

# Jets' Curtis Martin has shown greatness beyond football, including forgiving his father

What would you do if your biological father deserted your family?

What would you do if he left you and your mother behind when you were just a toddler, forcing her to work two jobs to support you while he wasted his life on drugs and alcohol?

This is what Curtis Martin did: He showed up unannounced at his dad's apartment on Father's Day in 1998, insisted he wear a blindfold, and led him outside to the backseat of a waiting car.

Martin drove him to a condominium complex, led him up a short flight of stairs, and brought him inside one of the units. The father could only smell the scent of freshly cleaned carpets as he waited for further instructions.

"Take off your blindfold," Martin said.

The father did as he was told.

"Welcome home, Dad," the son said.

The father looked around and saw an ivory-colored sofa, a new television and decorations on all the walls. The two-bedroom condo, completely furnished, was a gift — all the father had to do was bring over his clothes.

But Martin wasn't finished. The former [Jets](#) star and current Hall of Fame finalist led his dad outside again, where Curtis Martin Sr. found a Cadillac Seville, used but in mint condition, with a huge red bow on the roof.

"Happy Father's Day, Curt," said Rochella Dixon, the woman he left behind all those years ago.

That's when the tears started. The father didn't know what to say, so he thanked the star NFL running back who welcomed him back into his life, and then he thanked God for giving him such a forgiving son.

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Curtis Martin is up for the Pro Football Hall of Fame for the second straight year this week, and if you considered nothing but his football résumé, they should be preparing his bust for Canton.

He is the fourth all-time leading rusher in NFL history with 14,101 yards, behind only Emmitt Smith, Walter Payton and Barry Sanders. He was one of the most consistent and durable backs of his generation, a player who topped 1,000 yards in each of his first 10 seasons.

That his coach and mentor with the Jets and the New England Patriots, Bill Parcells, is also a finalist, makes the potential story even sweeter. Martin relishes the idea that he and the man who has played a more important role in his life than anyone would be inducted together.

But, for Martin, his football accomplishments tell only part of his story. The Hall of Fame is supposed to “honor individuals who have outstanding contributions to professional football,” according to its mission statement, and “promote the positive values of the sport.”

No one has represented the game better than Martin, who retired in 2005. He told a story last week about the day he was drafted in 1995, when he was supposed to be excited about the big paychecks and bright lights but confided in his mentor, the Rev. Leroy Joseph, that he wasn’t sure he wanted a career in football.

“Curtis, all the things you want to do for people?” Joseph told him. “Maybe football is just the vehicle to do it.”

So that’s the way he chose to approach his time in the NFL. A lot of athletes talk about being a role model. Martin built his career around it. He survived the gangs of the Homewood section of Pittsburgh, where bloodshed and death were a part of his life. He once found his loving grandmother stabbed to death by a man who later said he needed money to pay his phone bill.

He made it to the NFL and became a star. He has built a successful business career since his retirement and talks about someday buying an NFL team. But to Martin, all of that only matters if others see his example and follow him.

“I wanted to inspire others to do the same, and not to settle for the hand they’ve been dealt,” he said. “That’s what I want to stand for. I came into the NFL with the goal of being an inspiration.”

Part of that, he said, is not letting the bitterness from a difficult upbringing take over your life. That means finding forgiveness for people, even the father that abandoned your family.

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Curtis Martin Sr. didn’t expect forgiveness. He knew he had everything he wanted in his life — a caring wife and a young son — and threw it away.

He was done with a four-year stint in the Army when he met Rochella Dixon in McKeesport, Pa., his hometown, in 1973. Money was tight, but the couple did its best, until Martin Sr. strayed.

He said peer pressure led him to smoke his first marijuana joint when he was 18, and slowly, that led to “everything else.” He said he left his family in 1978, and the downward spiral was swift.

“There was a time when the only thing I owned was the clothes I was wearing,” he said in a 2004 interview. “I lived in shelters, parks, wherever. From ’85 to ’90, those were the worst years. That’s when I got mixed up with that crack cocaine. I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy.”

“I had nothing.”

Those worst years coincided with the sudden emergence of a young high school football star that shared his name. Martin only started playing football at Taylor-Allerdice High as a senior because his mother wanted him to do something away from their awful neighborhood, and because the coach, Mark Wittgartner, had seen his physical talents in gym class.

Martin was a natural from the first moment he touched the football. “Know something, do something, be something” is the motto at Taylor-Allerdice, and the crowds at games quickly understood that Martin’s career would go far beyond its all-dirt field.

But his father was not there to witness it.

“I never held a grudge,” Martin said. “It was him not wanting to be involved in my life. I understand that. He was strung out on drugs. I understand the shame that he had and I never held it against him. It was always in my plans to do something for him, but I wanted to make sure he was fully rehabbed.”

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In 1990, Martin Sr. said he checked himself into a veteran’s hospital in Columbus, Ohio. He stayed two weeks. Then he entered a rehabilitation center for a six-month stay. When that was through, Martin Sr. asked to stay longer.

“I just got sick and tired and sick and tired and sick and tired of being down in the dump and not having anything and being abused,” Martin Sr. said.

“I’ll tell you the truth, the first five or six years (after leaving rehab) I still had yearnings to use. But thank goodness to God, I didn’t. It was a tough fight. Even when you sleep, you’re dreaming about it.”

The Star-Ledger spoke with Martin Sr. in 2004, when the Jets were preparing to play his hometown Steelers in the playoffs. Curtis Martin Jr. asked that the newspaper not publish the story then because the wounds within the family still had not completely healed.

That process took time. Martin gave his father those incredible gifts on Father’s Day in 1998, but this was not a one-time thing. He visited. He called. He became a part of his life, and in turn, Martin Sr. stayed true to his promise to stay clean.

“He could have just blocked me out of his life, period, if that’s what he chose to do,” Curtis Martin Sr. said. “I thank God he is a forgiving son, a forgiving person, and he let me back in.”

How did Martin forgive?

“You know something?” Martin answered. “I realized, where I come from and especially with all the things my mother had gone through, there’s a bitterness that gets embedded in a person’s heart.

“I’ve seen so many people with that bitterness in their lives, and I’ve found the difference between me and a lot of others is I chose to forgive.”

“To me, coming from where I’ve come from, seeing what I’ve seen, God forgave me, which is pretty miraculous to me. We all make mistakes. God forgave me, who am I not to forgive others?”

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Martin spent another Father’s Day with his dad in 2009, but this one was much different. Cancer had attacked his lungs, brain and liver. The father was just 58, but he was running out of time.

The son returned to New York and, the next day, called to see how the father was doing.

“Hey man, I got to get ready to go,” his father said.

Martin thought his father, a man of few words for his entire life, had to get off the phone for a doctor’s visit or something else. But it turns out, it was his way of saying goodbye. He died the next day.

“He and I never bonded like we did those last two weeks he was alive,” Martin said. “Before he died, he was a man at peace. I never wanted to be like my father in any way, but when it comes to the day I die, I hope I can be like him.”

Martin believes the decision to forgive his father helped the family, including his mother, heal. Dixon was even cooking meals for the man who left her, Martin said, as his health deteriorated.

“At his funeral, my mother came to me and said, ‘You know something, I am so glad you were not how I was. The fact that you forgave him helped me forgive him,’ ” Martin said. “She told me, ‘It would be so hard if he died and I never forgave him. I’m so grateful that you helped me do that.’ ”

Martin became a father himself Dec. 15, welcoming a daughter named Ava into the world, and has spent the last few weeks dealing with the emotions all new dads feel. Every noise from the crib will make him jump up from the bed to check on her, so he’s sleeping in another room.

As for the Hall of Fame vote this week, Martin would love to stand at Parcells’ side as the coach and player are inducted. But what he did in football will never define him as a man.

Which, of course, is exactly why he belongs.

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