Still, the focus of most for the season’s final day was on Simpson. The NFL record for rushing yards in a season was held by Jim Brown of the Browns at 1,863. O.J. only needed 61 yards to top that number, and it seemed like a foregone conclusion at this point. The question became, could Simpson reach the magical number of 2,000 yards?

The Bills gave him every chance to do it in the final game of the season on a miserable day at Shea Stadium in New York. Rookie quarterback Joe Ferguson threw only five passes all day. On O.J.’s 34th and last carry with about six minutes left, he ran off left tackle for seven yards. That put him at 200 yards for the day, and 2,003 for the season. He left the game at that point with nothing left to prove. Simpson had reached the mountaintop, ranking as the premier superstar in all of American sports.

"From the moment that happened, I knew I was a part of football forever," Simpson told Graham of The Buffalo News later. "I was the first guy to gain 2,000 yards and nobody could beat that, like being the first to hit 60 home runs or run the four-minute mile."

At this writing, Simpson remains the only person to run for 2,000 yards in a 14-game season. He averaged 143.1 yards per game – 10 yards more than any other player in NFL history. All of this came when the other team absolutely, positively knew that the Bills were going to run the ball most of the time.

The Bills beat the Jets, 34-14, but missed the playoffs. After the game, Simpson brought his offensive line into a news conference. “I want to introduce the cats who did the job all year,” Simpson said. He told reporters that he’d keep playing “until all these guys get old so they won’t be able to help someone else break my records.”

O.J. spent the winter accepting every conceivable award and signing several endorsement deals with major companies. He was a crossover star, a man with an outgoing, friendly personality who could reach whites and blacks at the same time. Everyone loved O.J. Simpson then.

The 1973 season was a tough act to follow, but 1974 was even better for the Bills as a team. Simpson suffered an injury and missed part of the opener against the Raiders. Ferguson led the Bills to two touchdowns in the final minutes to produce a 21-20 win in



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one of the most exciting Monday Night Football games in history. Buffalo started the season 7-1 and looked like one of the best teams in the league. From there the Bills slumped to 2-4 to finish 9-5. The difference between 1973 and 1974 was that Buffalo reached the playoffs. Simpson “slumped” to 1,125 yards but still was a first-team All-Pro and Pro Bowler.

The assignment for the Bills was a tall one – beat a Steelers team that was about to become one of the great dynasties in NFL history, and do it in Pittsburgh. The Steelers scored 26 straight points in the second quarter to blow the game open and won by a score of 32-14. Simpson ran for only 49 yards on 15 carries in the only playoff game of his career.

Simpson continued to be a presence off the field in the mid-1970s. O.J. did some television work for ABC and popped up in some movies. However, he might be remembered best for his television ads that started in 1975 as he ran through airports for Hertz Rent-a-Car. They represented something of a breakthrough in terms of the marketing of an African American athlete.

"O.J. was the first to demonstrate that white folks would buy stuff based on a black endorsement - as long as it was not pressed as a black endorsement," said Harry Edwards, professor emeritus of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, said. "The way they did that was to remove black people totally from any scene that O.J. was in. ... They bought the notion that you could erase the black character, the culture. This is what made O.J. marketable."

Switching back to football, O.J. and the Bills got a measure of revenge early in the 1975 season, when the Bills returned to Pittsburgh. Simpson said he always wanted to make a play that felt like a track sprint, and he did so by going 88 yards for a touchdown against the famous “Steel Curtain” defense. Simpson ran for 227 yards in a 30-21 win. Buffalo started the season 4-0 but couldn’t maintain it, in part due to injuries, and fell to 8-6 for the year. Simpson said later that 1975 was his best all-around season, with 1,817 yards rushing (tops in the league), 28 catches for 426 yards, and 23 touchdowns. The team’s offense was unstoppable, but the defense gave up a record 3,080 passing yards in a 14-game schedule.

Simpson began 1976 with a contract holdout and a trade request, and the team looked into deals with such teams as the Rams and Raiders. He eventually received something of a bribe to stay - a then-gigantic contract of more than \$700,000 per year. The Bills essentially fell apart in 1976, with Saban resigning after the team went 2-3. Jim Ringo took over the team, and the Bills went 0-9 from there. Ferguson missed the second half of the season with an injury, leaving Simpson’s legs as the team’s remaining offensive



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threat. He tried his best, memorably gaining a record 273 yards on Thanksgiving Day in a loss to the Lions. Simpson finished with 1,503 yards in his last great season. Ringo was brought back in 1977, but the situation in Buffalo continued to deteriorate. Simpson missed half the season with an injury, and the Bills staggered to a 3-11 record before thousands of empty seats at home games. It seemed quite obvious that O.J.'s time in Buffalo was about up.

Sure enough, Chuck Knox came in from the Rams as the Bills' new head coach, and one of his first actions was to find out what he could get on the trade market for Simpson. The San Francisco 49ers were willing to give up five draft picks (a 1, two 2s, a 3 and a 4) for Simpson on March 24. O.J. arrived in San Francisco for the news conference and said, "Home at last, thank God almighty, I'm home at last."

The Bills did fine on the deal. The draft choices restocked the roster, and the team won the AFC East title in 1980. The improvement even came without the help of the first-round draft choice that came in the Simpson trade. Tom Cousineau was the first overall pick in 1979, but signed with the Canadian Football League instead. Eventually, the Ohio State linebacker was traded to Cleveland for another package of draft choices – one of which was used to select Jim Kelly. The quarterback was the foundation for the Bills' run of participating in four straight Super Bowls in the early 1990s.

San Francisco didn't fare as well. Simpson was a 31-year-old running back with a lot of miles on his body, and couldn't help the 49ers escape from the basement. San Francisco went 2-14 under two coaches in 1978, and 2-14 for new coach Bill Walsh in 1979. Simpson missed some playing time because of injuries in both years, and couldn't break 600 yards rushing in either season. He bowed out gracefully after the 1979 season, realizing his time had gone. His final play was a 10-yard run for a first down against Atlanta.

"I'd do it again in a minute," 49ers owner Edward DeBartolo said about acquiring Simpson two years earlier. "I have the utmost and highest respect for him, more than for anyone I've ever met. He's giving us everything he has—his guidance, his leadership. He's going out like a man."

Simpson exited with 11,236 career yards rushing with a Most Valuable Player trophy and four seasonal rushing titles. His spot on the list of the great running backs in history was secure. Sportswriter Larry Felser's only words when introducing Simpson's name for discussion for as a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame were "I give you O.J. Simpson." He went in on the first ballot in 1985, and Saban introduced him. After retirement, Simpson divorced his first wife and married Nicole Brown; they had two children. Simpson did some work as a commentator on ABC's "Monday Night Football"



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and on NBC's NFL coverage. O.J. appeared in movies such as "The Naked Gun" trilogy and television shows.

He appeared to be ready to spend the rest of his life being O.J. Simpson for a living, someone who could make others happy merely by showing up. For most former football players, our story would be more or less over, right here.

"I have an aversion to being referred to as an ex-football player," Simpson told Sports Illustrated in its November 2, 1992 issue. "I'm O.J., which means I'm somebody today and the highlight of my life isn't behind me."

Then came June 12, 1994.

Nicole, now Simpson's ex-wife, and friend Ron Goldman were stabbed to death outside of her home in Los Angeles. In less than a week, authorities were ready to charge Simpson with the double murder. It was shocking to just about everyone, including Felsler. "I've never seen anything close to a dark side of him," he said at the time. "We all know guys who wouldn't say hello for anything under \$10,000. Somebody would walk up and ask him to appear at a kid's birthday party - and he'd do it for free."

O.J. and old friend Cowlings jumped in a rented white Bronco on June 17 and became the subject of a surrealistic slow-motion chase on the freeways of Los Angeles. The entire nation (95 million) watched the chase on television that night, anxious to see what might happen next. Domino's Pizza set a company record for orders that night. Certainly, the possibility existed that Simpson might try something drastic like committing suicide. Instead, he went to his old house and surrendered to the police.

His lengthy (267 days) trial was nationally televised as well, and much of America became very familiar with the circumstances, the attorneys and even the judge, Lance Ito. The phrase "Trial of the Century" was used to describe the case, and reality may have matched the hype this time. Disturbing details about Simpson came out during the trial, such as the fact that police had been called to the house eight times during his second marriage because of domestic disputes. One of the viewers was ex-teammate DeLamielleure, who wrote in his book, "How could the guy I knew and admired be the same man who stood there in court trying to tug on that leather glove?"

On October 3, 1995, the jury announced its verdict: not guilty. The reaction revealed a huge rift in American society. Many whites thought the evidence clearly showed that Simpson had committed the murders and were outraged at the decision. Many African Americans had seen a criminal justice system work against them – often unfairly over the years – and reacted with delight that one of their own had been found innocent against all



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odds. The same societal forces were apparent in a different way 25 years later, when George Floyd died while in police custody in Minneapolis – sparking protests and riots across the country.

Simpson was a free man, but still had to go through a civil case. He lost that verdict in 1997, and was ordered to pay \$33.5 million to the families of the victims. About 10 years later, Simpson returned to the headlines with another arrest. He and some associates went into a Las Vegas hotel room and took some memorabilia that Simpson claimed belonged to him. He was charged with armed robbery and kidnapping, and convicted on all counts on October 3, 2008. Simpson was sentenced to a minimum of nine years in prison, and was released in 2017.

By 2020, Simpson had settled into a new life, albeit one in which many think of him as being close to radioactive. He was living quietly in Las Vegas. Simpson’s most visible public action might be on Twitter, where he has close to 1 million followers. O.J. does memorabilia signings, and is said to be playing plenty of golf. Simpson has said he worries about the degenerative brain disease known as CTE, which certainly has received much more attention in recent years than it did, say, 25 years ago.

He has tried to sidestep the issue that will be part of his legacy forever. Call it one last change of direction.

“We don’t need to go back and relive the worst day of our lives,” he said about his family in 2019, adding that it is a subject that “I will never revisit again. My family and I have moved on to what we call the ‘no negative zone.’ We focus on the positives.”



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