

FOOTBALL  SUPERSTARS

ELI MANNING



RAY PAPROCKI

FOOTBALL  *SUPERSTARS*

Eli Manning

FOOTBALL SUPERSTARS

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CONTENTS



1	Eli's Rise to the Top	7
2	Football's Royal Family	14
3	Eli's First Steps to Stardom	24
4	Eli Goes to College	33
5	A Rookie in the Big Apple	44
6	The Pressure Mounts	55
7	A Super Finish	66
8	A Hero Is Made	76
	Statistics	88
	Chronology	89
	Timeline	90
	Glossary	92
	Bibliography	97
	Further Reading	102
	Picture Credits	103
	Index	104
	About the Author	109



Eli's Rise to the Top

The scene was soon after Super Bowl XLII in 2008 in the Arizona desert. New York Giants quarterback Eli Manning stood on a stage on the field while confetti floated through the warm February air. He hoisted a trophy in his right hand while wearing a T-shirt and a cap with matching slogans: “Super Bowl Champions.”

Just minutes earlier, Manning had miraculously escaped from New England Patriots defenders to heave a long pass to David Tyree, who made a spectacular catch—perhaps the most memorable play in the history of the NFL’s championship game. It set up Manning’s 13-yard touchdown pass that gave the Giants a 17-14 victory in one of the biggest Super Bowl upsets. The underdog Giants had beaten the undefeated and seemingly invincible Patriots. Manning stood at the



center of the victory, the game's most valuable player (MVP) and a nation's new hero.

Manning knows all about being a football idol. His father, Archie, was a folk hero in college and a star in the NFL. His brother Peyton is considered one of the best quarterbacks ever to play the game. In fact, Peyton led the Indianapolis Colts to a Super Bowl victory the year before and collected the MVP title, too. In a touching scene after the game against the Patriots, Peyton visited Eli in the Giants locker room, and they talked about the game with big smiles, acting as if they were in the privacy of one of their homes instead of surrounded by reporters and photographers.

For most of his life, Eli lived in the shadows of Archie and Peyton. Although he was quite successful himself, football fans and the media never considered him to be on par with his father and brother. During his first four seasons in the NFL, he was criticized for his inconsistency, for throwing too many interceptions, for being too low-key, for . . . take your pick. New York is a tough town in which to try to make your mark. And there is little patience for making mistakes.

By winning the Super Bowl, though, Eli became a superstar in his own right.

His story begins in New Orleans, where he grew up the youngest son of Archie and Olivia Manning, who had two other boys, Peyton and Cooper (the oldest). Archie had a long and distinguished career, playing quarterback for the New Orleans Saints, Minnesota Vikings, and Houston Oilers. All three sons were talented athletes, although the family didn't push them to play sports (Cooper was a wide receiver at the University of Mississippi until health problems forced him to quit).

Eli grew up as the youngest, always following in his brothers' footsteps. He is different from his siblings, who are quite outgoing. Eli is quiet and calm. As a child, he also became close to his mother. Thanks to her, he developed an early



After leading the New York Giants to victory at Super Bowl XLII, Eli Manning was named the game's most valuable player. Winning the award and the championship game were enormous achievements for Manning, who comes from a family of football stars.

interest in antiques by joining her on shopping trips around New Orleans.

He attended the same high school as his brothers, who had made big names for themselves there. He, too, attracted a lot of attention. Newspapers from across the country wrote articles about the son of Archie and the brother of Peyton, who at

that time was a famous college quarterback at the University of Tennessee.

The high school careers of Eli, Cooper, and Peyton left a big impression on their school, Isidore Newman. In 2004, after all three had long graduated, Newman retired jersey No. 18, the one worn by all three brothers in honor of their father's college uniform. Newman headmaster Scott McLeod told the crowd at the school, as a compliment to Olivia and Archie, "The person you are is the person your child will become." About the three sons, he said they had "set the world standard for behavior and grace. . . . They never put the benefit of fame before the value of friends." Cooper spoke for the family at the ceremony. In explaining why he was chosen to give the speech for the Mannings, he listed the accomplishments of his father and his brothers before saying with a smile, "but in the end it was decided that [the speaker] should be the most handsome Manning."

HEADING TO OLE MISS

Colleges heavily recruited Eli, and he chose to attend the University of Mississippi, just as Cooper and his father had done. Archie was a living legend at the school known as Ole Miss. You can't turn around on campus without seeing some mention of him. It would be hard for Eli to match his father's accomplishments there.

Ole Miss fans love their football. It has many rich traditions. One of the more popular traditions is the Walk of Champions, where fans line up to cheer the players as they head to the stadium for the game. Eli became quite familiar with the tradition during his college career—and also a bit savvy about how far some supporters of the visiting team might go. "It really gets you fired up for the games," he said. "You shake hands with people, you high-five the kids. I kind of hold something in my right hand just in case, a playbook or something, kind of do it all left-handed. You have to take care of the right, you never

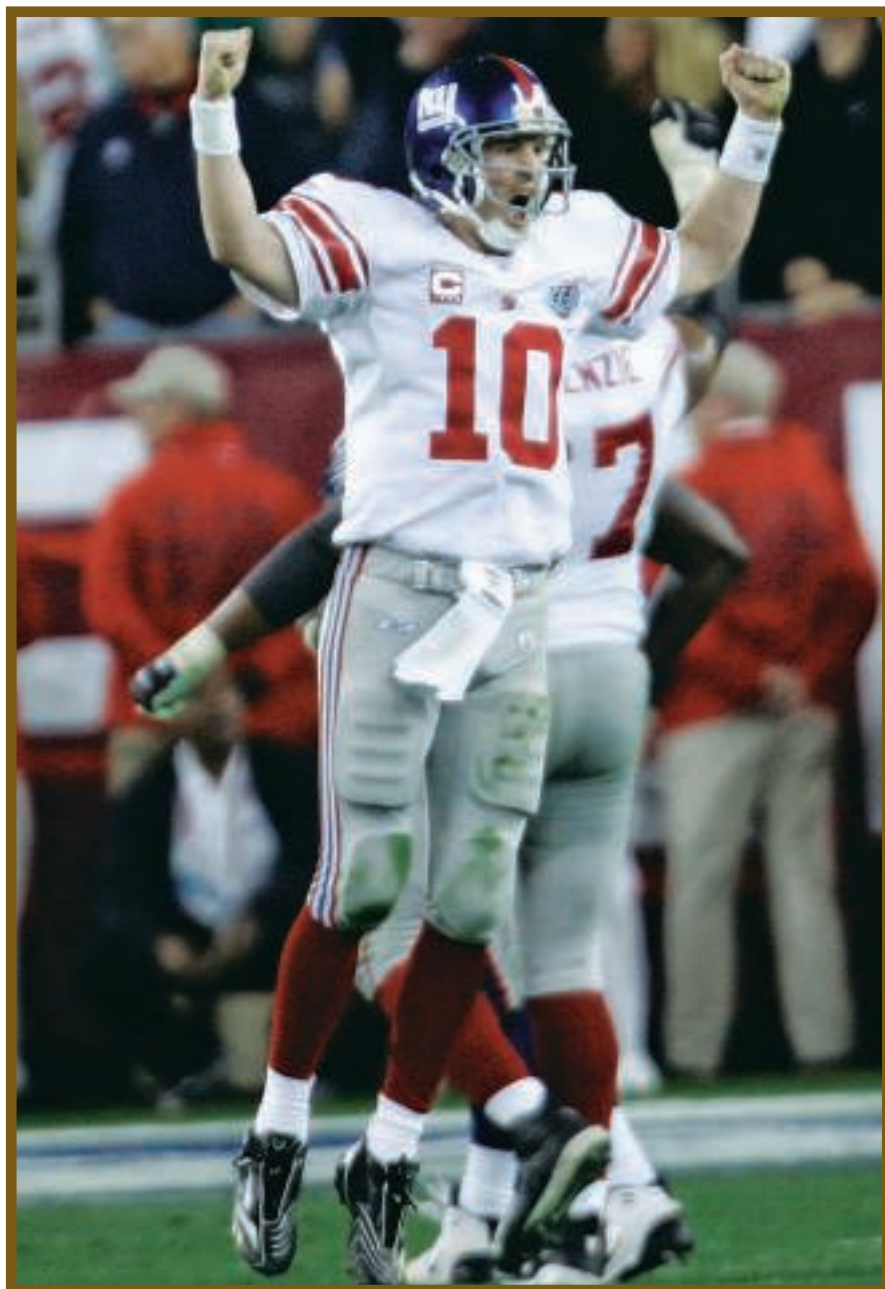
know. We might be playing LSU, and there might be an LSU fan trying to stick something sharp in there.”

Eli got off to a rocky start at college. He was arrested for public intoxication during a fraternity party on campus. The incident helped him focus on taking his role seriously and trying to live up to his billing as a talented football player who was also known as a nice guy from a well-respected family.

After two seasons of watching from the sidelines, Eli embarked on a college career that would make him a national name. He took a struggling football program and injected it with fresh blood, taking the team to near the top of the acclaimed Southeastern Conference (SEC) and to its first major bowl in decades. He set a bunch of school records, breaking many set by his father. He was being compared to Peyton, who was already establishing himself as one of the best quarterbacks in the NFL.

In 2004, Eli was projected as the top pick in the NFL Draft. But then controversy erupted. Archie, who had spent a career playing for bad teams, and Eli told the team that held the top choice, the San Diego Chargers, that Eli didn't want to play for them. The Chargers had many problems, both on the field as a team and off the field as an organization. Eli's wishes became public, and many fans were upset with the Mannings for trying to get their own way. As it turned out, the Chargers did choose Eli but quickly traded him to the New York Giants. Eli was thrilled. But playing in New York, with its aggressive media and rabid fans, wouldn't be easy.

It was a big move from New Orleans and the small town of Oxford, Mississippi, home of Ole Miss, to the Big Apple. In fact, Eli wasn't interested in living in Manhattan, the heart of the nation's most exciting city. He bought a condo in nearby Hoboken, New Jersey, because it reminded him of Oxford in some ways. In fact, before Eli left home to join the Giants, he and his mother shopped at a bookstore in Oxford to buy a set of books by a famous author from Mississippi, William Faulkner,



Manning's record as a college quarterback was impressive, and he became the top pick for the 2004 NFL Draft. Although he had a rocky start with the New York Giants, his Super Bowl win against the New England Patriots quieted his critics.

as a reminder of home. In Hoboken, he felt as if he could move about without being mobbed by fans.

As a rookie, he was thrown in as a starter midway through the 2004 season and struggled a lot, losing six straight games before winning the final contest of the year. Over the next three seasons, the Giants became a good team, winning their division once and going to the play-offs each time. You would think that would have pleased the fans and the media, but expectations for Eli were really high. His play was inconsistent, as he made one great throw and then tossed an interception. Many doubted that he could ever become more than an above-average quarterback. The criticism could have crippled him, but he stayed strong and remained true to his even-keel self, which came under fire, too. A familiar refrain was: Why can't Eli be more of an emotional leader?

Then came the magical play-off run and the Super Bowl appearance against the mighty Patriots. After that victory, Eli quieted his critics. He followed that achievement with more notable news. He married his college sweetheart, Abby McGrew, and collected a number of contracts as a spokesman for major companies. He followed his Super Bowl victory with his best season yet in 2008, leading the Giants to the play-offs again and making his first Pro Bowl (an all-star game).

Heading into the 2009 season, he signed a new contract making him one of the highest-paid players ever in the NFL. It isn't all about the money and the fame, however. Eli has also been honored for his charity work, most of it involving sick children. He spends not only his money but also his time trying to improve the lives of people not as fortunate as he and his family are.



Football's Royal Family

Eli Manning was born into football royalty on January 3, 1981, in New Orleans. His father, Archie, was a phenomenal player in high school in the tiny town of Drew, Mississippi. Archie chose to attend the University of Mississippi. This was in the late 1960s, when there was much strife in the country, especially the Deep South, over civil rights and the segregation of whites and blacks. Hate and turmoil simmered as the old ways were hard to change in places such as Louisiana and Mississippi. In 1962, Ole Miss refused to allow a black student to attend the school. The National Guard was called in, and riots broke out. The university and the entire state were ridiculed across the country, its people viewed as small-minded hate-mongers.



Archie came across as anything but. He was not only talented but also friendly and polite. He set a good example as the star of the Mississippi football team. The state fell in love with Archie. A song was even written about him, "The Ballad of Archie Who," after a comment by a University of Tennessee player in response to a reporter's question about facing the quarterback. (The player's response was "Archie Who?")

He was soon on the covers of national sports magazines. He played an exciting style of football, scrambling from defenders and either running for yardage or flinging the ball downfield. "Here was this gawky, young, red-headed boy who came out of the Delta with enormous talent that he used for Ole Miss and the state," said David Sansing, an emeritus professor of history at the university. "We were coming out of a bad time with an enormous riot and civil rights murders in the state. This was a mean and ugly place, and then Archie came along. He was Mississippi's own Tom Sawyer, and he gave us all something to cheer. He was so good, and best of all, Archie was a good kid."

By the time he finished at Ole Miss in 1970, he had set 27 school records. He was named an all-American twice, and, in his senior year, he finished third in the balloting for the Heisman Trophy, which is given to the most outstanding player in college football. Archie was such a legend at the University of Mississippi that the speed limit on campus is 18 miles per hour—after the number Archie wore when he played there. Even with the accolades and achievements, however, Archie also had to deal with tragedy early in life. When he was a sophomore in college, Archie's father committed suicide after suffering from health problems. It was a devastating situation for a young man to experience. He wanted to stay home, get a job, and take care of the other members of his family. His mother, though, insisted he go back to college.

With the No. 2 overall pick, the New Orleans Saints selected Archie in the 1971 NFL Draft. The New England Patriots chose Stanford quarterback Jim Plunkett with the first choice. That same year, Archie married Olivia Williams; they had begun dating as freshmen at Ole Miss. She was a cheerleader and elementary education major who would later become a homecoming queen. “I knew Archie played football, but he wasn’t on the varsity yet and I wasn’t seeking a player,” Olivia once told a reporter. “If I’d known what I was getting into, I’d probably have run for the hills.”

He got big money, for that time, as a rookie with the Saints: \$30,000 in his first year, which went up to \$70,000 in his fifth year, with a \$160,000 signing bonus. The Saints were an awful team, and the hope was that Archie would make them better. It sure looked that way after his first game as a pro: He ran for the winning touchdown to defeat a strong Los Angeles Rams team, 24-20. The team’s improvement, however, was less than dramatic. The Saints finished with four wins that year, only two more than the previous season.

Even though Archie became a star, the team just kept losing. In fact, in the 10 seasons since the Saints started as a franchise in 1967, its record was 36–99–5. In 1978, the Saints had one of its best seasons, albeit still a losing one at 7–9. Archie broke through as a superstar that year, passing for 3,416 yards and 17 touchdowns. He won all kinds of awards, including the top individual honor in the NFL: most valuable player. It was a remarkable achievement because the MVP usually plays on a winning or championship team.

Archie had another strong season in 1979, and the Saints even won as many games as they lost, 8–8. The Saints returned to their losing ways the next few seasons, however, and Archie was traded to the Houston Oilers and later the Minnesota Vikings. In 1985, he retired from the sport that had made him a household name. He was more than an MVP and a two-time All-Pro. Archie also received recognition for his work with



In the 1960s, Manning's father, Archie, was the star quarterback at the University of Mississippi. Archie became known for his unique playing style and set 27 school records before being signed by the New Orleans Saints.

charity. He won two prestigious awards: the Byron "Whizzer" White Humanitarian Award and the Bart Starr Humanitarian Award.

When Archie retired, Eli was only four years old. He was the youngest of the three Manning boys: Cooper, born in 1974, was seven years older than Eli, and Peyton, born in 1976, was five years older. Like Archie, Cooper and Peyton were outgoing. Peyton was intense and serious. Cooper was the ham of the family, cracking everybody up with his jokes and antics. Eli, like his mother, was quiet and calm. His nickname became “Easy.” Peyton and Cooper were very close as kids and extremely competitive. They also bickered, as many brothers do. Cooper remembers once when Peyton hit him on the head with a belt buckle and blood gushed out.

RAISING NORMAL KIDS

Unlike Eli, who was too young, Cooper and Peyton got to be a part of their father’s career—playing on the field before games and hanging out in the locker room. Archie and Olivia, however, didn’t try to mold their sons into athletes. Archie didn’t care about them being football players. In fact, he tried to avoid talking about the sport with them. He wouldn’t coach their teams and tried to stay in the background. (Although if they asked, he would show them the proper techniques of how to throw a football.)

He and Olivia just wanted them to be happy at whatever they chose to do. They raised all three boys to be humble and gracious. “They were taught to respect adults and have the right manners. All Archie and Olivia wanted was their kids to be normal. . . . The whole family is warm and generous, a joy to be around,” said Billy Van Devender, who was Archie’s roommate at Ole Miss and the best man at his wedding.

Archie and Olivia Manning bought a 5,000-square-foot Greek Revival home in the Garden District of New Orleans in 1982. The large house has been described as “elegant and refined, quiet and welcoming.” Eli was two years old when the family moved in. The house had a backyard for the boys to play in, but a few problems did occur. “I can’t tell you how many

windows were broken in the house next door from our baseball games,” Olivia said. Archie was still playing in the NFL but had just been traded to the Houston Oilers. The house needed a lot of work. “I told him, ‘Just leave me a checkbook.’ It probably saved our marriage,” she told a reporter jokingly. Renovating a house can be costly and frustrating.

During Christmas, Olivia would decorate the tree with various ornaments, including those made by her boys, such as one with a picture of Eli as a first grader with glasses. When the children were young, the family routine for Christmas was to go to church on Christmas Eve, then have dinner at Antoine’s, a fancy restaurant in the French Quarter. The family had brunch at home on the holiday.

Despite Archie’s effort not to push his sons into sports, they naturally gravitated to playing basketball, baseball, and, especially, football. Instead of stuffed animals, a young Eli slept with Nerf baseballs and footballs in his bed. Archie encouraged his sons to play together in the backyard before signing them up for organized sports. In fact, there is a video on YouTube of the little Manning brothers in full uniform singing the national anthem outside their home.

Still, the three boys played a lot of organized sports when they were young. “Looking back, it seems like we celebrated every Fourth of July at a Little League tournament at Carolyn Park in St. Bernard, watching Cooper, then Peyton, then Eli play for Carrollton Playground,” Olivia said. “It all started with baseball.” Eli, meanwhile, was always the little brother. Eli “would try to play catch with Peyton, but he dropped too many balls, so Peyton took pillows off the couch and taped them to Eli’s arms. He looked like a big marshmallow, but at least he could smother the passes.”

But when Eli wasn’t around his brothers, other kids recognized Eli’s talent for playing football, even at an early age. As the story goes, when Eli and his fellow kindergartners would play football at school, he was chosen to be the quarterback. While

Eli enjoyed participating in sports, he also watched his brothers play in plenty of games. Sometimes he got tired of going, and Archie thought that, if they continued to take him, Eli might abandon sports. So on occasion he would leave Eli home with his mother, who would take him shopping with her to the antiques stores on Magazine Street in New Orleans. He wasn't

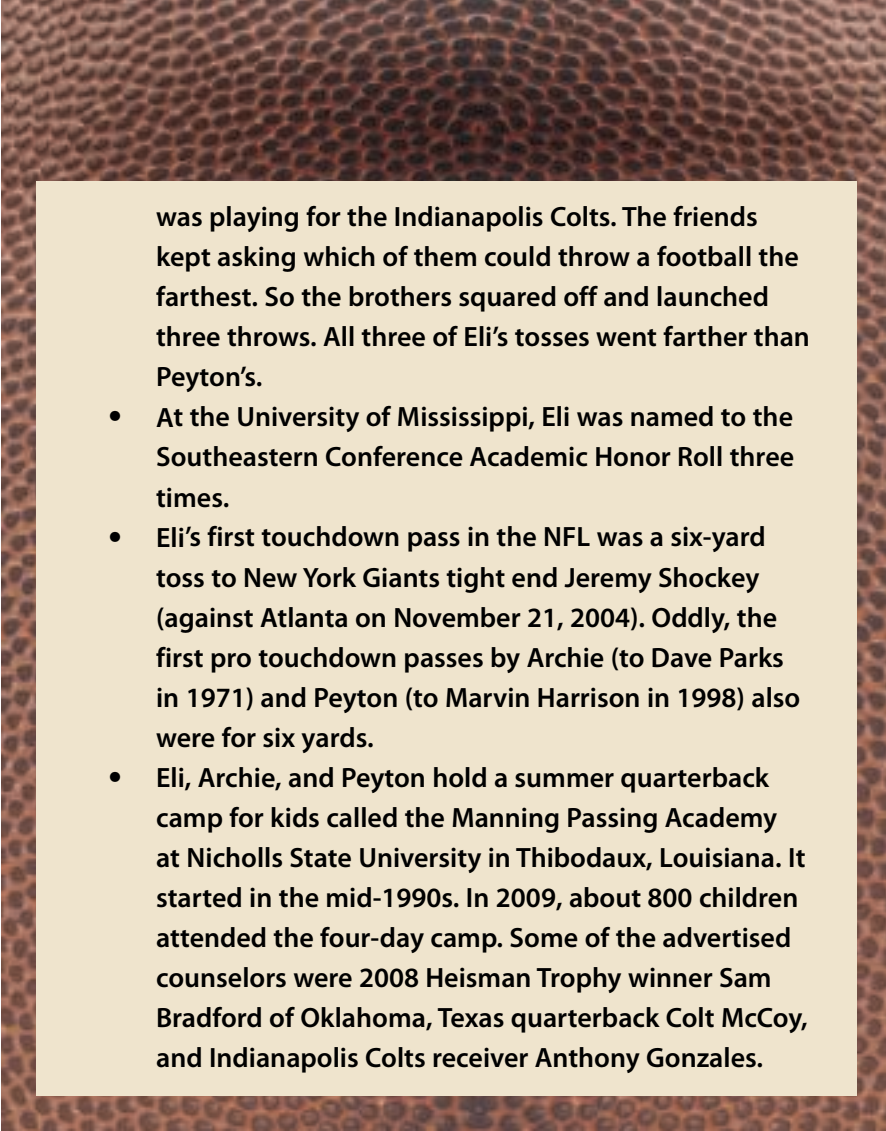
THE ELI FILE

Here are a few miscellaneous facts about Eli Manning:

- Favorite actor: Bill Murray.
- Favorite junk food: Pringles.
- Favorite TV show: *Seinfeld*.
- Favorite quarterback, other than his brother: Brett Favre.
- The Park & Sixth Comfort Food deli in Hoboken, New Jersey, offers a roast beef sandwich named after Eli.
- Unlike Peyton, Eli was not interested in learning sports trivia when he was growing up. So Peyton would pin Eli and hit him on the chest until he could name all of the schools in the Southeastern Conference.
- On viewing games with Peyton as a kid, Eli said: "Every Sunday, we'd be on the couch watching NFL football. . . . It was never sitting there talking, 'Hey, I want to be in the NFL and win a Super Bowl.' We wanted to win our little championship in our 7- and 8-league basketball tournament or whatever we were playing at the time."
- Peyton, Eli, and some friends took a summer vacation to Florida in 2003. Eli was still in college, and Peyton

interested at first, but over time he began to enjoy it. Even today, he has an interest in antiques, and he shops for them during the off-season.

When Eli turned 13, Peyton and Cooper were already off to college. He and his mother spent a lot of time together. Eli told a reporter that they would follow a routine of eating out



was playing for the Indianapolis Colts. The friends kept asking which of them could throw a football the farthest. So the brothers squared off and launched three throws. All three of Eli's tosses went farther than Peyton's.

- At the University of Mississippi, Eli was named to the Southeastern Conference Academic Honor Roll three times.
- Eli's first touchdown pass in the NFL was a six-yard toss to New York Giants tight end Jeremy Shockey (against Atlanta on November 21, 2004). Oddly, the first pro touchdown passes by Archie (to Dave Parks in 1971) and Peyton (to Marvin Harrison in 1998) also were for six yards.
- Eli, Archie, and Peyton hold a summer quarterback camp for kids called the Manning Passing Academy at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana. It started in the mid-1990s. In 2009, about 800 children attended the four-day camp. Some of the advertised counselors were 2008 Heisman Trophy winner Sam Bradford of Oklahoma, Texas quarterback Colt McCoy, and Indianapolis Colts receiver Anthony Gonzales.



Growing up in New Orleans, the Manning brothers were close, and they frequently played sports in the backyard and in the community. In this 1996 photograph, the Manning family pose outside their home. Clockwise from top left: Cooper, Olivia, Archie, Eli, and Peyton.

together once a week when his father was gone. With just the two of them, alone, they got a chance to talk about themselves. During those times, Eli learned a lot about his mother.

She grew up as Olivia Williams in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Her family's roots were as mule traders. In 1907, they settled in Philadelphia and opened a small mercantile store. Olivia's

mother was quite an athlete, an all-state basketball player in high school. She was also the second woman in the state to get an airline pilot's license, in 1941. Apparently, all that athletic talent didn't come just from his father's genes. Eli has said on occasion that his mother is the boss of the family: "My mom knows how to do everything. My dad is clueless. I don't think he knows how to wash clothes."

Eli's strong bond with Olivia began when he was very young. He had trouble reading as a first grader. "As a child, it's embarrassing and frustrating," he said. "They call on students to read out loud in class, and it's one of those deals where you're praying the whole time that they don't call on you." So his mother would work with him at home. "Her laid-back attitude and her soft Southern drawl helped me keep calm about it. She's the one who kept telling me it would all work out and it did," he said. "Eli and Olivia are certainly very close," Archie once told a reporter. "They have that special bond that you see between mamas and their baby boys."

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