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Bucs' Bryant joins drive to prevent infant deaths from SIDS

By Kate Santich

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Tampa Bay Buccaneers kicker Matt Bryant stood somberly at an Orlando podium Friday and cleared his throat. "You may have to bear with me a little bit," he began. "Our son -- next week would have been his first birthday."

Last September, at 3 1/2 months old, Bryant's seemingly healthy, happy baby boy, Tryson, died in his sleep. The diagnosis: sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

Though Bryant still has trouble talking about it, he and his wife, Melissa, have joined a campaign to raise awareness of SIDS and to educate parents and caregivers on the proper way to put babies to sleep -- on their backs.

The campaign is a joint effort by the Health Council of East Central Florida and the Hayes Foundation, started in 2002 by a woman in Richmond, Va., who also lost her son to SIDS. Their mission, thanks to a \$31,000 grant, is to send every baby born at an Orange County hospital home with a onesie that has "This Side Up -- While Sleeping" printed on the front.

The back has a list of more detailed instructions, such as not smoking around babies, not letting them nap on adult beds and feeding them breast milk instead of formula.

"Since this is a serious subject, we thought the best way to handle it was to give the mothers something when they leave the hospital that is kind of cutesy," said Linda Sutherland, executive director of Orange County's Healthy Start Coalition. Then she held up one of the tiny garments. "This is cutesy."

In Florida last year, at least 248 babies died due to unsafe sleeping methods in which they were inadvertently smothered by adults, bedding or cushions.

SIDS is the leading cause of death for babies less than a year old. And while no one can say that all SIDS cases are the result of unsafe sleeping situations, studies have shown that safe-sleeping practices help reduce the risk. In the 15 years since pediatricians launched the "Back to Sleep" campaign, urging parents to put babies on their backs while sleeping, cases of SIDS have dropped 42 percent.

"In this world, we can't prevent everything," Bryant said. "But [we] can give the babies a better chance."

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The grant, from the 100 Women Strong Giving Circle, will cover the first 15,000 onesies. But organizers are hoping to extend the message through private donations.

For more information, or to donate, go to healthystartorange.org.

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