

SUPER BOWL PICK: RAVENS VS. SEAHAWKS

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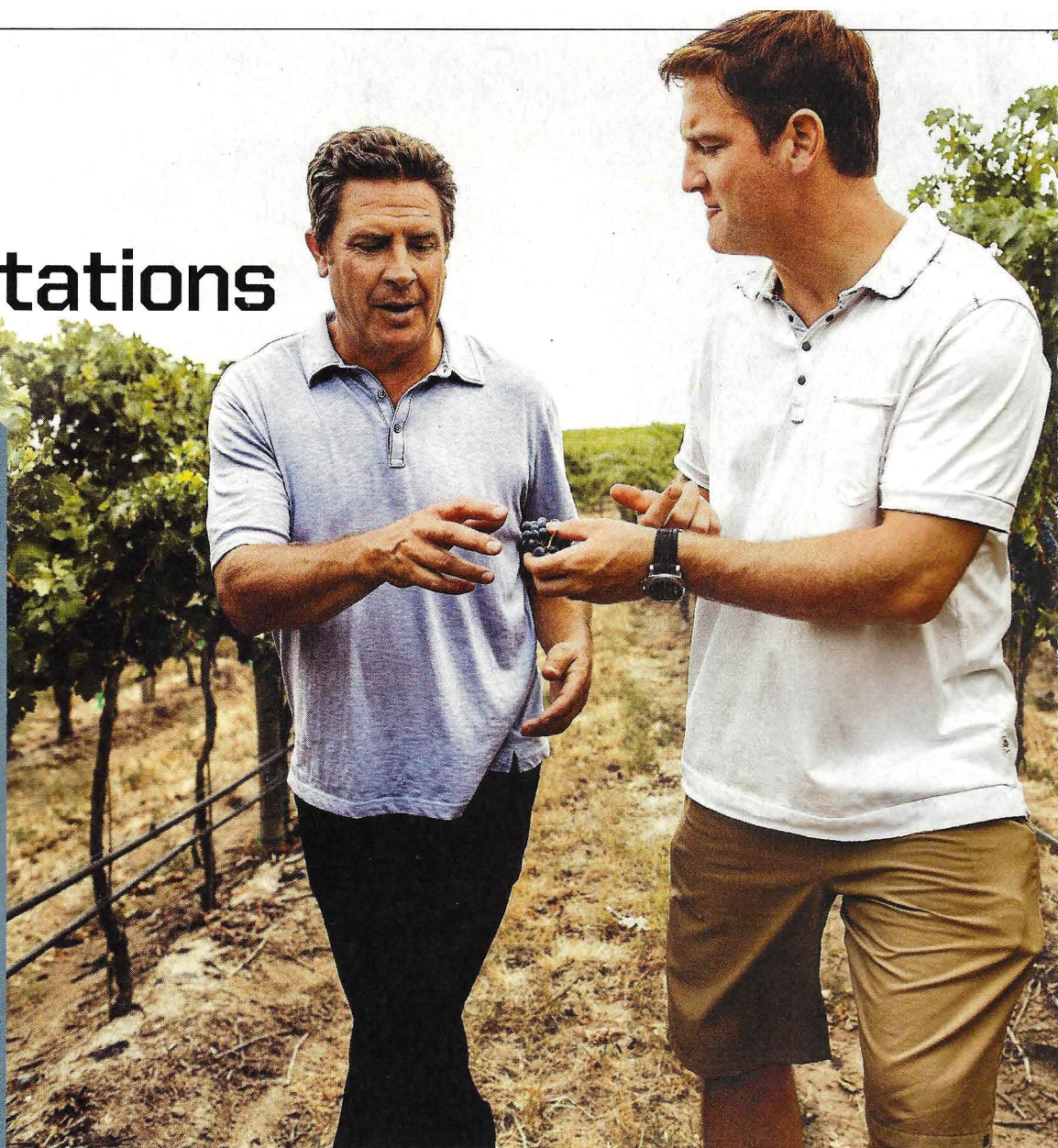
PRO-FILES

# + Grape Expectations

Ex-quarterbacks Dan Marino and Damon Huard are teammates again in a new game: making high-end wine. And this time Huard makes the calls.

BY  
**BEN BASKIN**

Photographs by  
Caylee Betts



A SERIES  
FROM THE  
EDITORS OF  
**FORTUNE**  
AND  
**Sports Illustrated**

**DAMON HUARD'S** hands are stained a deep purple. His white polo shirt has two circular splotches of the same hue. For the past hour he has been drinking wine siphoned out of new \$1,500 French-oak barrels—just another day at the office.

"This is our little Napa," says Huard. It's late July,

another football season approaches, and the former NFL quarterback is surveying his new 5,300-square-foot winery outside Seattle with the look of a proud parent. "We're making a world-class 94-point wine," he says, "and we're doing it right here in a warehouse in Woodinville."

Woodinville is the home of Passing Time, the winery Huard launched in May 2014 with Dan Marino, the man he once backed up with the Dolphins. Marino, who started collecting wines shortly after he turned pro in 1983, served as something of a mentor and sommelier to Huard, who

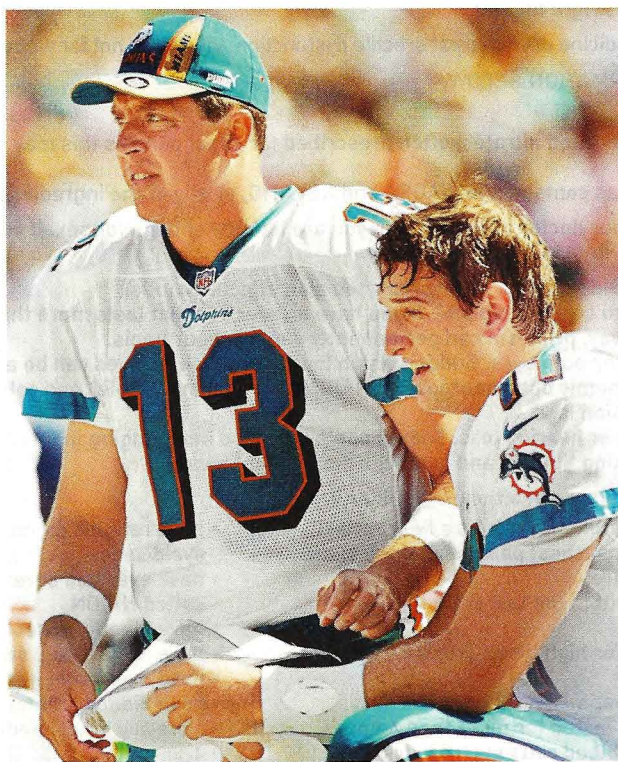


joined the team as a rookie in '97. "I drank Bud Light or Captain Morgan and Coke," Huard says now. "But over my years with Dan, the wine bug just hit me."

By the time Huard arrived in Miami, the cellar in Marino's Fort Lauderdale home contained some of Washington's finest vintages. Huard grew up in Puyallup and graduated from Washington in 1996 as the Huskies' all-time leading passer, so he was intrigued. Years later, when he was studying the wine business, he even learned that his great-grandfather Nelson Huard was one of the state's first Concord grape growers.

And while Marino, who splits his time between Florida and Kiawah Island, S.C., brings celebrity and marketing muscle to the venture, it is Huard who runs the daily operation. On this day, that includes making a delivery at a hotel and chatting with a restaurant manager at lunch, which leads to a sale and Huard's promise that he'll return with six bottles.

Back at the winery, Huard samples his 2014 vintage. Each barrel bears a label with a seemingly random concatenation of letters and numbers. They correspond to different regions of Washington, specific vineyards and varietals, and the yeasts used in fermentation. Huard deciphers them as if he's reading from a play sheet on the sideline. "Ah, this is the fourth-leaf stuff from Champeux," he says.



"It has that floral essence, and the cocoa powder coats your mid-palette."

Huard takes a wine thief—similar to a turkey baster—and siphons some wine from the barrel into a glass. He swirls it and takes a sip.

"This is some good s---," he says.

**DURING THEIR** three seasons as Miami teammates, Huard and Marino often dreamed of starting their own winery. They'd sit in quarterback meetings and doodle in their playbooks, drawing different iterations of what they wanted their company name and logo to be. Rifle Arms came and went, along with many others. They eventually settled on Passing Time because it was subtle. They chose

"I drank Bud Light or Captain and Coke," Huard says of his early days in the NFL.

**"But over my years with Dan, the wine bug just hit me."**

### Role Reversal

Marino (13 and far left) was the star in Miami, but it's Huard who runs the show at Passing Time.

not to put any references to their previous careers or their own names on the label, save for the laces of a football. "Is it laces?" Huard asks. "Or is it the markings of time?"

Marino retired in 2000, and while Huard kept playing until '09—including stops with the Patriots, Chiefs and 49ers, who cut him before that season started—he spent the last eight years of his career cultivating relationships in the Washington wine industry, becoming friends with farmers and vineyard owners. At times he'd pass along a Dan Marino-signed football.

In 2010, Huard, Marino and financial partners Doug Donnelly and Kevin Hughes combined to invest \$500,000 to start Passing Time. But they knew money wouldn't be enough, so they hired Chris Peterson, who had been billed as one of the best young winemakers in Washington.

Using both Huard and Peterson's connections, they sourced Cabernet Sauvignon grapes from three vineyards, plus some Merlot and Cabernet Franc for blending. When Peterson finished work on the first vintage in spring 2014, he had mixed news for Huard and Marino: They had 500 cases of really good



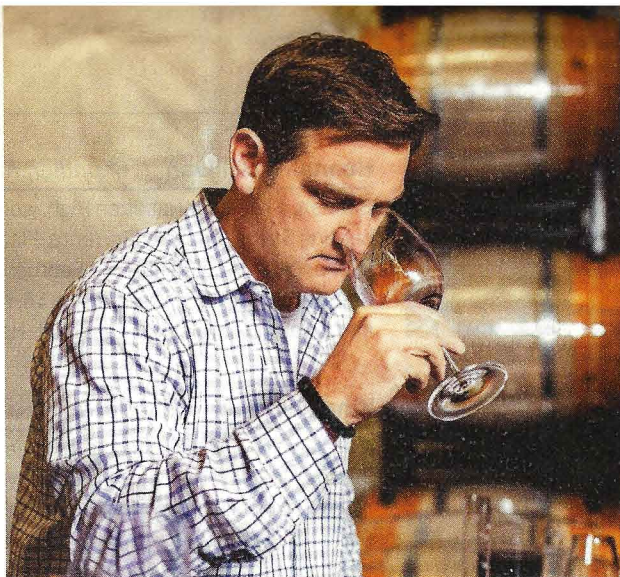
wine, but 300 cases didn't measure up. Instead of offering an inferior wine, Peterson suggested selling the 300 cases wholesale, even though they would lose about \$200,000. "If you want to make a high-end wine, you have to be ruthless with quality selection," Peterson says.

Huard and Marino didn't hesitate. They sold the rejected cases to another winery for about \$25 a gallon, and it was used in a 91-point blend. Good, but not good enough for *Passing Time*. "We had to establish our identity," Huard says. "We are sparing no expense to make Washington's next great Cabernet."

Their first vintage, a 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon, was released in April. It received a 93 in *Wine Spectator* and a 94 in *The Wine Advocate* (placing them in the Outstanding category for each), immediately putting *Passing Time* on the map within Washington's \$4.8 billion wine industry.

Of the 500 cases of that initial vintage—which they sold at \$75 a bottle—only a handful remain. Nobody takes a salary except the winemaker, and all proceeds go directly back into the company for the production of their next wine.

*Passing Time* will make 450 cases of its 2013 vintage, and its barrel scores are higher than the 2012. The 2014 vintage will be released in '17, which is when Huard & Co. plan to take



### Smell of Success

Markings on the barrel indicate where a vintage came from, and once it's ready, Huard uses a wine thief to siphon some for a sip before it is bottled and sold.



the business to the next level. They'll produce 1,200 to 1,500 cases and expand to three Cabernet Sauvignons. There will be one from each of Washington's three most famous appellations—Walla Walla, Horse Heaven Hills and Red Mountain—showcasing the subtle differences among each region. They project that by their sixth year, they will start to make a profit.

"We want to really build something. Make it special," Marino says during a

visit to New York City in July. "This is definitely not a vanity project."

Marino talks about everything from the four quarterbacks who have since joined him in the 5,000-passing-yard-season pantheon ("I did it 31 years ago") to his first off-season after retirement ("It was tough . . . you have withdrawals") to the not-yet-real *Ace Ventura 3* ("If someone calls, sure I'd do it"). He reflects on how great it is to be in business with Huard, a friend whom he trusts to run the show when he can't be around.

"I'm good at drinking it," says Marino, who can remember his great-grandfather Constantine and cousin Chucky making wine in 55-gallon drums in their basement when he was growing up in Pittsburgh. "That's my job. Social director and drinker."

**B**ACK IN Woodinville, Huard double-checks to make sure he has put the stoppers back into the barrels correctly. Construction workers are building a huge new room that *Passing Time* can use for tastings and parties. Huard asks a colleague if the fresh coat of paint could affect the wine, and he's assured it won't. Satisfied, he cleans his wine glass and wine thief, turns off all the lights and walks to his car.

"Oh, you know what, wait," he says, jogging back into the building to grab four more cases of wine. "I still have deliveries to make." □

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To watch a video about Damon Huard and to see the entire Pro-Files video series, go to [SI.com/pro-files](http://SI.com/pro-files)