

Photo courtesy Getty Images

The Mane Man

*Steelers safety
Troy Polamalu
reflects on
fatherhood, faith
and football.*

On this sunny So-Cal day, Pittsburgh Steelers safety Troy Polamalu graciously postpones his morning workout to ruminate about not just football—but life and what’s most important in it. I narrow our chat to three topics.

Football is a given: How was this year’s Super Bowl experience versus XL? Tomlin versus Cowher? Goals for the coming season?

Fatherhood is new in Polamalu’s life since the birth of his son, Paisios, named after a beloved contemporary Greek Orthodox monastic, Elder Paisios, on Oct. 31, 2008. Has daddy-dom been life-changing? Will he encourage his son to play professional sports? How’s that beautiful new mom doing?

And last but not least: Faith. In order to properly meet Polamalu where he lives, this is the requisite, the grounding force that gives meaning to everything he does, every play he makes. Polamalu’s evident gratitude to the one who made him is marbled throughout our talk—from his training regime to his travels to Mount Athos a monastic site in Greece, a place he calls “heaven on earth.”

While he has a reputation for being one of the NFL’s fiercest players, Polamalu would prefer

BY GINA MAZZA ✪ PHOTOS BY MIKE FABUS ✪ PHOTO AT LEFT COURTESY GETTY IMAGES

SUPER BOWL



Two days before Super Bowl XLIII, Polamalu stretches during practice at Tampa's Raymond James Stadium. Photo by Mike Fabus, Pittsburgh Steelers

"Tasmanian angel" over "Tasmanian devil" because his ball game is about glorifying God. "Football is part of my life but not life itself," he says. "Football doesn't define me. It's what I do [and] how I carry out my faith."

Whether shooting a Coke Zero commercial or running up the sand hills on Manhattan Beach to train—which he's probably off to do after this interview—Polamalu, 27, is refreshingly modest and introspective, choosing his words as precisely as he picks his spots on the gridiron. He's intense when the occasion calls for it, and reveals with ease the depth of his character while philosophizing about matters outside the huddle. At the same time, there's a lightness about Polamalu that gives you the impression that he's not taking himself or his high-profile lifestyle too seriously.

Even after the Steelers gave him the biggest contract in team history, more than \$30 million, extending him through 2011, nothing major has changed in the Polamalus' lives. They're still in the same house. He still trains with the same trainer. The number of commercial endorsements has increased as his popularity has soared, but Polamalu is cautious not to let this encroach on family time. The Polamalus live simply and quietly.

on *Fatherhood*...

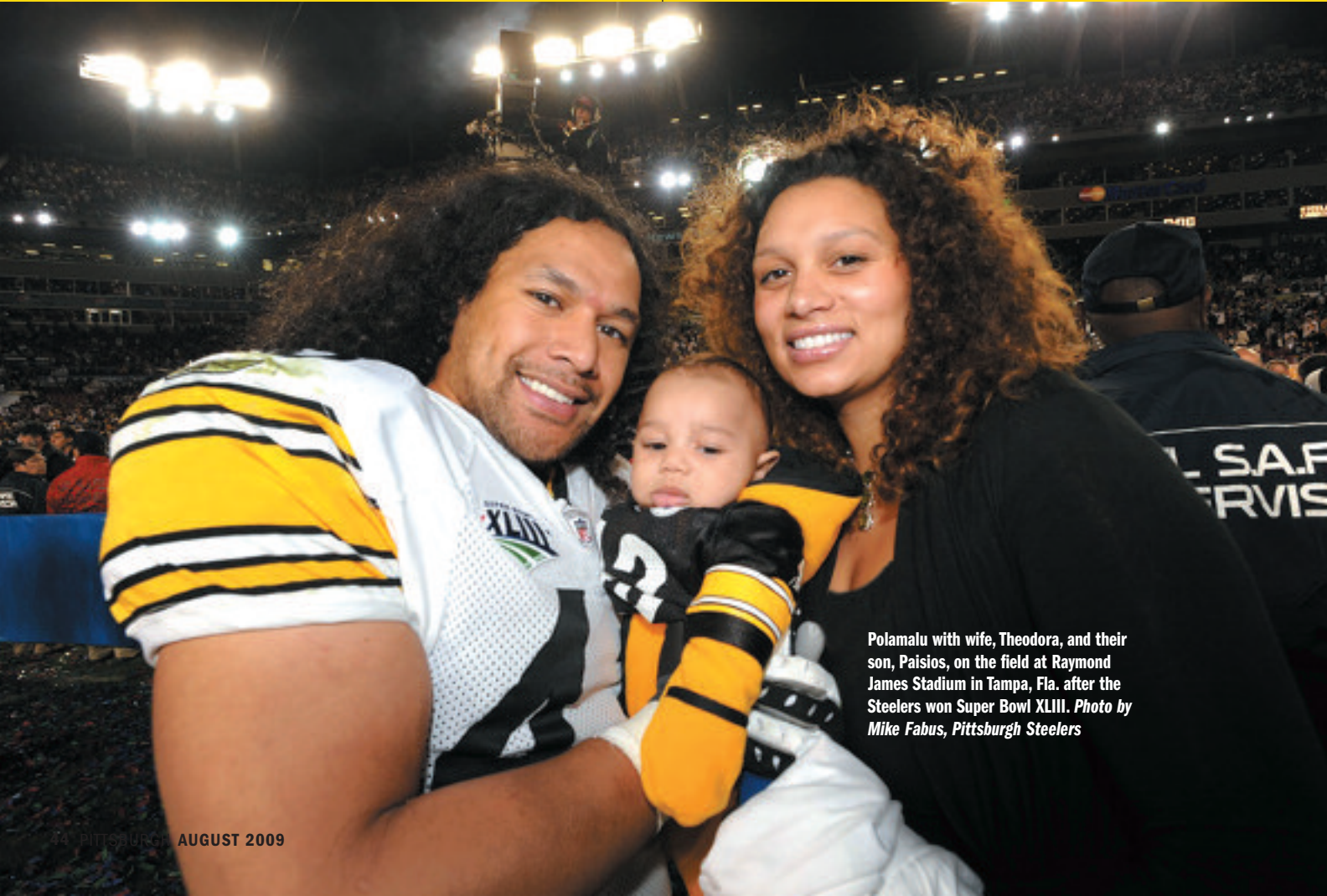
Has becoming a father changed your life?

I think becoming a parent encourages people to change their lives, but even before I was a father, I had an interest in bettering myself as a husband and as a person. The intensity is greater when you have a child, but I've always tried to be conscious of myself. In that sense, not much has changed how I view my life. Obviously there's another member of our family. The cool thing is that I'm able to bring my son when I work out, so training takes a lot longer!

Eight months old and already training?

Yeah, he sits and watches me. I think it's important for a child to see his parents work. One day, God willing, he'll be able to see a nice house, a nice car, good food—things that I didn't have growing up. It's important for him to realize that these things are obtained first of all through the grace of God but also through hard work.

I come from [a childhood] where I would put every condiment imaginable on my cheeseburger just so I



Polamalu with wife, Theodora, and their son, Paisios, on the field at Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, Fla. after the Steelers won Super Bowl XLIII. Photo by Mike Fabus, Pittsburgh Steelers

could feel more full. There's value in that struggle. Parents don't want their kids to experience that, but honestly I want my kid to experience that. I think parents have a tendency to give their kids everything they didn't have. In turn, they grow up lacking important qualities—like courage and perseverance. If you grow up with any type of wealth or anything that is just given to you, you [may] lack these qualities. But first of all, it's most important for Paisios to have a spiritual foundation.

You view your parental role as being a role model spiritually as well?

As a parent, I don't want to talk out of both sides of my mouth; I don't want to act a certain way and be another way. Not everybody has a material struggle, but everyone has a spiritual struggle. So with my son, it's important for him to first understand the spiritual struggle and, as a result of that, know how to [deal with] the physical struggles that he has in his life—whether it's dealing with not enough or too much of something.

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Troy on the sidelines in Pittsburgh against the New York Giants in October 2008.

Photo by Mike Fabus, Pittsburgh Steelers

So it's a matter of being an example?

I think talking is overrated. Anybody in the world can talk about doing anything. The hardest thing is to do it. It's important for my son to understand, for example, why we pray, why we go to church. It's important for him to grow up in an atmosphere of watching us do it, to understand that nothing is given to you in life. Everything must be worked at in order to be obtained—whether it's something material or it's salvation.

If Paisios had the calling to become an Orthodox priest and not a fullback, you'd be elated?

Of course. Obviously the [athletic] pedigree is there in my family and my wife's [and] people give me a hard time: "Troy, man, what if your son's not a good athlete, or he grows up and he's not big?" But I say, "How big do you need to be in order to be a priest?"

You're not saying, "I want my son to grow up and be an athlete."

No, not at all. I would like him to play sports because there are important lessons to be learned through sports—those qualities of perseverance, courage, hard work and ethics.

How is your wife, Theodora, adjusting to being a mom?

Oh, she's the best. It's given me a whole new perspective on my wife. Obviously, she's had a lot of responsibility in dealing with me and my inadequacies. But now, to watch her wake up every night and feed him . . . you know, as a mother, you kind of give up your whole life. Obviously, I'm able to still do what I do. I play football. I do things that surround football. I get to train.

Some dads are naturals and others don't know how to react once the baby is home. Do you feel comfortable in this role?

Oh yeah. I want to feed him, play with him, do all those fun dad things. We go swimming in the ocean. He's crawling, but he's not surfing yet.

Do you do diapers?

Oh, I hand him off to Grandma for that.

You're the youngest of five, right?

Yes, I am. In my own social experience with families, it's the youngest child who is always the most outgoing, the most athletic. I think it's because the parents don't raise the youngest child—God raises the youngest child. With the first child, it's like, "OK, he has to eat only organic

food; he has to read only these authors; he's got to study all the time." Parents put everything they want for their children onto that first child. In turn, with the youngest, parents are more likely to say, "Whatever happens, happens." Theodora and I are trying to be conscious that we don't instill our own agenda on our child, but allow God to work his grace on him."

on Faith...

How would you define the spiritual struggle you referred to earlier?

It's the struggle of good and evil, and with that comes the struggle with greed, jealousy, materialism, sexual morality, pride—struggles we face every day, in every second of the day.

In the past few years, you formally joined the Greek Orthodox church. Where do you worship?

My wife and I go often to a Greek Orthodox monastery in Saxonburg, a monastery in Arizona and several parishes in Pittsburgh. We like the monastery because it's most serene there, and we can talk to the monastics. To see their daily struggles really fascinates me.

What intrigues you about the monastic life?

The monks take salvation seriously in every facet of their lives. This is a model for me as a Christian and for my family on how to live our lives. The struggle between good and evil is very materialized with the monks. It's something they grasp daily. When you sit down with them, so much peace and love exudes from them.

There's an amazing monk who lives in Florence, Arizona—Abbot Ephraim, my spiritual father. He's the epitome of Mount Athos in Greece brought to America. For 1,500 years, this place has been devoted solely to Christian spirituality. It's heaven on earth.

What's the most important thing you've learned from him so far?

That you cannot have an experience of God without humility.

on Football...

Let's talk about your summer training schedule. The California vibe is so different from Pittsburgh, and your training is different from your teammates'. What you do works for you because you show up at train-

ing camp shipshape, and coach Mike Tomlin is cool with it. Why do you choose to train in California?

California is a great atmosphere for training. First of all, being able to train in sunshine is a blessing. There's so much energy out here, kind of a rat-race mentality. When I come here, my mind flips into that mode. I'm part of that rat race. I grasp onto it to push me in training. Also, I have a revolutionary trainer in Marv Marinovich out here.

You've been training with him since your USC days. What makes his training regime unique?

He's got the gift to be able to look at a body and know what it needs. Other trainers are starting to adapt his revolutionary style that includes flexibility, strength, speed, balance. When people see the workout, they say it looks weird, but it correlates. A hack squat or bench press can never really correlate to a real athletic movement in a sport, but put a squat or bench into a plyometric movement or some appropriate action within it, then it correlates.

As an athlete, your life is your body. You have to know what your weak points are.

I've become very sensitive to how my body reacts to certain supplements, certain foods. The only person I've ever entrusted that to is Marvin. He's the only person who could tell me, "Troy, stop eating that and start eating this," or "Troy, you're beat. Go home and get some rest," or "Troy, this new [machine] you're doing is not good for you. Stop doing it." I work out three to four hours every morning, then I do a 15-minute session before I go to bed.

Is Marv your nutrition wiz as well?

No question, and he's not a trainer who tells me to eat healthy then goes and eats Whoppers and drinks soda. He's more strict on his diet than anybody I've ever seen. He hasn't eaten an unhealthy thing in 50 years.

What does he espouse? Vegan? Raw?

He's not totally vegan, and he does eat a lot of raw foods. He encourages me to do this and to eat organic. But he also knows that within my mind, it's important for me to have a release; so he'll say go ahead and have a little junk food here and there, just know that when it comes time to crack down, you have to crack down. He understands the psychology of an athlete. If I train too much, he'll say, "Troy, you need to get a life!" So he's a nutritionist, a sports physiologist and a psychologist.

And that's important. Thank God he's gotten me to this point where I'm able to play my seventh NFL season [this year].

Anything new in your training this year?

I spoke with Olympic gold-medal decathlete Bryan Clay at a Nike symposium. I approached him with a lot of questions about training and really took in what he had to say, because decathletes have to do every move and coordinate every energy system from sprints to hurdles to long jump, high jump, pole vault. An athlete like that can play in every sport.

Last season was pretty spectacular, with the Super Bowl win and everything leading up to it. It seems as if you allowed yourself to relax and enjoy this win more than Super Bowl XL.

This year was amazing in that way. It was a fun year for our whole team. We never had the burden of having to win the Super Bowl. Coach Tomlin is the best in that way. He's like my trainer. He's everything—a psychologist and a great coach. He prepares us by pushing or relaxing our team at just the right times. He has the maturity in his second year of coaching that coach [Bill] Cowher had in his later years.

Take me back to that AFC Championship game against the Baltimore Ravens when you made that fourth-quarter interception return for a touchdown.

It was awesome. To experience something like that in front of your own fans is a gift from God really. It was exciting for me personally because it was the first game that my son had come to watch me play and the first game my wife had attended in a while. As soon as I crossed the end zone, I pointed at them. I was so happy for my son. I couldn't believe he was able to experience that. So when he sees [the reel] someday, I can say, "See that, son? I'm pointing right at you and your mom."

It seems as if professional football is a great forum for being able to feel the full range of emotions as a human being—everything from bliss to anguish—so intensely, and the world is watching. Is that part of the appeal and what gives you such passion for the sport?

Yea, you do feel the whole range.

Athletes who are involved in physical sports such as hockey or mixed martial arts ride the emotional highs and lows, as well as the physical highs and lows. It's a

long fight, a full season. You go through major injury after major injury. It's like, ah man, my Achilles has been messed up for four weeks straight, then all of a sudden my left knee is bothering me. My Achilles is not healed yet, but I'm thinking about my left knee because that's the worst thing at the moment, then it's my right shoulder.

You move through these pains throughout the season. That's probably why the worst fans of football are the players' wives. It's like, "Man, this sucks. My husband is hurting all the time." And it's no fun for them to experience either.

Any personal goals for this season?

During these two Super Bowls, honestly, my experience wasn't so much of being happy for myself, like oh, I finally got it. I've always been happy for my teammates. These guys are so passionate about football and being Pittsburgh Steelers. The joy for me is seeing my teammates have that fulfillment. To see them experience that again this year is obviously the pull we all have.

How about those Pens?

When I was watching the final Stanley Cup game, my heart was pounding—with 15 minutes in the game and we're up by two. That's too much time! Hockey is the greatest spectator sport ever. It's nonstop action. In the last minutes, holding my son in front of the TV, I said, "Son, you're going to watch history right now." I was so nervous. It was crazy! I can honestly tell you I was more nervous in those final moments than I was sitting on the sidelines in Tampa. Sid and Evgeni—they're so young, it's like having LeBron [James] and Kobe [Bryant] in Pittsburgh—then to see them win it! That's why Pittsburghers are so passionate about sports. We have these teams that do well.

Back in the day, there were always championships that came through this city, even with the Buccos. Now, hopefully, that tradition will start up again—especially now that my son is a true Pittsburgher. **PM**

Gina Mazza, a Pittsburgh-based journalist and regular contributor to PITTSBURGH MAGAZINE, is the author of Everything Matters, Nothing Matters: For Women Who Dare to Live With Exquisite Calm, Euporic Creativity and Divine Clarity (St. Lynn's Press, 2008). She can be reached at inspire@zoominternet.net.

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