

9-1-2003

## Back from the brink

John Roberts  
*Furman University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine>

---

### Recommended Citation

Roberts, John (2003) "Back from the brink," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 46 : Iss. 3 , Article 21.  
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol46/iss3/21>

This Article is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in Furman Magazine by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the [FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines](#). For more information, please contact [scholarexchange@furman.edu](mailto:scholarexchange@furman.edu).

## Back from the brink

On a hot, sticky afternoon in August, the Furman football team is engaged in its first live scrimmage of the new season.

In the huddle, Josh Stepp, a redshirt freshman quarterback, calls the play: "Seven-stretch on three. Ready . . ."

"BREAK!" shouts the team, clapping their hands in unison.

Stepp takes the snap, turns and pitches the ball to Brandon Mays, who starts to his left but finds little room. Instinctively he stops, reverses direction and slashes past a defender into the open field.

After a 10-yard gain, safeties Shelton Riley and Jeremy Blocker draw a bead on Mays. Blocker hits him hard from the left and Riley from the right, driving him into the Bermuda turf.

A hush falls over the team as the bodies untangle. All eyes are on Mays. When he bounces to his feet, the players erupt in applause and hoots. He acknowledges the applause with a smile — a wide, contagious grin as big as the young man's heart — and nods to a woman sitting alone nearby.

Bobbette Mays had driven 50 miles from her home in Arden, N.C., to see this. She needed to know that her son would be OK.

"I was so relieved," she says. "I knew he was ready then. Brandon was back."

Brandon Mays' story, however, is more than the tale of a gifted athlete's battle against ulcerative colitis, a disease of the colon. Mays' illness — and recovery — confounded his teammates and coaches, inspired the campus and helped bring a family closer together.

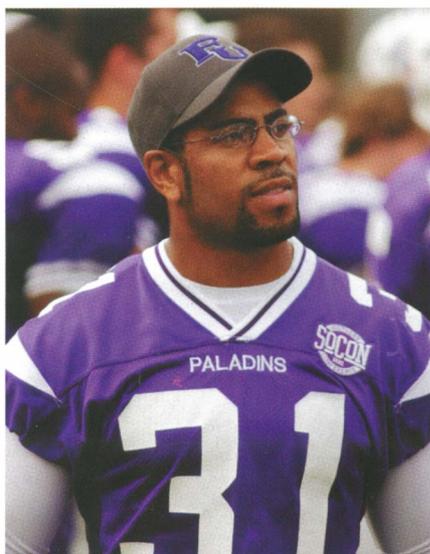
During the spring of 2002, life was good for Mays. At 5-10 and 195 pounds, the red-shirt freshman was among the strongest members of the Furman squad, with a bench press of 365 pounds and a squat of 500. His powerful legs could carry his muscular frame 40 yards in 4.6 seconds.

Having spent a year on the scout team and impressing the coaches with his work ethic, the highly touted Mays seemed destined to play a key role in the Paladin backfield. During the final spring scrimmage he led all rushers, churning out 103 yards and three touchdowns on 16 carries. Some long-time Paladin fans predicted that he would eventually join Stanford Jennings, Robbie Gardner, Carl Tremble and Louis Ivory in the pantheon of great Furman tailbacks.

But late that summer, Mays' body started to turn on him. He began suffering bouts of nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Although he had been diagnosed with ulcerative colitis in high school and had experienced similar problems before, they normally went away after a few days.

This time, they didn't. By early Septem-

## Debilitating illness doesn't keep Brandon Mays down



**Mays missed one game with a concussion but through October had played in seven games at tailback and on special teams.**

ber, as the Paladins prepared to open the 2002 season against Vanderbilt, Mays was hardly able to sleep. Still, he faithfully took his medication and prayed each night for the symptoms to subside.

In the second game, against Elon, Mays rushed for a team-high 88 yards. But the disease was sapping his energy. The next week, against VMI, a listless Mays carried the ball just three times for eight yards. The following week he watched the Western Carolina game from the sidelines.

"By that time I was so tired at practice that I couldn't run more than one play without losing my breath," says Mays. "I had to take three off and rest."

On Friday, October 11, Mays suffered though a horrible night. The next morning he called the coaches to say he couldn't make the trip to Appalachian State. Then he called the doctor.

While ulcerative colitis is incurable, the condition can ordinarily be controlled with medication. Mays' doctor boosted his dosage, but with little effect.

"I was taking six pills a day and was getting worse," says Mays.

He began to lose weight — fast. In just three weeks, his weight dropped from a robust 195 pounds to 140. He vomited after every meal, his body rejecting all forms of nourishment. For his friends, coaches and professors, unease turned to fear.

His worsening condition put him at risk of dehydration, shock or even a potentially fatal rupture of the colon. On October 24, dehydrated and feverish, Mays was admitted to Greenville's St. Francis Hospital, where he received intravenous fluids.

Doctors decided that the only solution

was to remove all but six inches of his large intestine. Surgeons would construct a special "J-pouch" to connect the remnants of his large intestine to his small intestine, which would allow Mays to have a regular digestive system.

The radical and highly invasive procedure would require three surgeries. And there were no guarantees. If Mays' body rejected the "J-pouch," or if other complications arose, he would be burdened with a colostomy bag for the rest of his life.

On October 30, doctors removed his large intestine. Afterward, Mays refused to see all but a few visitors.

"I did not want my teammates to see me in a weakened state," says Mays, who was in the hospital for two weeks. "If they did there might be some doubt when I made my comeback. And I did not know if they could handle seeing me that way."

He recovered enough to return to school for winter term, colostomy bag in tow.

Although he was a shadow of his former self, he kept insisting he would suit up in 2003.

"Once I saw him I thought he'd never play again," says Furman coach Bobby Lamb. "We thought that it was a real shame, because here was this great kid who had such a promising career."

Slowly, Mays began putting on weight. Surgeons completed the re-engineering of his intestine February 20, and while he was unable to take part in spring drills, he began lifting light weights and easing into an exercise regimen. The third surgery, May 8, eliminated the need for the colostomy bag.

Mays' parents were divorced when he was a toddler. His father, Herschel, now lives in Los Angeles, and while growing up Mays had little contact with his three half brothers and four half sisters. But the crisis helped unite his extended family.

"Through the grace of God I had the strength to push through this. My family really pulled together, too," he says.

And once his doctors gave him the green light, Mays began working out with a vengeance. He never doubted that he would return for the 2003 season — even if his coaches and teammates weren't so sure.

But on that hot day in August, on his first run from scrimmage, Mays convinced everyone. "He had that great burst and that great run," says Lamb. "And I thought to myself, 'Brandon Mays is back!'"

Soon, Lamb began referring to Mays as "Miracle Man." The moniker stuck and can be heard sometimes during practice, when Mays crashes through defenders and into the open field:

"Hey!!! There goes the Miracle Man!"

— John Roberts